INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Introduction to Biblical Interpretation

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Dedicated to our esteemed mentors:

Donald W. **Burdick**

D.A. Carson

David A. Hubbard

A. Berkeley Mickelsen (†)

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations in the following lists occur throughout the text of the book and in the footnotes. Abbreviations are also found in the concluding bibliography, which lists extensive sources.

General Abbreviations

ad loc.	***ad locum,*** at the place
ca.	***circa,*** about
cf.	***confer,*** compare
chap.(s)	chapter(s)
contra	in contrast to
ed.(s)	edited by, editor(s)
e.g.	***exempli gratia,*** for example
esp.	especially
et al.	***et alii,*** and others
ET	English translation
f., ff.	following [verse(s); page(s)]
fem.	feminine
FS	***Festschrift***
Ger.	German
Gr.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
hiph.	**hiphil**
id.	***idem, the same***
i.e.	***id est,*** that is
loc.	locative
loc. cit.	loco ***citato, the*** place cited
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
n.d.	no date
niph.	**niphal**
no.	number
n.s.	new series
p., pp.	page, pages
pace	with due respect to, but differing from
par.	parallel (to)
pass.	***passim,*** throughout
pl.	plural
Q	***Quelle*** (Ger. "sayings" source for the Gospels)
rev.	revised, reviser, revision
s.v.	sub ***verbo,*** under the word

tr.	translator, translated by
UBS	United Bible Societies
v., vv.	verse(s)
viz.	*videlicet*, namely
vol.	volume
X	times (as in *3X = three* times)

Versions and Translations of the Bible

ASV	*American Standard Version*
CEV	*Contemporary English Version*
GNB	*Good News Bible (Today's English Version)*
KJV	*King James Version (Authorized Version)*
NASB	New *American Standard Bible*
NCV	New *Century Version*
NEB	New *English Bible*
NIV	New *International Version*
NKJV	*New King James Version*
NRSV	New *Revised Standard Version*
Phillips	J. B. Phillips, *The* New *Testament in Modern English*
REB	*Revised English Bible*
RSV	*Revised Standard Version*
TEV	*Today's English Version* (GNB)

Periodicals, Reference Works, and Serials

ABD	*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed., D. N. Freedman
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed., J. B. Pritchard
AnOr	Analecta Orientalia
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch (German Old Testament)
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BDB	F. Brown, S. R Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R W. Funk, *A Greek* Grammar *of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
Bib	*Biblica*
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BT	*The Bible Translator*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur *ZAW*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBQMS	CBQ Monograph Series
Chr Cent	*Christian Century*
CT	*Christianity Today*
EcR	*Ecclesiastical Review*
EDNT	*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., H. Balz and G. Schneider
EvQ	*The Evangelical Quarterly*
EvT	*Evangelische Theologie*
ExpT	*The Expository* Times
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GTJ	Grace *Theological Journal*
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IB	*Interpreter's Bible*
IBMR	*International Bulletin of Missiological Research*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed., G. A. Buttrick
IDBS	*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement*
Int	*Interpretation*
ISBE	*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed., G. W. Bromiley
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBR	Journal of Bible and Religion
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplements
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*JSOT* Supplements
JTS	*Journal of the Theological Studies*
KB	*Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros*, ed., L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner
M&M	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Creek New Testament*
NAC	*New American* Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIDNTT	New *International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed., C. Brown
NIDOTT	New *International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, ed., W. Van Gemeren, et al.
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NT	*New* Testament
NTA	New *Testament Abstracts*

NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OT	Old Testament
OTA	*Old Testament Abstracts*
OTL	Old Testament Library
PRS	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
RSP	*Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBLSP	SBL Seminar Papers
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testament
TBü	Theologische Bücherei
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed., G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (since 1954)
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* ed., G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren
THAT	*Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament,* ed., E. Jenni and C. Westermann
TLZ	*Theologische Literaturzeitung*
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TrinJ	*Trinity Journal*
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
TWOT	*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* ed., R. L. Harris, et al.
TynB	*Tyndale Bulletin*
USQR	*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	*VT* Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZPEB	*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible,* ed., M. C. Tenney.

Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen	Deut	1 Sam	1 Chr
Exod	Josh	2 Sam	2 Chr
Lev	Judg	1 Kgs	Ezra
Num	Ruth	2 Kgs	Neh
Esth	Isa	Joel	Hab
Job	Jer	Amos	Zeph
Psa (Pss)	Lam	Obad	Hag
Prov	Ezek	Jonah	Zech
Eccl	Dan	Mic	Mal
Song	Hos	Nah	

New Testament

Mt	2 Cor	1 Tim	2 Pet
Mk	Gal	2 Tim	1 Jn
Lk	Eph	Titus	2 Jn
Jn	Phil	Phlm	3 Jn
Acts	col	Heb	Jude
Rom	1 Thes	Jas	Rev
1 Cor	2 Thes	1 Pet	

Apocrypha

1 Macc	1 Maccabees
2 Macc	2 Maccabees
Sir	Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach)
Wis	The Wisdom of Solomon

Pseudepigrapha and Patristic Books

Ant.	Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*
Barn	Barnabas
1-2 Clem	1-2 Clement
Did	Didache
H.E.	Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* History of the Church
Strom	*Stromateis* (Clement of Alexandria)

Rabbinic Writings

b. B. Bat.	Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Bathra

Texts, Versions, and Ancient Works

DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text of the Old Testament

Preface

Two significant volumes guided students of a previous era: Bernard Rarnm's ***Protestant Biblical Interpretation*** and Berkeley Mickelsen's ***Interpreting the Bible.*** They taught generations of students how to interpret the Bible. But developments since the 1960s have been so profuse and so pervasive that current students find those volumes out of date in many ways. Today a serious student of biblical interpretation faces an imposing quantity and range of books and articles. To address this reality, several noteworthy volumes appeared in the early **1990s,** especially G. R Osborne, ***The Hermeneutical Spiral*** and W. R Tate, ***Biblical Interpretation.*** We applaud these works. But the former is more theoretical and better suited to advanced students, while the latter is more selective in the topics it covers.

We offer this volume to advance the practice of biblical interpretation-also called hermeneutics-in this generation. A comprehensive yet readable text, it covers all the key issues in interpreting the Bible. We have incorporated insights from beyond biblical studies themselves-philosophy, linguistics, the social sciences, and literary criticism, among others. We have written this book not merely to collate and report others' findings-though we have certainly done much of that-but also to propose our own strategy for this crucial venture of interpretation. The book brims with biblical examples to demonstrate the principles under discussion. We strive to show students not merely what interpretation is all about, but ***how*** to interpret.

How did such a book emerge, and how do three authors write a book together? Initially Dr. Klein proposed the idea of a new volume on hermeneutics and wrote the original outline. Soon he realized how formidable a task this would be, so he recruited three colleagues, all professors at Denver Seminary, and they divided the tasks of research and writing equally among themselves. Unexpectedly, other Seminary responsibilities forced Dr. Ecklebarger to withdraw from the project. He did, however, provide input for the chapters on the history of interpretation, general rules of hermeneutics, and application. The bulk of the work fell to the remaining three-Dr. Klein and Dr. Blomberg covered the New Testament field, and Dr. Hubbard represented Old Testament studies.

To maximize the value of our backgrounds and expertise, we decided that all three would be involved in everything produced. So each wrote his assigned sections and then read the others' drafts. We made extensive comments and suggested revisions, deletions, or insertions. Where genuine differences and disagreements

surfaced we discussed the issues until a consensus was reached; we wanted to produce a text that all could affirm. Ultimately, Dr. Klein served as the final editor with freedom to alter and edit as necessary to produce the final manuscript.

We hope that the resulting volume weds the best of our individual and joint competencies. We have verified the truth of the proverb, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov 27:17). By absorbing each other's critical comments, we grew to appreciate one another's abilities and understanding of God's truth. We have remained good friends, and we believe our joint efforts have produced a volume that will yield a rich harvest of faithful interpreters and doers of God's Holy Word.

We must give due credit to the expert staff at Word, Inc. David Pigg, Manager of Word's academic book division, expressed immediate enthusiasm for the project when it was only a dream of Dr. Klein's. His enthusiasm has not flagged, even though we took longer to produce the final manuscript than he would have liked. As well, managing editor Terri Gibbs and her expert staffimproved our writing style all along the way. We owe them our sincere appreciation-as do all subsequent readers of the book. Special thanks go to Jeanette Freitag for help with the indexes.

No book surfaces apart from the contributions of numerous people beyond the author or, in this case, authors and editors. Dr. Timothy I? Weber graciously read the chapter on the history of interpretation. Our numerous references readily acknowledge the work of our colleagues in the scholarly arena. No doubt many others contributed to our thinking, but we were unaware of their input, gained as it was over the years, and are unable to acknowledge it beyond this admission. Yet four individuals-not adequately featured in the footnotes-have made a lasting impression on our lives, and to them we dedicate this book. They were our first mentors in graduate biblical studies. They not only honed our skill in interpretation, but they also ignited an enduring love for the Bible. Each stressed the need to know not only *what the* Bible says, but also what the Bible *means* by what it says. We pray that we can pass on the same mindset to our students. So we laud Donald W. Burdick, D. A. Carson, David A. Hubbard, and A. Berkeley Mickelsen(†). Well might the writer of Hebrews have spoken of this quartet when he admonished:

> Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Heb 13:7)

Thank you, brothers, for what you have meant to us.

February 1, 1993
Denver, Colorado

William W. Klein
Craig L. Blomberg
Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.

Introduction

Almost daily, the average Christian is challenged to obey God's Word. How well we sense the urgency of Jesus' words to that Israelite woman of long ago, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it! " (Lk 11:28 NRSV). And James' words ring out in our minds: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (Jas 1:22). The Psalmist assures us, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psa 119:105). We believe we can grow in our relationship with God, we can develop into more spiritually-wise disciples, and we can become increasingly useful servants of God—if we will only believe and follow God's instructions in the Bible. How much more effective we could be-how much more Christ-like-ifwe would make Bible study and application integral parts of our lives. We face the challenge to become *biblical Christians: Christians* who learn what God's Word says, and who humbly, obediently, put it into practice.

But how are we to learn what the Bible says? How do we mine its resources? What are we to learn and how are we to respond? Can we know if we have understood the message correctly? Our goal in writing this book is to help answer these questions, to unravel some of the mysteries of biblical interpretation.

Admittedly, it can be daunting to face a voluminous Bible full of alien genealogies, barbaric practices, strange prophecies, and eccentric epistles. It would be so much simpler if the "experts" would simply assemble God's instructions for us in a nice systematic list. But God himself did not provide a mere list of principles and practices. Dare we reduce the Bible to such a level? However much we might prefer that God's revelation came in a different form, we bow to his wisdom in giving us the Bible as it stands. We are convinced that when we understand the nature of the Bible and what God has done in providing it, we will see that it cannot be reduced to a list of beliefs to espouse, attitudes to adopt, actions to pursue, nor the corresponding opposites to avoid. In his wisdom, God has given his people the kind of revelation he decided would be best for us; Our task is to understand and respond to what God has communicated in ways that demonstrate our obedience and faithfulness to that revelation. We have to come to terms with the Bible as *it is!* And that is precisely what we intend to help the reader accomplish.

But in order to execute the task of correct biblical interpretation, we must first understand what biblical interpretation is. Thus, in *Part I we* define hermeneutics and demonstrate the crucial need for careful and valid hermeneutical principles. To understand how to interpret the Bible today requires an appreciation of our predecessors in the biblical faith. So we investigate the various approaches and techniques people have employed to understand Scripture throughout history. We want to learn from them-appropriating what is valid and valuable while avoiding

their mistakes and pitfalls. A most valuable legacy of our spiritual ancestors is the biblical canon. We provide insight and perspective on the formation of the Bible. In addition, we will consider the phenomenon of Bible translation and seek to help readers navigate through the maze of competing versions available today.

In Part *II we* will consider first the interpreter-the qualifications and presuppositions that are necessary and appropriate for the task of biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics has long been concerned with unraveling the meaning of the ancient texts. But until recently sufficient attention was not given to those seeking to understand that meaning-to the interpreters themselves. Interpreters are not blank slates or empty sponges; who they are contributes greatly to the entire enterprise of understanding. So beyond qualifications and presuppositions, we investigate the concept of "preunderstanding"-what interpreters bring with them to the task of interpretation. Having described the interpreter we will then raise the question of the ***goal*** of **interpretation**—what it is that we seek. Is the goal to determine the meaning the authors intended, the meaning in the texts themselves, or the meaning produced when text and modern interpreter interact? Can we say that a text has (or produces) only one possible meaning, or should we seek different meanings or levels of meaning within it? Or, to ask it differently, can texts have meanings that their authors intended while containing an additional meaning or meanings placed there by the Holy Spirit to be recovered by subsequent readers? These are foundational questions, and their answers have enormous implications for our task because issues of life and eternity are determined by a proper understanding of God's message.

In *Part III we* proceed to establish basic, commonly-accepted principles for understanding how **literature**—both prose and poetry-functions. We survey the various literary, cultural, social, and historical issues involved in interpretation. Since languages function according to specific rules and principles, interpreters must understand these rules in order to study the texts properly. The goal is not to complicate matters, but to achieve better understanding. We aspire to the greatest precision and accuracy in the process of interpretation.

Part *IV* introduces the reader to the specific kinds of literature (or genres) found in the Bible, and gives an overview of the appropriate methodologies for understanding the meaning conveyed by each. We describe each genre-Law (the Bible's legal material), OT historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, wisdom literature, OT apocalyptic, Gospels, NT historical narrative (Acts), Epistles, and Apocalypse-and show how the interpreter needs to study each one to comprehend its message fully.

Undoubtedly, readers have a variety of reasons for wanting to study the Bible. *Part V seeks* to make accessible the practical wealth of the Bible by investigating, briefly, the various ways it ministers to God's people. Whether they use the Bible to help others (in teaching, preaching, or counseling a friend), or to seek for personal spiritual encouragement, or simply to worship the God of the universe, the Bible has proved its value since its origin. What is more, the Bible serves as the source book for the Church's theology-for its understanding of God's perspective on life and his will for his people.

In essence, the Bible is God's written revelation to his people. It records in human words what God has mandated for them. Thus, a significant question for every student of the Bible is: How can we ***apply the*** Bible to our lives today? ***Part V*** considers this essential question of personal application. This task is not easy, for the Bible message moves across centuries and cultures. And precisely because the Bible came to people within their own cultures and experiences thousands of years ago, modern Christians are not always sure how literally they should implement what the Bible commands. They are puzzled about how to move from the principles in a passage to appropriate modern application. When we read what God required of the ancient Israelites or the first-century Christians, we puzzle over his expectations for us today. If pork and shrimp were forbidden for God's people in 1200 **B.C.** **(Lev 11:7,10–12),** on what basis, if any, can we rescind that prohibition today? If Paul required women in the Corinthian church Of **A.D.** 57 to wear appropriate head coverings (1 Cor **11:4–6,13),** may twentieth-century women disregard his instructions? Why do we insist on following Jesus' instructions to his disciples: "This is my body given for you; *do* ***this*** **in** remembrance of **me"** (Lk 22: **18)?** Should we not also perform his other clear instruction: **"**. . . you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you ***should do*** as I have done for you" (Jn **13:14–15)?** These are pivotal issues for the Christian who sincerely wants to apply the Bible correctly to his or her life.

In recent years, some biblical scholars and interpreters have issued a call for a radical **shift** in the focus of interpretation. Several new, and in some cases esoteric, methods have arisen in both literary-critical (e.g., structuralism) and **social**-scientific (e.g., feminist hermeneutics) studies. Most readers of this textbook will probably not add all of these tactics to their arsenals of **interpreative** methods, yet, they offer some definite assistance to interpreters. Also, their presence on the modern scene requires us to provide students with some assessment of their procedures and **usefulness.** Since the discussion tends to be rather technical, it has been formulated in an Appendix following Chapter 11.

To aid biblical interpreters, whether novice or experienced, we have provided an Annotated Bibliography of suggested helps. As carpenters, secretaries, or surgeons require tools to do their work, so interpreters need specific tools. Throughout the book we argue for a responsible approach to discerning the meaning of the biblical texts. That approach often requires insights and information accumulated by specialists. In this **final** section we show why appropriate tools are necessary; we explain how to use them; and then we list those we feel interpreters will find most useful. The Bibliography is a practical list for students to ***use*** in Bible interpretation. For the more technical details and documentation of the approach to biblical interpretation developed in this book, readers can consult the footnotes at appropriate points.

We have a **final** word to teachers who employ this as a textbook: each chapter was designed to be self-contained in scope. The chapters can be assigned for study in various sequences, for each can stand on its own. This also means there is some minor overlap and repetition in the discussions of a few topics. We usually **cross**-reference topics to alert readers to locations where an issue receives more detailed discussion.

PART I

THE TASK OF INTERPRETATION

CHAPTERONE

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 process'

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

[1]M. **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 ***hermeneia*** 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 convinces 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]

[2]The 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.

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

[4]Two 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 Schltiermacher, 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 modem 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 herneneutics" 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 Tesfamenf 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 Texfs* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Second, readers will someimes 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 "feminis" and you can see how adopting a frame of reference will predetermine a reading or hermeneutic cf 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.

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

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

[7]H. 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 hermencutical 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

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

[9] Those 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*** (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983).

[10] Following 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

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

[12]Ryken, *Words of Life,* 24.

[13]For 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

[14]Unfortunately, "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 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

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[15] J. 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.

[16] We 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?

[17] The rabbis' ability to memorize the Torah-soinetimes 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. Riesenfeld, ***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 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

[18] Luke 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.

[19] For 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).

[20] For 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.

[21]G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for AN Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19821, 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.

[22]Of 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.

[23]Admittedly, 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 neverhave 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 himselfdown 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.

[24]Of 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-5 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 ***a&out 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

[25]From 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, 19911) 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).

[26]E. 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]

[27]Indeed, 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.

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

Their identity and the history of their work remain obscure, but the Hebrew Scriptures still show the thumbprints of their work.[2] One such anonymous writer, for example, ended Deuteronomy with this interpretation of the unique significance of Moses: "Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face ..." (Deut 34: 10). Similarly, the books of l-2 Chronicles offer, in part, a reinterpretation of l-2 Rings from a post-exilic perspective. Such interpretations sought to apply then-extant biblical materials to contemporary concerns.

The first interpreters known by name were Levites who assisted Ezra the scribe. When the Israelites returned from exile (late sixth **century B.C.), they spoke the Aramaic of Babylon instead of the Hebrew of their Scriptures. So, when on a solemn occasion Ezra publicly read the Mosaic law, Levites explained to the crowd what he was reading (Neh 8:7-8). Probably, their explanations involved both translation of the text into Aramaic and interpretation of its content. According to rabbinic tradition, this incident spawned a new Jewish institution, the Targum (i.e., translation-interpretation)** .[3]

In fact, that institution was one of two formative activities involving biblical interpretation in intertestamental Judaism. In that period, Jewish worship included the oral Tar-gums-i.e., the translation and interpretation of Hebrew scripture readings in Aramaic. Eventually, scribes reduced these oral Targums to writing in order to perpetuate their use, which continues to the present.[4] At the same time, scribes and rabbis vigorously pursued the study and teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch. They worked to solve problems raised by the texts, explaining obscure words and reconciling conflicting passages. More important, they sought to apply the Scriptures to the issues of daily life raised by their contemporaries.

A grave cultural crisis fueled their intensive scripture study. In the late intertestamental era, domination by the Greek and Roman empires forced Jews to define and preserve their own religious identity in the face of foreign cultural values and religions. They found refuge in the study of their ancient Scriptures. In the process, they honed their methods of interpretation to a fine edge. As Kugel points out, the influence of these largely anonymous figures proved far-reaching:

> **They established the basic patterns by which the Bible was to be read and understood for centuries (in truth, up until the present day), and, what is more, they turned interpretation into a central and fundamental religious** activity.[5]

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[2]Recent **investigations have brought this "inner-biblical exegesis" to light. For an excellent overview of current findings, see D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson, eds.,** *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,** 1988), **25-83. See also M. Fishbane,** *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* **(Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) for his discussion of** inner-**biblical exegesis in the** OT.

[3]*Palestinian Talmud, Megillah* 4, 74d; G. **Vermes, "Bible and** Midrash: **Early Old Testament Exegesis," in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds.,** *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome, 3* vols. **(Cambridge: At the University Press,** 1970),1:201 **(henceforth,** *CHB I*).

[4]**For general background on** Targums, **see J. Bowker, The** *Targum in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), **3-28.**

[5]**J. L. Kugel, "Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Late Forms of Biblical Exegesis," in J. L.** Kugel and R. A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* **(Philadelphia: Westminster,** 1986), **13.**

By the New Testament period, this intense hermeneutical activity had already coalesced into three distinctive approaches to Scripture. Each approach was associated with a geographical center of Jewish religious life and a different school of thought. For our purposes, their importance lies in the background they provide on **the** way NT writers interpreted the OT.

Rabbinic Judaism

Centered in Jerusalem and Judea, this branch of Judaism promoted obedience to the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Torah, in the face of mounting pressure **to accommodate** to Greco-Roman culture. The interpretive approach of rabbinic Judaism is evident in the massive amounts of literature it inspired. It contains two basic types of content. ***Halakah*** (Heb. "rule to go by") involves the deduction of principles and regulations for human conduct derived specifically from **OT legal** material. ***Haggadah*** (Heb. **"a** telling"), by contrast, draws on the whole OT offering of stories and proverbs to illustrate biblical texts and to edify readers.[6]

Rabbinic Judaism produced three main literary works. The Mishnah presents the once-oral teachings of leading rabbis as early as the famous competitors, Hillel and Shammai (late first century B.C. to early first century **A.D.**). Published about A.D. 200, the Mishnah presents many individual tractates arranged under six topics (e.g., **feasts,** women, holy things, etc.).' About fifty years later, another document called Abot (lit., "the Fathers") affirmed that what the Mishnah writers taught was part of the oral law received by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Most of its content is halakah.

The Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (ca. A.D. 400 and 600, respectively) essentially offer commentary (also known as Gemara) on the Mishnah by later rabbis. Topically organized, each Talmudic section quotes a section of Mishnah, which is followed by citations of rabbis and portions of Scripture. The frequent citation of Scripture implies that the Talmud's purpose was to give biblical support for the interpretations of the Mishnah.[8] At times like modern biblical commentaries but often very different, the Midrashim (from Heb. ***drš***, "to search") provide interpretation of biblical books, sometimes explaining passages almost verse-by-verse while often addressing only selected verses. The commentary-which may provide parallel or even competing perspectives-follows the quotation of a verse or phrase from Scripture. Though written no earlier than the second century **A.D., some of their interpretive** material probably derives from the pre-Christian era. Most of their content is haggadah.[9]

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[6]**Halakah and haggadah also refer to the genre of mbbinic traditions themselves, whether they are legal or narrative in form.**

[8]**For a standard edition, see H.** Danby, *The Mishnah* **(Oxford:** Oxford University Press, **1964). Cf. also the general comments and examples in J. Neusner,** *From Testament to Torah: An Introduction to Judaism in Its Formative Age* **(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 45-65.**

[9]**Cf. the excellent introduction with examples in Neusner,** *From Testament to Torah, 72-99.*

[9]**B. Chilton, "Varieties and Tendencies of** Midrash: **Rabbinic Interpretation of Isaiah 24.23,"** in R. T. France and D. Wenham, **eds.,** *Studies* fn *Midrash and Historiography, vol.* **3 of** *Gospel Perspectives* **(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 9-11 (henceforth** *GP III*). Conveniently, Neusner *(From Testament to Torah,* **100–115) provides a useful overview and examples.**

The interpretation of Scripture in rabbinic Judaism shows several distinct features. First, it depends heavily upon rabbinic interpretive tradition. Interpretation amounts to citing what earlier revered rabbis say about a passage. For example, consider how the Mishnah cites two ancient rabbis to resolve a possible conflict between two important OT legal teachings. The Law taught that the people of Israel must not work on the Sabbath (Deut 5:12-15) and must circumcise newborn sons on their eighth day of life (Lev 12:3; cf. Lk 1:59; 2:21). But suppose the eighth day falls on a Sabbath? The Mishnah resolves the conflict by appealing to rabbinic tradition:

> R Eliezer says: If they had not brought the circumcision knife on the eve of Sabbath it may be brought openly on the Sabbath; and in time of danger a man may cover it up in the presence of witnesses. R Eliezer said moreover: They may cut wood [on the Sabbath] to make charcoal in order to forge an iron implement. R Akiba laid down a general rule: Any act of work that can be done on the eve of Sabbath does not override the Sabbath, but what cannot be done on the eve of Sabbath overrides the Sabbath.[10]

Second, rabbinic commentators often interpret Scripture literally (Heb. *pᵉšaṭ*, "plain sense"). At times, taking the plain sense of Scripture produced a rather wooden interpretation. For example, Deut 21:18-21 legislated the legal recourse of Israelite parents who have a rebellious son. By taking the text quite literally, the Mishnah defined the circumstances under which an accused son would escape condemnation:

> If either of them [i.e., the son's parents] was maimed in the hand, or lame or dumb or blind or deaf, he cannot be condemned as a stubborn and rebellious son, for it is written, Then *shall his father and his mother* lay hold on him-so they were not maimed in the hand; *and bring him out*—so *they* were not lame; *and they shall say*—so *they* were not dumb; *this is our son*—so *they* were not blind; he will *not obey our voice-so they* were not deaf."

The central feature of rabbinic interpretation, however, is the practice of *midrash*. Basically, midrash aims to uncover the deeper meanings that the rabbis assumed were inherent in the actual wording of Scripture. Ultimately, their motives were pastoral-to give logical biblical teaching for situations not covered directly by Scripture. To do so, the rabbis followed a system of exegetical rules (Heb. *middôt*) carefully worked out over the years. Hillel listed seven such rules by which an interpreter might draw inferences from a passage.[12] Most of the rules employed assumptions that we still deem valid—e.g., the use of analogous words, phrases, or verses from biblical cross-references to illumine the text under study. On the other hand, they sometimes used cross-references in ways that we consider questionable (e.g., citing words, etc., without regard to their context).

As the Mishnah and Midrashim attest, the application of these rules resulted in an atomistic approach to exegesis. First, the interpreter breaks up the Scripture quotation into separate short phrases. Then he interprets each one independently without regard for its context. Thus, interpreters tend to make much of a text's incidental details. Notice how one Gemara biblically defends Jewish agricultural practices. The Mishnah says,

> When do we learn of a garden-bed, six hand breadths square, that five kinds of seed may be sown therein, four on the sides and one in the middle? Because it is written, *For as the earth bringeth forth her bud and* as *thegarden causeth the seeds sown* in *it to spring forth* [Isa 61:11]. It is not written *Its seed,* but the *seeds sown in it.*

By breaking down Isa 61:11 into parts, the Gemara explains why Jews should sow five kinds of seed in the same small garden:

> R Judah said: "The earth bringeth forth her bud"; "bringeth forth"-one; "her bud"-one; making two. "Seeds sown" means (at least) two more; making four; "causeth to spring forth"—one; making five in all.[13]

Such interpretations may strike modern readers as ingenious manipulations of Scripture. In fairness, however, one must remember that the rabbis assumed that divine truth resided both within and behind Scripture's words. Further, their motive was the same as that of any modern pastor-to apply Scripture to the pressing problems of a contemporary audience. On the other hand, the rabbis were the first to model the cross-reference strategy in biblical interpretation. In that respect, modern Bible students remain in their debt. More important, NT writers interpret the OT in ways not unlike the ancient rabbis. Thus, knowledge of their methods illumines the NT use of the OT.

Hellenistic Judaism

In 333 B.C. Alexander the Great completed his conquest of the Persian Empire including Palestine. He and his successors began to impose Greek culture throughout their domain. Greek influence proved to be particularly strong on the large Jewish community in Alexandria, the city in Egypt named for the great emperor. There, Hellenistic Judaism flourished, a movement which sought to integrate Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, with Jewish religious beliefs.[14]

[10]Shabbath 19.1 (from Danby, *The Mishnah,* 116).

[11]Sanhedrin 8.4 (from Danby, *The Mishnah,* 394).

[12]For Hillel's list, see C. K. Barrett, "The Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New," *CHB I,* 383–84. Tradition also attributes lists of thirteen and thirty-two rules to later rabbis. Cf. the excellent treatment of midrashic exegesis in R. N. Longenecker, ***Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 32-38.

[13]Shabbath 9.2 (from Danby, *The Mishnah, 108,* including n. 8).

[14]Kugel, "Early Interpretation," 40–44. For an overview of Hellenistic Judaism, see M. Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century After Christ* (London: SCM, 1989).

Eventually, Greek replaced Hebrew as the common language among Jews outside of Palestine. So about 200 B.C., Alexandrian Jewish scholars produced a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint.[15] More important for our purposes, in the fertile intellectual soil of Alexandria flowered a major school of biblical interpretation, one which enjoyed wide influence among Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire and in Jerusalem itself.

The major distinctive of this school of interpretation was its allegorical method, which was rooted in platonic philosophy. Plato taught that true reality actually lay behind what appeared to the human eye.[16] Applied to literature, this view of reality suggested that a text's true meaning lay behind the written words. That is, the text served as a kind of extended metaphor which pointed to the ideas hidden behind it.[17] With respect to the Hebrew Scriptures, the master practitioner of allegory was the brilliant Alexandrian Jewish thinker, Phi10 (20 B.C.-A.D. 54) who sought to reconcile the Hebrew Scriptures with the philosophy of Plato.[18]

For Philo, a Bible passage was like a human being; it had a body (i.e., a literal meaning) and a soul (an allegorical meaning).[19] He accepted the literal meaning of many Scriptures, but he also believed that only the allegorical method could reveal the true inner meaning that God had encoded in them. He developed a set of rules to recognize when a text's allegorical meaning was its true meaning. In his view, one could disregard a text's literal meaning when it (1) said anything unworthy of God, (2) contained some insoluble difficulty, unusual grammar, or unique rhetoric, and (3) was an allegorical expression.

Further, Phi10 believed that hidden meaning lay behind numbers and names. More ingeniously, he also found it by playing with the many possible meanings of the same word and by regrouping the words of a biblical passage. Consider, for example, how he handled Gen 2: 14 ("A river flowed through Eden and watered the garden. From there the river branched out to become four rivers" NCV). He determined that the Edenic river represented goodness, while the other four represented the four great virtues of Greek philosophy-prudence, temperance, courage, and justice.[20] In other words, the number four in the biblical text suggested to him four items from Greek philosophy.

[15]The ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, attempted to collect all the books of the world and wanted a Greek translation of the Jewish Law. During the third century B.C. only the Pentateuch was translated; later the rest of the OT was translated.

[16]To illustrate, Plato compared human perception of reality to the experience of being in a dimly lit cave. One sees only shadowy figures (the "forms"), but true reality (the "ideas") lies behind them. For more on platonic philosophy, see J. Coppelston, A *History of Philosophy, 8* vols. (Paramus, NJ: The Newman Press, 1971), 1:127–206.

[17]The Greeks had honed this interpretive method from the sixth century B.C. It allowed them to find value in Greek classical literature (e.g., Homer, etc.) some of whose ideas (e.g., the morality of the gods) the philosophers found offensive. The Platonists at Alexandria used allegory to teach platonic philosophy from classical Greek literature.

'*For Philo's life and thought, see E. R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus,* rev. ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963); B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (New* York: The Philosophical Library, 1952), 1–6.

[19]*De Vita Contemplativa, x. 78.*

[20]*Legum Allegoriarum,* 1.63–64.

From hindsight, the strengths and weaknesses of Philo's approach appear evident. On the one hand, he rightly recognized the limitations of human language to convey the profound mysteries of spiritual reality and the nature of God, and he attempted to integrate biblical ideas with those of the dominant philosophy of his day in order to relate biblical faith to contemporary culture-a difficult challenge people of faith in every generation must face. On the other hand, Philo's approach suffers from subjectivity, arbitrariness, and artificiality. One might ask Philo, for example, why the Edenic river represents goodness and its tributaries four other virtues. To someone else, the former might represent the stream of human life and the latter four major ethnic groups of humanity. Again, Phi10 ignores the real differences between biblical ideas and those of Greek philosophy. It is hard to escape the conclusion that ultimately Philo's interpretation depended more upon platonic philosophy than upon the Bible.

The Qumran Community

This branch of Judaism flourished at Qumran, a site on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea, about 150 B.C.-A.D. 68. Its now famous literary legacy, the Dead Sea Scrolls, reveals the community's self-identity and reason for being. It regarded the Judaism centered in Jerusalem as apostate. So, led by its founder, a mysterious figure called the Teacher of Righteousness, its members withdrew to the wilderness of Judea to form a monastic community to prepare for the coming of the messianic age. Specifically, they awaited God's imminent judgment, which they expected to fall on their apostate religious competitors, and they anticipated his renewal of the covenant with the only true, pure Israel-themselves. They saw themselves as the final generation about whom biblical prophecy speaks.[21]

The interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures played a prominent role at Qumran.[22] If the law of Moses entranced the rabbis, the OT prophets preoccupied the Qumranians. Alleging special divine inspiration, the Teacher of Righteousness claimed to show that events of that day, especially those involving the Qumran community, fulfilled OT prophecies. This explains why so many of the scrolls consist of copies of OT books and why Qumran produced so many commentaries on them. For our purposes, the latter are most important, for they show the principles of biblical interpretation that the community followed.

To be specific, the community practiced a method called *pesher.*[23] Three interpretive techniques typified this approach. The interpreter might actually suggest a change in the biblical text (textual emendation) to support an interpretation. He would select a known alternate textual reading of the phrase in question and offer

[21]Kugel, "Early Interpretation," 61-62. For an English translation of the scrolls, see G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1987); M. A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[22]For an overview of their interpretive methods, see F. F. Bruce, "Biblical Exposition at Qumran," in France and Wenham, eds., *GPZZZ, 77-98.*

[23]On the nature of *pesher,* see M. P. Horgan, *Pesharim: Qumran Interpretations of Biblical Book* CBQMS 8 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association, 1979), 229-59.

the interpretation. Lacking an existent variant, the clever interpreter was not averse to creating one that suited his interpretive purposes! For example, Hab 1:13a reads, "Your eyes are too good to look at evil; you cannot stand to see those who do wrong" (NCV). The Pesher rightly comments that the words address God and describe his holiness. One expects a similar treatment for v. 13b: "So how can you put up with those evil people? How can you be quiet when the wicked swallow up people who are better than they are?" (NCV). But the commentary interprets the "you" pronouns as plural, not singular, and as such they refer not to God but to the house of Absalom-a religious group that the Qumranians disliked."

Again, the commentator might contemporize a prophecy. He would claim to find a prophecy's fulfillment in events either of his own day or of the immediate future. For example, the writer sought to contemporize Hab 1:6, "I will use the Babylonians, those cruel and wild people" (NCV). Originally, the line predicted that the Babylonian army would come to punish sinful Judah. But according to the Pesher, "this refers to the Kittim [Romans] who are indeed swift and mighty in war. ..."[25] In other words, the commentator interpreted the ancient prophecy about the Babylonians as predicting the coming of Qumran's enemies, the Romans.

Finally, the interpreter might use an atomization approach. He would divide the text into separate phrases, then interpret each one by itself regardless of the context. For example, in explaining Hab 2:4 (literally "Behold, his soul shall be swollen . . .") the Pesher says "they will pile up for themselves a double requital for their sins. ..." The idea of double punishment derives from the word "swollen" (Heb. *'pl*), which the commentator arbitrarily reads as "to be doubled" (Heb. *kpl*).[26]

In sum, Judaism sought to relate its ancient Scriptures to the realities of its contemporary experience. Rabbinic Judaism found in the application of the Mosaic Law a refuge to protect Jewish identity. Rather than resist outside influences, Hellenistic Judaism tried to accommodate its beliefs to those of the platonic philosophy. And the ascetic Qumranians mined OT prophecies to explain the events of their own day. Out of this rich, complex stream of interpretation flowed a new interpretive current-Christian interpretation.

The Apostolic Period (ca. A.D. 30–100)

Continuity and discontinuity mark the transition from Jewish to early Christian interpretation. As devout Jews, the first Christian interpreters-the apostle-regarded Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah and the small religious community he left behind as the true fulfillment of Judaism's ancient hopes. They appealed to the OT Scriptures to support their beliefs, interpreting them by many of the same principles as other Jewish religious groups.[27] On the other hand, they revered Jesus as the new Moses and the authority of Jesus as superior even to that of the law of Moses-a decisive departure from their Jewish roots. Also, they interpreted the OT from a radically new perspective-in light of the Messiahship of Jesus and the new age inaugurated by his coming.[28]

Indeed, Jesus' *literal fulfillment* of OT prophecy was their fundamental hermeneutical principle. In this they followed the example of Jesus himself.[29] Jesus launched his ministry by claiming in a Galilean synagogue that he personally fulfilled Isa 61:1–2 (Lk 4:18–21; cf. Mk 1:15). Later, when John doubted that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus appealed to his healing of the blind, the lame, and the deaf just as Isa 35:5–6 had forecast (Lk 7:21–23). Along those same lines, the apostles found the prophetic fulfillment of the OT in Jesus and his teaching about the kingdom of God. In other words, they understood the OT christologically. According to Paul, to read the law of Moses without Christ is like reading it through a veil (2 Cor 3:14–16; cf. Exod 34:33–35). The reader simply cannot see what it really means!

To remove that veil of ignorance, however, the apostles did not limit themselves to the literal interpretation of OT prophecies. In fact, they employed at least three other interpretive approaches. First, they often mined OT historical and poetic sections to find predictions of the work of Christ and the Church. Their method was that of *typological* interpretation-to find represented in OT events, objects, and ideas divinely-inspired types (i.e., patterns or symbols) that anticipate God's activity later in history.[30] The assumption is that the earlier event/object/idea repeats itself in the later one. This technique sought to persuade the apostles' first-century Jewish audience of the similarities between the OT and NT ideas and events as well as the superiority of the latter to the former. The point was to show Christianity as the true culmination of the OT worship of God.

Two NT books, Matthew and Hebrews, best illustrate the typological approach.[31] For example, Mt 2:17 writes that Herod's killing of young Jewish boys fulfills Jer 31:15:

> A voice was heard in Ramah
> of painful crying and deep sadness:
> Rachel crying for her children.
> She refused to be comforted,
> because her children are dead. (NCV)

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[24]Horgan, *Pesharim*, 15, 32-34; W. H. Brownlee, *The Midrash Pesher of Habakkuk*, SBLMS 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 91-98.

[25]Brownlee, *Midrash Pesher*, 59–62; Horgan, *Pesharim*, 13, 26.

[26]The translation follows Brownlee, *Midrash Pesher*, 122-24 ("a pun"); cf. Horgan, *Pesharim*, 17, 39 ("probably an interpretation").

[27]R. A. Greer, "The Christian Bible and Its Interpreters," in Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 128. For details and examples, see Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis* in the Apostolic Period, 79–220.

[28]Cf. Barrett, "Interpretation," 399–401.

[29]Cf. R. M. Grant and D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 8-38.

[30]Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 36-38. More on this to follow.

[31]Cf. Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 28-35.

In the context of Jeremiah, the verse refers to the exile of Israel to Babylon in the sixth century B.C. It invokes the ancient image of Rachel, the Israelite mother par excellence (cf. Ruth 4:11), as a symbol of corporate Israel's intense maternal grief. Matthew believed Herod's violence fulfilled the lines from Jeremiah in a typological sense: history had, as it were, repeated itself in that both the earlier and later events shared similar features indicating God's sovereign hand at work in both events. This repetition signaled to Matthew that Herod's bloodshed fulfilled Jeremiah's words and thus implied that Jesus was the Messiah.

A second apostolic approach was that of ***literal-contextual*** interpretation. This approach interpreted OT Scriptures according to their normal meaning. Here again, their method followed Jesus' example. Jesus rebutted Satan's clever but twisted use of OT passages with straightforward OT quotations (Deut 6:16 in answer to Psa 91:11–12; cf. Mt 4:4, 7). Twice Jesus invoked the normal sense of Hos 6:6 ("I want faith&l love more than I want animal sacrifices" NCV) to answer the Pharisees' criticism of him or his disciples (Mt 9:13;12:8).

The epistles offer several examples of this approach. Primarily, the apostles cited OT texts interpreted literally to support their instruction on Christian morals.[32] So, in Rom 12, Paul teaches his readers not to seek revenge on those who have wronged them (w. 17-21). To back up his point, he cites Deut 32:35 ("Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" NRSV) and Prov 25:21–22 ("If your enemy is hungry, feed him" NCV) according to their natural meaning. Along the same line, Peter instructs believers to treat each other with humility, quoting Prov 3:34 for support: "God is against the proud, but he gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet 5 :5 NCV). If you do this, he concludes (v. 6), God "... will lift you up when the right time comes."

A third apostolic method is ***principle/application.*** In this method they did not take an OT passage literally; rather, they interpreted it by applying its underlying principle to a situation different from, but comparable to, the one in the original context. Consider, for example, how Paul sought to prove that God wants to save both Jews and Gentiles by quoting Hosea (Rom 9:25–26 NCV):

> I will say, "You are my people"
> **to those** I **had called "not my people."**
> **And** I will show my love
> **to those people** I **did not love.** (Hos 2:1, 23; **cf. also his citation of 1** :10)

Originally, Hosea's words referred to the nation of Israel-specifically to Israel's reconciliation with God after a period of divine rejection. "Not my people" and "did not love" were actually the names of Hosea's children that symbolized that rejection. To make his case, Paul extracts a theological principle from Hosea's words-God can lovingly make those into his people who were not so before—then he uses that principle to justify the full membership of Gentile believers in the people of God.

[32]Barrett, **"Interpretation,"** 396–97

Paul's defense of **his right to earn a living from the ministry of the gospel provides a classic example (1** Cor 9:9; cf. 1 Tim 5:17–18). Apparently, this practice needed justification because Jewish custom prohibited rabbis from receiving payment for their services.[33] He quotes Deut 25:4 ("When an ox is working in the grain, do not cover its mouth to keep it from eating" **NCV), arguing** that God actu**ally had** Christian clergy, not real oxen, in mind. This is true, Paul says, because "when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in hope of sharing in the harvest" (v. 10). The principle is: if human labor benefits anyone, **it** should at least benefit those who perform it. Paul applies the principle to payments to Christian ministers and thus provides a scriptural basis for this practice.

In summary, apostolic interpretation both compares with and departs from the contemporary Jewish interpretive method. The apostles' primary method is typology, especially when defending the Messiahship of Jesus and the ministry of the Christian Church. Significantly, they were the last notable interpreters with Jewish roots. From here on, Greco-Roman influences displace Jewish ones and dominate Christian biblical interpretation.

The Patristic Period (ca. A.D. 100-590)

The death of the last apostle, John, ushered in a new era for the Church. It lasted until Gregory I became pope in A.D. 590. We call it the "patristic period" because it features the contribution of the so-called Church Fathers-the leaders during the initial four centuries after the apostolic period.[34] During the patristic period, the writings of the apostles circulated among the churches but had not yet been collected into a canonical companion to the OT. Thus, while the Church considered many of the books and letters that later became our NT to be on a par with the OT, it still regarded the OT as its primary authoritative collection of Scriptures.

As we shall see, however, during this period another authority-church tradition-began to exercise significant influence on the definition of church doctrine. Indeed, this development definitively shaped the practice of biblical interpretation until the Protestant Reformation fourteen hundred years later. When church councils finally agreed on the precise contents of the Christian canon of Scripture, this period came to an end.

The Apostolic Fathers (ca. A.D. 100–150)

The Patristic Period can be divided into three main subperiods. The first, that of the apostolic fathers, gives us a glimpse of biblical interpretation during the first

[33]Greer, **"The Christian Bible," 130.**

"For an overview, see Grant and Tracy, *Short History,* 39–51; **R. P. C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church,"** *CHB I,* 412–53. **More detailed treatment appears in D. S.** Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics* **in** *the Light of the Early Church* **(Grand Rapids:** Baker, 1992).

half-century after the apostle John's death. Our sources are the writings of early church leaders like Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and an anonymous writer who calls himself Barnabas. Other important writings include the *Didache* (pronounced "DID-a-kay" from Gk. "teaching"), the *Shepherd of Hermas,* and the *Epistle to Diognetus*—plus various fragments that help round out the picture.[35] **The fathers address two primary audiences-Christians in the churches and Jews opposing them. Hence, their writings serve two corresponding purposes:** (1) to instruct believers in Christian doctrine, and (2) to defend the faith against Jewish arguments.

Several methods of interpretation are evident among the early Church Fathers.[36] Occasionally, they use *typology* to relate the OT to the NT, especially with regard to teachings about Jesus. For example, the Epistle of Barnabas (12:1–7) sees two OT passages as types of the cross of Christ-the outstretched arms of Moses, which gave Israel victory over Amalek (Exod 17), and the bronze serpent, which Moses lifted up in the wilderness (Num 21; cf. Jn 3: 14). The Christian writer implies that both of these types teach that there is no hope of salvation outside of Jesus. Similarly, according to Clement, the bishop of Rome, the scarlet color of the cloth that Rahab hung in Jericho to signal Joshua's spies foreshadowed the blood of Jesus (1 Clem 12:7). In his view, by choosing that signal, the spies showed that "through the blood of the Lord will redemption come to all who believe and hope."[37]

On other occasions, typology helps the writer to teach about Christian living from the OT. So, the Epistle of Barnabas finds in Moses' prohibition against eating pork a warning against associating with inconsistent Christians. The reason is that, like pigs, they "forget their Lord when they are well off, but when they are in need, they acknowledge the Lord. ..."

The most popular interpretive approach among the fathers was that of *allegory.* Apparently, several factors led them to adopt this approach. They wanted to support their teachings from the OT Scriptures, presumably to give their doctrine more credibility. Also, at the time, the allegorical method was the most popular way to interpret literature in general. Hence, it was natural for them to take up the accepted literary method of the day and apply it to the Scriptures.

Consider, for example, the interpretation that Barn 7-8 gives the OT ritual of the red heifer (Num 19). Typical of allegory, it draws great spiritual significance from the details of the procedure. So, the writer says the red heifer represents Jesus, and the children who sprinkle its ashes "are those who preach to us forgiveness of sins ..., to whom he [Jesus] entrusted the authority to proclaim the gospel" (i.e., the apostles). Similarly, for Barnabas the seven days of creation provide the interpretive key to the future of history. The six days symbolize that the world will last six thousand years, the seventh day symbolizes the second coming of Christ, followed by the eighth day-"the beginning of another world" (1 5:3–9).[38]

[35]For translation and commentary see J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, rev. and ed. M. W. Holmes, The *Apostolic Fathers,* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, *1989).*

[36]Greer, "Biblical Interpretation," 137-42.

[37]The translation is from *The Apostolic Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 19.

[38]Translation of Lightfoot et al., *The Apostolic Fathers,* 182–83.

At times the early fathers employ a ***midrashic*** interpretive approach reminiscent of the rabbis and the Qumran sectarians. The interpretation of Gen 17:14 in Barn 9:8-9 provides a classic example. The Genesis verse reports that Abraham circumcised 318 men at the inaugural observance of circumcision in the Bible. By clever (though to us opaque) midrashic treatment of the number 3 18, Barnabas surprisingly finds a reference to Jesus and his cross:

> Now the (number) 18 (is represented) by two letters, J = 10 and E = 8—thus you have "JE," (the abbreviation for) "JESUS." And because the cross, represented by the letter T (= 300), was destined to convey special significance, it also says 300. He makes clear, then, that JESUS is symbolized by the two letters (JE = 18), while in the one letter (T = 300) is symbolized the cross.[39]

Finally, the fathers show early signs of an interpretive principle that was to dominate biblical interpretation until it was rejected during the Reformation. In the second century, an increasing number of heretical groups arose within the Church. Most prominent among them were the Gnostics who, like the others, supported their unorthodox views by appealing both to the Scriptures and to so-called sayings of Jesus-sayings they claimed Jesus taught his disciples in private.[40] The lack of a finished, canonical collection of apostolic writings placed leaders of the orthodox branch of the Church at a disadvantage. They felt that their only recourse to rebut the heresies was to appeal to the authority of tradition handed down from the apostles.

This established a new hermeneutical principle in the Church: ***traditional interpretation.*** The Church came to regard the traditional interpretation of a biblical passage (that which the churches taught) as its correct interpretation.[41] Now at first glance that step seems a small one; however, it subtly advanced church tradition to a status almost equal with that of Scripture as the Church's ultimate authority for doctrine. More importantly, church leaders assumed the role of official keepers and adjudicators of the apostolic tradition. Their doctrinal rulings defined the correct interpretation of many biblical passages. Eventually, the dominating influence of this principle led to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the papacy and, many centuries later, ignited the Protestant Reformation.

Alexandria versus Antioch (ca. A.D. 150–400)

As the early Church Fathers passed from the scene, two centers of Christian instruction came to dominate biblical interpretation in the Church. Though both shared the same basic Christian beliefs, they differed in their approaches to Bible interpretation. Each carried on and refined one of the interpretive approaches received from its intellectual ancestors.

[39]Translation of R. A. Kraft, *The Apostolic Fathers,* 4 vols., ed. R. M. Grant (New York: Nelson, 1964), 1:109.

[40]For a popular treatment of Christian Gnosticism, see J. Dart. *The Jesus of Heresy and History: The Discovery and Meaning of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

[41]Cf. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 134–39, 231.

Earlier we described the exegetical method of the Jewish scholar, Phi10 of Alexandria. Alexandria had long been a center promoting allegorical methodology among Jews and neo-platonic philosophers. Thus, it is not surprising that the Christian catechetical school at Alexandria practiced allegorical interpretation. By adapting the interpretive methods of their contemporaries, Christian teachers at Alexandria undoubtedly hoped to gain credibility for their interpretations among their non-Christian peers.

Two articulate spokesmen present the case for reading the Bible allegorically. The first is Clement of Alexandria who taught there from A.D. 190 until 203 when the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Septimius Severus drove him into exile.[42] Like Philo, Clement taught that Scripture has a twofold meaning. Analogous to a human being, it has a body (literal) meaning as well as a soul (spiritual) meaning hidden behind the literal sense. Clement regarded the hidden, spiritual sense as the more important one. His allegorical method is evident in his interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son.[43] Typical of those who allegorize, he attributes Christian meaning to the story's various details. So, the robe that the father gave to the returned prodigal represents immortality; the shoes represent the upward progress of the soul; and the fatted calf represents Christ as the source of spiritual nourishment for Christians. In Clement's view, therefore, a text's literal sense is but a pointer to its underlying spiritual truth.

The second spokesman is Clement's successor, the distinguished scholar Origen (A.D. 185-254). In his extensive writings, Origen argued that just as humans consist of body, soul, and spirit, so Scripture has a threefold meaning.[44] Origen expanded Clement's twofold body and soul view by separating the soul into soul and spirit, adding a third or "moral" meaning: ethical instructions about the believer's relationship to others. He also refined the idea of a spiritual sense into a doctrinal sense, i.e., truths about the nature of the Church and the Christian's relationship to God.

Thus, said Origen, the wise interpreter of Scripture must move from the events of a passage (its literal sense) to find the hidden principles for Christian living (its moral sense) and its doctrinal truth (its spiritual sense). As an example, consider Origen's interpretation of the sexual relations between Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:30–38).[45] According to Origen, the passage has a literal sense (it actually happened). But its moral meaning is that Lot represents the rational human mind, his wife the flesh inclined to pleasures, and the daughters vainglory and pride. Applying these three to people yields the spiritual (or doctrinal) meaning: Lot represents the

[42]Our discussion follows the treatment in Grant and Tracy, *Short History,* 52–56.

[43]A R Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 10* vols. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1913), 2:581–82 (sermon fragment).

[44]J. W. Trigg, *Origen* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 125-28. Cf. Grant and Tracy, Short *History,* 56–62; M. F. Wiles, "Origen as Biblical Scholar," *CHB I,* 454-89; and K. A. Ecklebarger, "Authorial Intention as a Guiding Principle in Origen's Matthew Commentary" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1987).

[45]"Genesis Homily V," in *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus,* The Fathers of the Church 71 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 112–20.

OT law, the daughters represent Jerusalem and Samaria, and the wife represents the Israelites who rebelled in the wilderness.

From a modern perspective, such interpretation seems to play fast and loose with the text. One might argue that Origen is simply reading his own Christian ideas into the text rather than drawing them from it. Aware of this criticism, Origen contended that God had inspired the original biblical writer to incorporate the allegorical meaning into his writing. Thus, what Origen considered the highest meaning of Scripture—its deeper spiritual truth-was already implicit in Scripture, not something invented by the interpreter.

Not surprisingly, Origen's extreme allegorical approach sparked a reaction among other early church leaders. They rejected allegory as a legitimate, reliable method for interpreting Scripture. As a result, they founded a second Christian catechetical school at Antioch in Syria in the fourth century A.D.[46] Instead of allegory, its curriculum taught the historical-grammatical understanding of Scripture: that every passage has one plain, simple meaning conveyed by its grammar and words. The chief instructors were Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. A.D. 350428) and Theodoret (ca. A.D. 393460). The sermons of John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 347-407) show the application of this method to preaching.

As the intellectual climate of Alexandria had profoundly shaped the approach of Clement and Origen, so the Antiochene school felt the influence of its intellectual neighbors-the Jewish community in Antioch. In fact, at one point Theodoret even criticized the interpretations of his teacher, Theodore of Mopsuestia, for being more Jewish than Christian.

For the Antiochenes, the key to finding the deeper meaning in Scripture was what they called *theoria* (Gk. "insight"). This was the ability to perceive both a text's literal historical facts as well as the spiritual reality to which these facts pointed. In other words, the Antiochene school did not downplay the literal meaning in favor of a hidden spiritual one; rather, it affirmed that, like an image, the historical sense directly corresponded to the spiritual sense.

Their radical rejection of allegory led the Antiochenes to depart from some interpretations widely accepted by the church. For example, the school's greatest interpreter, Theodore, distinguished between OT texts that are genuinely messianic and those that are originally historical.[47] In his view, only four psalms (2; 8; 45; 110) truly prophesy about the incarnation of Christ and the Church. As for psalms cited as messianic by Jesus and the apostles, he did not take them to be predictive prophecy. Rather, he explained their use in terms of the analogous spiritual difficulties that the psalmist and Jesus shared.

Along the same line, Theodore departed from the traditional allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon, i.e., that it symbolizes Christ's love for the Church or the Christian's devotion to Christ. Instead, he regarded it as a love poem written by Solomon to celebrate his marriage to an Egyptian princess. Overall,

[46]Grant and Tracy, Short *History,* 63–72; and M. F. Wiles, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School," *CHB I,* 489–510.

[47]Cf. Grant and Tracy, Short *History, 66,* 67.

Theodore and the school at Antioch rejected the allegorical method and took Scripture's historical sense more seriously than did their Alexandrian counterparts. On the other hand, they still did not escape the grip of allegory completely. At times, they practiced a kind of typology that bordered on the allegorical approach they so strongly rejected.

Church Councils (ca. A.D. 400-590)

With the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in A.D. 312, politics exercised a profound influence on the Church's interpretation of Scripture. In the emperor's view, doctrinal disputes between the orthodox mainstream and its heretical tributaries threatened the empire's political stability. So he pressured the Church to settle differences and to standardize its disputed doctrines. This proved to be a difficult task for two reasons. First, simple appeals to Scripture in defense of orthodoxy produced nothing but a doctrinal stalemate. The reason was that the unorthodox groups also supported their views from Scripture, often very persuasively.

Second, orthodox theologians themselves could not agree on the proper way to interpret Scripture. The conflict between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools undermined all appeals to Scripture. At one point, the early church father Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200) recommended that defenders of orthodoxy ***not*** appeal to Scripture since such appeals rarely would win the argument.[48] The Church desperately needed some authority to determine with finality the meaning of Scripture. It found the answer in the apostolic succession of church leadership.

Above, we noted how the apostolic fathers appealed to traditional interpretation in response to heresies like Gnosticism. Under Constantine, orthodox church leaders argued that only they, the apostles' successors, were the true interpreters of Scripture since only they had directly received the apostolic teaching. To implement this principle, church leaders convened a series of church councils to define official church doctrine.

By defining correct Christian beliefs, the doctrinal decisions of councils gave church tradition even greater authority than it had before. In effect, it raised the authority of tradition above that of Scripture. Increasingly, the Church's official pronouncements on doctrine came to determine the interpretations of Scripture the Church deemed correct, not the other way around.

Early in this period, the great church leader Augustine articulated the prevailing view in his On ***Christian Doctrine*** (A.D. ***397).*** According to Augustine, to interpret the Bible properly one must find out what the original writer intended to say.[49] Now this principle works well when the teaching of Scripture is clear. But what does one do when it is not? In reply, Augustine offered three criteria for finding the correct meaning of obscure texts.

[48]Grant and Tracy, Short ***History, 73.***

[49]"Augustine, On ***Christian Doctrine, 1.41.*** Cf. the convenient overview of Augustine and his thought in G. Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," ***CHB I, 541-63.***

First, one consults the "rule of faith" (what clearer passages of Scripture say on the subject) and second, one consults the "authority of the Church" or the church's traditional interpretation of the text. Third, if conflicting views meet both criteria, one should consult the context to see which view commends itself best. In other words, plainer passages and church tradition take precedence over the contexts of obscure passages.[50] Thus, the accepted church tradition, not a reasoned study of Scripture, became the ultimate interpreter of the Bible.

Another event toward the close of the patristic period solidified the grip of tradition on interpretation even more. Church leaders finally persuaded the learned scholar, Jerome (A.D. 331–420), to translate the OT and NT, as well as the Apocrypha, into Latin. This translation from Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, known as the Vulgate (from the Latin word for "common"), became the official Bible of the Church. Unfortunately, from that time the study of the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek ceased for all practical purposes. Instead, the Church came to depend upon the Vulgate translation for all doctrinal discussions. In some instances, its translations were not as accurate in reflecting the original languages as they could have been (e.g., in **Lk 1:28, "Hail** Mary, full of grace ..." [contrast *NRSV* or *NIV]).* Thus the Church moved still another step away from dependence upon the Scripture itself for its teachings.

The Middle Ages (ca. A.D. 590-1500)

As ***the*** name implies, the Middle Ages is the historical era that falls between two other major periods. It flows out of the Patristic Period, dominated by church fathers and councils, and flows into the new courses charted by the Reformation. In a sense, it constitutes a transitional phase between the two. The Middle Ages mark the decline of some features of the former and lay the groundwork for the emergence of the latter. Popular impression sees the period as a dark, oppressive one, and to a great extent that portrait is consistent with historical reality.[51] Ignorance plagued both Christian clergy and laity, and morally bankrupt church leaders stopped at nothing to preserve their ecclesiastical power. At the same time, important developments profoundly shaped the practice of biblical interpretation in the following centuries.

Three approaches typify biblical interpretation in the Middle Ages. Interpreters continued to depend heavily upon ***traditional*** interpretation-the views of the fathers passed down over centuries. The primary resource for this method remained the written ***catena*** or chain of interpretations compiled from the commentaries of the Church Fathers.[52] Significantly, while pre-medieval catenas cited a variety of commentators, medieval ones featured Fathers like Augustine and Jerome, who

[50]Grant and Tracy, Short ***History,*** 78–80.

[51]For an overview, see J. H. Dalmus, The ***Middle Ages*** (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

[52]R. E. McNally, *The **Bible** in the Early Middle Ages* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 30–32.

expressed the Church's accepted doctrinal views. In other words, interpreters using catenas tended to conform their interpretations to the Church's doctrinal norms. As McNally puts it, during this period "[e]xegesis became almost synonymous with tradition, for the good commentator was the scholar who handed on faithfully what he had received."[53]

The catena spawned one important interpretive offspring during the Middle Ages. Medieval Bible scholars developed the practice of the *interpretive&m.* Glosses were Scripture annotations or commentaries from the Fathers that were written in the margins or between the lines of the Bible. This practice became widespread in medieval schools. Eventually, editors compiled glosses on individual biblical books into the *Glossa Ordinaria, the* standard medieval commentary on the Bible.[54]

Of all the methods of biblical interpretation in the Middle Ages, the *allegorical* method dominated. Indeed, in contrast to Origen's threefold sense of Scripture, many medieval scholars believed every Bible passage had four meanings. A popular rhyme that circulated widely in the Middle Ages summarizes them:

> **The letter shows us what God** and **our fathers did;**
> **The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;**
> **The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;**
> **The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.**[55]

This practice viewed the Bible as having four senses: literal (or historical), allegorical (or doctrinal), moral (or tropological), and anagogical (or eschatological). For example, medieval Bible scholars commonly took the word "Jerusalem" to have four senses:

Literal:	the ancient Jewish city
Allegorical:	the Christian church
Moral:	the faithful soul
Anagogical:	the heavenly city[56]

The third method of medieval interpretation was *historical* interpretation. Some medieval interpreters sought to find the historical sense of Scripture by consulting with Jewish authorities. The biblical commentaries written by Andrew of St. Victor (twelfth cent.), abbot of an English abbey at Wigmore, exemplify this approach.[57] Unlike his contemporaries, Andrew excluded spiritual commentary and theological questions from his interpretation. Instead, he concentrated on a text's historical or literal sense, drawing often on Jewish interpretation. Though a minority figure on the larger

[53]McNally, *The Bible* in the *Early Middle Ages, 29.*
[54]Smalley, *Study of the Bible, 46-66* **(with a photograph).**
[55]Translation **from Grant and Tracy, Short** *History, 85.*
[56]Grant and Tracy, Short *History,* **85-86.**
"Smalley, *Study of the Bible, 120-72.*

historical landscape, Andrew reminds us that some medieval scholars kept alive the tradition of earlier exegetes like Jerome for whom Scripture's literal sense was primary.

Eventually a more influential proponent of the literal approach emerged, the movement called scholasticism.[58] Scholasticism was a pre-Renaissance intellectual awakening in Europe that began in the monastic schools and later spread to the universities. Its main concern was to sort out the relationship between the Christian faith and human reason. Two factors provided the fertile seed bed from which this movement sprouted and spread.

First, Europe enjoyed several centuries of relative political stability and peace that allowed scholars to pursue their questions without distraction. Second, the rediscovery of pre-Christian classical philosophers, especially Aristotle, provided the intellectual tools for the task. Aristotelian philosophy was the primary tool.[59] The scholastics, like Anselm and Peter Abélard, used its method of logical analysis and syllogisms to produce great works on various theological topics.

The most articulate spokesman for scholasticism, however, was the brilliant Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth cent.).[60] His massive *Summa Theologica* synthesized the intellectual fruits of three centuries of intense academic discussion. It gave the Christian faith a rational, systematic expression, and eventually became the standard summary of theology in the Roman Catholic Church. More than any of his contemporaries, Aquinas propounded the importance of the literal meaning of Scripture. For him it represented the basis on which the other senses (allegorical, anagogical, etc.) rested. Indeed, he argued that the literal sense of Scripture contained everything necessary to faith. In effect, he freed theology from its long historical slavery to the allegorical method.

In summary, the Middle Ages witnessed the decline of the dominance of the allegorical approach in the Church. The scholastic emphasis on the use of reason in interpretation underscored the subjectivity of allegory and undermined confidence in its validity. The application of philosophical tools to theology tended to anchor the interpretation of Scripture to more rational, objective moorings. On the other hand, practitioners of allegory still abounded in the Church, and dependence upon traditional interpretation remained heavy. At the same time, forces were already at work that would produce the most decisive change in biblical interpretation the Church had yet seen.

The Reformation (ca. A.D. 15004650)

The Protestant Reformation introduced a revolution in the interpretation of Scripture, a revolution whose effects continue to the present. The historical sparks

[58]Below we draw on the fine discussion in K. S. Latourette, A *History of Christianity (New* York: **Harper & Row,** 1953), **495-98.**
[59]Interestingly, **some access to Aristotle came through** Arabic and Syriac translations of his Greek writings (so Latourette, *History of Christianity, 497).*
[60]Latourette, *History of Christianity, 509-514;* and Grant and Tracy, Short *History,* 87-91.

that ignited this revolution are many, but one in particular merits mention because of its relevance to our subject. During the late Middle Ages, conflict broke out between the frozen traditionalism of the scholastics and the so-called new learning of Christian humanists like Erasmus.[61]

With some justification, the latter derided the hair-splitting, convoluted logic of scholastic theology. According to the humanists, such theology offered no spiritual food for hungry Christian souls. Many writers openly yearned for the simple faith and devotion of the early Church. Since scholastic systematic theology provided traditional orthodoxy with its rational buttress, many saw scholasticism as a fortress that needed to fall.

Further, a renewed interest in studying the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek languages provided scholars with a fresh glimpse of the Scriptures. In 1506, the controversial philologist Johann Reuchlin published a rudimentary Hebrew grammar, thereby founding the modern study of Hebrew.[62] In 15 16, Erasmus published the first modern edition of the Greek New Testament with a fresh Latin translation appended to it. This increasing interest in the early manuscripts exposed many translation errors in the Latin Vulgate and undermined the absolute authority it had enjoyed in supporting church doctrine. The Catholic Church had staked its own authority in part on the Vulgate. Thus, doubts concerning the authority of the latter also cast shadows of doubt on the authority of the former.

Again, growing dissatisfaction with the allegorical method fueled a desire for a better interpretative approach. At the end of the fifteen century, a man named Geiler of Kaiserberg observed that abuse of the allegorical method had made Scripture a "nose of wax" to be turned interpretively any way the reader wanted.[63] Many rued the arbitrary, speculative nature of allegory.

According to a popular saying in the sixteenth century, "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it."[64] Indeed, Martin Luther was one of two figures who led the hermeneutical revolution of the sixteenth century. First, Luther affirmed that only Scripture has divine authority for Christians. Luther broke with the long-entrenched principle that church tradition and ordained church leaders held the same weight of doctrinal authority as the Bible.[65] He, thus, laid down the foundational premise of the reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). As a

[61]What follows draws on 0. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 29–39. "Humanists" were scholars who devoted themselves to the study of classical literature during this period.

[62]B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 38, 39.

[63]B. Hall, "Biblical Scholarship: Editions and Commentaries," in *Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1963), 48 (henceforth *CHB III*).

&Chadwick, *The Reformation, 39;* cf. also his treatment (pp. 40–75) of Luther's life. R. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (New* York: Mentor Books, 19501, offers an excellent biography of Luther.

[65]Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 93. As Latourette points out *(History of Christianity,* 704), Luther learned the nominalistic philosophy of William of Occam, who taught that one had to accept Christian beliefs by faith, not by reason, following the authority of the Church and the Bible.

corollary, Luther also affirmed the principle that Scripture itself is its own best interpreter; consequently, readers no longer needed to depend on patristic commentary to understand the Bible.

Second, Luther rejected the allegorical method of interpretation because, in his view, it amounted to empty speculation. Instead, he affirmed that Scripture had one simple meaning, its historical sense. This is discerned, Luther said, by applying the ordinary rules of grammar in the light of Scripture's original historical context. At the same time, Luther read the Bible through Christocentric glasses, claiming that the whole Bible-including the OT-taught about Christ.[66] Thus, while rejecting allegory, Luther took up again the typological interpretation typical of the NT.

But Luther stressed that proper interpretation also has a subjective element. By this he meant that the illumination of the Holy Spirit guides Christians in applying their personal experience to biblical interpretation. It enables the Bible reader to understand accurately what a given passage teaches about Christ. The resulting interpretation is, thus, a truly "spiritual interpretation."[67]

The other figure who led the hermeneutical revolution was John Calvin.[68] Like Luther and Aquinas, Calvin rejected allegory in favor of a historical interpretation of Scripture. With Luther, he also affirmed the Scripture as the Church's only ultimate authority, an authority to be believed by faith. Again, Calvin believed in a subjective element in interpretation—what he called "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." In Calvin's view, this witness served not to illuminate the process of interpretation but to confirm in the Christian's heart that an interpretation was correct.[69]

In brief, the Reformation represented a revolutionary break with the principles of biblical interpretation formerly practiced. Whereas previous Bible scholarship had relied on church tradition and the interpretations of church fathers, the Reformation leaned solely on the teachings of Scripture. If the past applied allegory to dig out Scripture's alleged many meanings, the Reformers opted for Scripture's plain, simple, literal sense. Small wonder, then, that both Luther and Calvin produced commentaries on numerous biblical books, commentaries still prized by Bible students today.

Ironically, the spiritual children of Calvin and Luther seemed to lapse back into a Protestant form of scholasticism.[70] In the late sixteen century, esoteric doctrinal disputes bordering on hair-splitting tended to preoccupy the emerging Lutheran and Calvinist churches. To outside observers, they departed from Luther and Calvin in one respect: they appeared to place more importance on intellectual agreement with Protestant dogma than on the practice of warm, lively, personal piety.

As for the Catholic response to the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545–63) reaffirmed, among other things, the Roman Catholic tradition of biblical interpretation. It upheld the authenticity of the Vulgate and forbade anyone to interpret

[66]Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 94.

[67]Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 94-95.

[68]For an overview of his life and work, see Chadwick, *The Reformation,* 82-96; and G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe, 1517-1559* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 210–38.

[69]Grant and Tracy, Short *History, 96.*

[70]Latourette, *History of Christianity,* 739–40; Hall, "Biblical Scholarship," 76-77; and N. Sykes, "The Religion of the Protestants," *CHB III,* 175–76.

Scripture out of harmony with church doctrine.[71] As a result, from the momentous events of the sixteenth century flowed two distinct streams of biblical interpretation: one Protestant and one Catholic. Nearly four centuries would pass before their approaches drew closer together again.

The Post-Reformation Period (ca. A.D. 16504800)

The Reformation was not the only revolutionary movement spawned by the late Middle Ages. The Renaissance (1300-1600) featured a reborn interest in classical Greek and Roman art and philosophy. The revived interest in Hebrew and Greek that **aided the Reformation** derived from the spirit of the Renaissance. If renewed Christian faith drove the Reformation, an increasing reliance on human reason spurred on the Renaissance. Consequently, important movements flowing from both the Reformation and the Renaissance influenced the interpretation of the Bible in the Post-Reformation period.

From the Reformation emerged the movement called *pietism*. Pietism began in Germany in the seventeenth century and later spread to Western Europe and America.[72] It represented a reaction to the arid intellectual dogmatism of Protestant scholasticism and the sterile formalism of Protestant worship services. Pietism sought to revive the practice of Christianity as a way of life through group Bible study, prayer, and the cultivation of personal morality. Its leader was Philip Jacob Spener (1635–1705), a German pastor who preached the necessity of personal conversion to Christ and an intimate, personal relationship to God. Against the purely doctrinal interests of their contemporaries, Spener and the German pietists stressed the devotional, practical study of the Bible. Their method featured careful grammatical study of the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, always, however, with an eye for their devotional or practical implications. In England, another pietistic movement, the Methodism of John Wesley (1703–1791), also sought to recover a vibrant personal piety and holy life through Bible study and prayer.[73]

The renowned New England preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) represents pietism in America. Unlike Spener and Wesley, Edwards approached the Bible with an eye both for its practical application as well as for its doctrinal teachings. As for method, Edwards resorted to typology to draw out practical applications from Scripture. Consider, for example, his interpretation of Gen 29:20: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." In enduring hard work out of love for Rachel, according to Edwards, Jacob was a type of Christ who endured the cross out of love for the Church.

[71] Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 868; cf. also the account of the Council of Trent in Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 273–81.

[72] Sykes, "The Religion of the Protestants," 190-93; Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 894-897.

[73] For an overview of the Wesleyan movement, see Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1022–29.

The spirit of the Renaissance gave birth to the important intellectual movement called rationalism.[74] Rationalism regarded the human mind as an independent authority capable of determining truth. The roots of rationalism lay in the Christian humanism of scholars like Erasmus. In the service of the Church, they had employed human reason to study the Bible in its original languages. They also believed that the use of reason to investigate the Bible helped Christians to establish their faith. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries thinkers applied this tool of reason not only against the authority of the Church but also against the Bible itself. Subtly, their work set the stage for the complete overthrow of both biblical and ecclesiastical authority in the nineteenth century.

In Neil's words, rationalism "was not a system of beliefs antagonistic to Christianity, but an attitude of mind which assumed that in all matters of religion reason is supreme."[75] Three thinkers, two of them philosophers, illustrate the approach of seventeenth-century rationalism to the Bible. In his *Leviathan* (1651), the Anglican philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued from internal evidence that Moses lived long before the Pentateuch was completed and, hence, could not be its author.[76] In his *Critical History of the Old* Testament (1678), the French secular priest Richard Simon reached a similar conclusion, stating that some parts of the OT reflect a confusion in chronology.[77]

It was the thoughts of Jewish philosopher Bernard Spinoza, however, that most significantly undercut the authority of Scripture.[78] In his originally anonymous *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), Spinoza argued for the primacy of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. In other words, Scripture should be studied like any other book-by using the rules of historical investigation. For example, reason understands scriptural claims to God's direct intervention in history to be simply a common Jewish way of speaking, not actual revelation. Miracle stories thus become nothing more than a powerful way to move ignorant people to obedience. By implication, Spinoza subjected Scripture to the authority of the human mind rather than the other way around.

Thus, the Post-Reformation period brought the fragmentation of approaches to biblical interpretation. On the one hand, the pietists continued to search the Scriptures to feed their hungry souls and to guide their quest for virtuous lives. On the other hand, whereas Aquinas had sought the integration of philosophy and theology the rationalists promoted the radical divorce of each from the other. Though rationalism had declined in popularity'by the mid-eighteenth century, it spawned a series of influential biblical handbooks written along the critical lines of Spinoza and enjoyed an even greater renaissance in the next century.

[74] Cf. the extensive survey in Sykes, "Religion of the Protestants," 193–98; W. Neil, "The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible 1700-1950," *CHB ZZZ*, 128-65; and Grant and Tracy, Short *History*, 100-109.

[75] Neil, "Criticism and Theological Use," 239.

[76] T. Hobbes, Leviathan, III, chap. 33. This denial, of course, ran against the longstanding opinion of the day.

[77] Sykes, "Religion of the Protestants," 194. Later scholars would look back to Simon as the father of modern biblical criticism.

[78] Grant and Tracy, Shot-t *History*, 105-108.

The Modern Period (ca. A.D. WOO-Present)

The Nineteenth Century

On many fronts, the nineteenth century was a revolutionary one. Latourette calls it "The Great Century" because it saw both an increased repudiation of Christianity as well as its unprecedented expansion in missions.[79] Radical advances in human science created popular confidence in the scientific method, which in turn produced a revolutionary method for studying history-the modern scientific study of history. Also, in the nineteenth century, developmentalism-the idea that evolving historical progress underlies everything-became widespread as the philosophy of Frederick Hegel and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin attest.

The Bible did not escape the impact of these changes. Scholars, especially those teaching in German universities, sought to approach the Bible through similar objective, scientific means.[80] Thus was born the approach known as the *historical-critical method,* an interpretive method guided by several crucial philosophical presuppositions. It inherited the rationalistic assumption from its seventeenth-century intellectual ancestors, that the use of human reason, free of theological limitations, is the best tool with which to study the Bible. So scholars treated the Bible as they would any other literature, not as God's special revelation to humanity.

Also, the historical-critical method presupposed a naturalistic worldview that explained everything in terms of natural laws and excluded the possibility of supernatural intervention. Thus, scholars accounted for biblical miracles by means of the laws of physics, biology, and chemistry. Again, the approach believed that all history happens as an evolutionary process of development. Thus, its practitioners interpreted the history that the Bible reports along that line, viewing earlier eras as "primitive" and later ones as "advanced." The historical-critical method further regarded the Bible's ideas as time-bound truths not timeless ones (the Bible merely records what people thought at the time). Finally, scholars assumed that the Bible's greatest contribution lay in its moral and ethical values, not in its theological teachings.

These presuppositions brought about two decisive shifts in the focus of biblical interpretation. First, rather than seek to discern what a text meant, many scholars sought instead to discover the sources behind it. This method was called source ***criticism.*** Second, rather than accept the Bible as timeless revelation, some scholars sought to retrace the historical development presumed to underlie it. The work of three influential German scholars illustrates these shifts in biblical interpretation.

F. C. Baur, professor of historical theology at the University of Tiibingen (1826–1860), argued that Paul's letters reflect a deep division in apostolic Christianity.[81] On one side, said Baur, stood the church of Jerusalem (led by Peter and other original disciples), which taught a Jewish form of Christianity. On the other,

[79]Latourette, *History of Christianity,* 1061.

[80]For details, see Neil, "Criticism and Theological Use," 255-65.

[81]Our treatment follows the summary of Baur by F. F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," in New *Testament Interpretation,* ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 42–43.

stood Paul and his Gentile converts who insisted that the gospel actually abolished the legalistic demands of Judaism. More important, Baur inferred that NT books that did not reflect early Christianity as divided must be post-apostolic in origin. On this premise he dated both Acts and the Gospels to the second century. In effect, Baur denied their authority as sources of information for the life and ministry of Jesus. Baur and his disciples, the so-called Tiibingen School, applied critical human reason to the study of the NT. They claimed to find a historical scenario implicit in the NT that tiered from the impression the documents themselves gave. The resulting portrait of the history of early Christianity departed radically from portraits commonly accepted by their contemporaries.

In OT studies, Julius Wellhausen wrapped up a long scholarly discussion about the written sources of the Pentateuch. In his monumental ***Prolegomena to the History of Israel*** (1878), Wellhausen argued that behind the Pentateuch stood four separate sources written between 850 and 550 B.C.[82] Several crucial implications derived from that claim: (1) that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch; (2) that the Law originated after the historical books not before them; and (3) that the true history of Israel differed markedly from the history the OT books narrate.

The last German scholar whose work typifies nineteenth-century thought is Adolf von Harnack. Probably more than any other book, his *What* ***Is Christianity?*** (1901) summarized the liberal theology that dominated Protestantism and shaped its biblical interpretation.[83] Harnack called for Protestants to return to the religion of Jesus, the religion he claimed lay hidden behind the Church's later portrait of him in the NT. For Harnack, three essential teachings summarize Jesus' religion: (1) the coming of the kingdom of God; (2) the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the human soul; and (3) the commandment of love.

In sum, Baur, Wellhausen, and Harnack claimed that historical criticism unearthed a complex literary and religious history behind sections of the present Bible. As many critics pointed out, if true, their views severely undermined the historical reliability of the Bible and, hence, its authority as a document of divine revelation. More important, their work radically redefined the object of biblical interpretation. Its purpose was not to determine the meaning of the present text but to find the sources and history lurking behind it. Only at the earliest stages of the tradition could one encounter accurate and authoritative history.

The Twentieth Century

The dawn of this century witnessed the flowering of two interpretive approaches that grew out of the late nineteenth century. The first was *history of*

[82]Originally in German, its English translation appeared as J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885). The application of source criticism in NT studies produced the now widely accepted theory that two main documents (Mark and a collection of Jesus' sayings called "Q") lay behind the present Synoptic Gospels; cf. Bruce, "History," 53-55.

[83]The English translation of the German original is A. von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Putnam 1901); cf. the discussion in Grant and Tracy, Short *History,* 116–117. For liberalism, see A. Richardson, "The Rise of Modem Biblical Scholarship and Recent Discussion of the Authority of the Bible," CHB *III,* 311–318.

religions.[84] Baur and Wellhausen had claimed to uncover the "true history" of the Israelite and Christian religions through internal biblical evidence. But during the nineteenth century, archaeologists had unearthed numerous written texts from ancient Egypt, Syro-Palestine, Babylonia, and Assyria. These texts gave scholars fresh new insights into religions contemporary to the Bible. Inevitably, scholars came to compare them with biblical religion. Such comparisons soon gave birth to the history-of-religions approach, a method that tried to trace the historical development of all ancient Near Eastern religions. Specifically, it professed to show how ancient neighboring religions had profoundly influenced the religious practices of the Israelites. Sometimes its adherents went to unwarranted extremes in their approach. F. Delitzsch tried to argue that the OT contained nothing more than warmed-over Babylonian ideas.[85]

The history-of-religions approach left two lasting influences on biblical interpretation. First, its comparative research suggested that many biblical ideas had originated earlier than scholars like Wellhausen had thought. For example, the discovery of ancient law codes implied that OT ethical demands derived from Moses rather than from the religious creativity of the prophets. Second, it firmly established what came to be known as "the comparative principle." Henceforth, proper biblical interpretation would require consultation with relevant cultural evidence from the ancient world of the Bible.

The second interpretive approach was the new literary method called ***form criticism.***[86] The father of form criticism was Hermann Gunkel, a German OT scholar best known for his study of the Psalms. Form criticism sought to recover the shorter oral compositions from which the Bible's written sources supposedly derived. It also aimed to determine the specific cultural life-setting in which each originated. Thus, Gunkel and his disciples claimed that the original setting of most of the psalms was the temple in Jerusalem.

Eventually, OT form criticism began to focus more on the literary types of the present written text rather than on the Bible's oral pre-stages.[87] Today form criticism remains an invaluable method in the toolbox of all serious Bible students. Our survey of OT literary genres later in this book bears witness to the lasting legacy of Gunkel's approach, and, as we shall see, in the hands of NT scholars it also profoundly shaped the interpretation of the Gospels in this century.

Post-World War I

To a great extent, the twentieth century's two world wars provide the time settings of biblical interpretation during this century. The disastrous events of World

[84]For its story, see H. F. Hahn and H. D. Hummel, ***The Old Testament in Modern Research*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 83-l 18.

[85]F. Delitzsch, ***Babel and Bible (New*** York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903).

[86]Cf. Hahn and Hummel, ***Old Testament,*** 119–56; more briefly, Neil, "Criticism and Theological Use," 289-91.

[87]Gunkel's own definitive research on the psalms certainly reflects this change. See H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, ***Einleitung in die Psulmen*** (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ***1933);*** cf. id., Die *Psalmen,* 5th ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968).

War I devastated Europe and destroyed the naive optimism that had supported liberal theology. The horrors of the war also seemed to stir up increasing interest in the existentialist philosophies of figures like Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. Like the proverbial phoenix, new directions in biblical interpretation arose from the ashes of world conflict. Two towering figures, men who today still cast long shadows of influence, initially charted those new directions.

The first was the Swiss country pastor, Karl Barth (1886–1968). In his commentary on Romans (1919), Barth lambasted the mistakes of liberalism and sought to reassert long-lost emphases of his Reformation heritage.** Specifically, he reemphasized the authority of Scripture as the Word of God and the necessity of a personal encounter with the living God of whom it speaks. The idea of such a personal encounter reflected the influence of Kierkegaard. Barth's later multi-volume Church Dogmatics fueled a lively renaissance in Protestant systematic theology and exemplified how penetrating biblical interpretation could enrich theology.[89]

The second imposing shadow on the twentieth-century landscape was the noted NT scholar, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976).[90] As Kierkegaard helped to shape Barth's theology, so Heidegger's existentialism formed the philosophical foundation of Bultmann's work. The history of biblical interpretation remembers Bultmann for two distinct developments. First, Bultmann applied the method of form criticism to the Gospels. He classified their individual episodes into various literary types (e.g., miracle story, pronouncement story, etc.) and suggested an original setting for each.[91] Bultmann also judged the historical reliability of certain literary forms depending upon their setting. Bultmann especially doubted those types that, in his view, seemed colored by the later beliefs of the early Christian community. Thus, in Bultmann's hands, form criticism further eroded the historical reliability of the Gospels. Bultmann distinguished between the "Jesus of history" (the person who actually lived) and the "Christ of faith" (the person in Christian preaching). On the other hand, using modern historical-critical methods, British scholars like C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, and Vincent Taylor ably defended the substantial historical reliability of Gospel accounts.

[88]For an English translation based on the sixth German edition, see K. Barth, ***The Epistle to the Romans*** (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). Cf. Richardson, "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship," 319–23; S. Neil1 and T. Wright, ***The Interpretation of The New Testament 1861-1986,*** 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 215-227.

[89]The English translation is K. Barth, Church ***Dogmatics, 4*** vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1969). For an overview of Barth's thought, see G. W. Bromiley, ***An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); and T. F. Torrance, ***Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*** (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990).

[90]Cf. the appreciative treatments in Neil1 and Wright, ***The Interpretation of the New Testament,*** 237-51; and W. G. Doty, ***Contemporary New Testament Interpretation*** (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 17-27.

[91]For a translation of the ground-breaking work originally published in 1921, see R. Bultmann, ***The History of the Synoptic Tradition (New*** York: Harper & Row, 1963). Cf. also the influential form critical work of Bultmann's contemporary, M. Dibelius, ***From Tradition to Gospel (New*** York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1965 [Germ. orig. 1919]). E. V. McKnight, ***What Is Form Criticism?*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) provides a convenient introduction to the method.

Second, Bultmann sought to "demythologize" the Bible, to interpret the *kerygma* or "message" currently couched in its (in his view) outmoded mythological worldview.[92] Like Barth, Bultmann was concerned that the Bible speak to the needs of modern people. He wanted to make the Bible's message understandable and relevant to his contemporaries. In his view, the prevailing scientific worldview had undermined the faith of many intelligent Christians. They had trouble believing the Bible because of what he called its mythological language-for example, its three-storied universe, its claims that Jesus "descended" from and "ascended" to heaven, and its miracles.

Bultmann's approach requires that one read the Bible with an existentialist hermeneutic .[93] Most readers expect to derive objective information from the Bible, and Bultmann conceded that the text does provide much of that, but he also allowed that readers may disregard anything they deem as prescientific (e.g., primitive cosmology, myths, etc.). Further, he argued that one should read the Bible subjectively to let its understanding of human existence clarify one's own existential predicament. Indeed, Bultmann affirmed that the Bible becomes revelation when it confronts us with such a challenge. He determined that people can understand the Bible only when they understand what he called their "unauthentic existence" and the possibilities of making it more authentic. In other words, he proposed a primarily subjective, existentialist reading of the Bible--one uprooted from any first-century historical event.

Between the two world wars, the work of Barth and Bultmann spawned a new theological movement called neo-orthodoxy (or dialectical theology). Dominated by Barth and another Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, three basic assumptions guided the approach of neo-orthodox theologians to biblical interpretation. First, God is a subject not an object (a "Thou" not an "It"). Thus, the Bible's words cannot convey knowledge of God as abstract propositions; one can only know him in a personal encounter. Such encounters are so subjective, mysterious., and miraculous that they elude the objective measurements of science. Second, a great gulf separates the Bible's transcendent God from fallen humanity. Indeed, he is so transcendent that only myths can bridge this gulf and reveal him to people. Thus, neo-orthodoxy downplayed the historicity of biblical events, preferring to view them as myths that conveyed theological truth in historical dress. Third, neo-orthodox theologians believed that truth was ultimately paradoxical in nature. Hence, they saw no reason to rationally reconcile conflicting statements in the Bible. Instead, they accepted opposite biblical ideas as paradoxes, thereby implicitly denying that any type of underlying rational coherence bound the diverse ideas of Scripture together.

[92]The translation of the 1941 German original is R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in H. W. Bartsch, ed., ***Kerygma and Myth vol. 1*** (London: SPCK, 1957), l-44; cf. also his ***Jesus Christ and Mythology (New*** York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Neill and Wright ***(Interpretation of the New Testament,*** 241–51) and Doty ***(Contemporary New Testament Zntepetation, 17-27)*** provide insightful assessments of Bultmann.

[93]Richardson, "Modern Biblical Scholarship," 327-39; and Doty, ***Contempora*** y New ***Testament Interpretation, 19.***

Post-World War II

If World War I gave birth to neo-orthodoxy and Bultmann's program, World War II also fathered significant offspring. In postwar America, a flood of publications showed a revival of interest in biblical theology, a revival that Childs calls the ***Biblical Theology Movement.***[94] In 1947, the journal ***Interpretation*** began publication to promote positive reflection on theology and the Bible. Three years later, SCM Press launched its scholarly series "Studies in Biblical Theology." While historical-critical matters had formerly dominated in biblical commentaries, now the commentaries featured discussions of the theology and message of biblical books.

According to Childs, five major emphases typified the movement: (1) the rediscovery of the Bible's theological dimension; (2) the unity of the whole Bible; (3) the revelation of God in history; (4) the distinctiveness of the Bible's mentality (i.e., Hebrew thought in contrast to Greek thought); and (5) the contrast of the Bible to its ancient environment. In the late 1960s, however, criticism of the movement cast doubt on many of those emphases. Nevertheless, the movement served to revive study of the theological dimension of the Bible, a dimension that had become a casualty of historical criticism in the late nineteenth century.

The postwar era also saw the birth of what proved to be an influential new method. The nineteenth century passed on interpretive methods that tended to highlight the Bible's diversity and disunity. With source criticism, for example, biblical interpretation amounted to a kind of academic autopsy. It was enough for the interpreter simply to catalog the parts of the textual cadaver. Again, by focusing on individual forms and their transmission, form criticism tended to bog down in a similar tedious analysis. In both cases, scholars simply ignored the larger literary context (the present, final text of the Bible) of which the sources and forms were a part.

But in the mid-1950s, ***redaction criticism*** emerged as a complementary discipline of form criticism. Basically, redaction criticism seeks to discern the distinctive theological and thematic emphases that the individual biblical writers or editors gave their materials.[95] It assumes, for example, that-however it came to be-each context or book reflects the editorial design of its author/editor, a design that aims to emphasize certain themes. Redaction criticism first appeared in studies of the Gospels,[96] but OT scholars have used a similar approach in studying sections of the Hebrew canon.[97]

[94]The term "biblical theology" refers to the theology that the Bible itself shows as opposed to that of philosophers or systematic theologians. B. S. Childs, ***Biblical Theology in Crisis*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13–60, provides details on the Biblical Theology Movement. But see also J. D. Smart, ***The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 22-30, who denies the movement's existence.

[95]For the method, see the introduction by NT scholar N. Perrin, ***What Is Reduction Criticism?*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

[96]E.g., W. Marxsen, ***Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969); and H. Conzelmann, ***The Theology of Saint Luke (New*** York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[97]E.g., D. J. A. Clines, ***The Theme of the Pentateuch,*** JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); and G. A. Rendsburg, The ***Redaction of Genesis*** (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986).

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Two other postwar interpretive developments trace their intellectual genealogy to the work of Bultmann. The first is the movement among Bultmann's students called the "new quest for the historical Jesus."[98] They reacted vigorously to his rigid denial that one could know little or nothing historical about Jesus. They (and many others) asked how one could have an authentic Christian faith without an actual historical Jesus. They wondered whether Bultmann's agnosticism about Jesus might actually undermine the faith. So, in the 1950s and 1960s they cautiously sought to sketch from the Gospels what they thought could be known historically about Jesus.[99] Bultmann's critics had accused him of Docetism, the heresy that Jesus only appeared to suffer and die but did not actually do so. Consequently his students paid particular attention to the history of the crucifixion because of its importance in Christian theology. Conservative scholars might regard their conclusions as rather meager, but they at least narrowed the gap between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith."[100]

The second development, the so-called new ***hermeneutic,*** also involved Bultmann's academic children.[101] It drew on new views in the field of linguistics concerning human language. Specifically, it understood language to be an actor (i.e., something that sets things in motion) rather than a label one attaches to passive objects. Thus, each use of language brings a new entity into being-what movement spokesmen like E. Fuchs and G. Ebeling call a "word-happening" or "speech-event." Each speech-event communicates its own unique truth-and this is the crucial point--in light of the hearer's own experience.

Applied to biblical interpretation, this new concept of language implied a different view of the biblical text. Up to now, interpreters presumed it to be an object that passively responded to their interpretive questions, an object over which they were master. By contrast, the new hermeneutic assumed that, when read, the text created, as it were, a new speech-event that mastered the reader. In other words, the biblical text interprets the reader, not vice versa, confronting him or her with the Word of God at that moment. Thus, in the new hermeneutic the text, not the interpreter, guides biblical interpretation. In interpretation, the text and its intention must grip the reader rather than the reader's questions controlling the text.

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[98]The expression derives from the book title of J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus,* SBT 25 (London: SCM; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1959), a title that echoes the English title of an important book written by A. Schweitzer more than fifty years earlier (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus [New* York: MacMillan, 1910]). For a survey of the quest, see Neil1 and Wright, *Interpretation of the New Testament, 288-312,* 397-98.

[99]The monograph by Robinson *(A New Quest of the Historical Jesus)* pointed the way. Other important contributors included the 1953 lecture by E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," published in translation in his Essays *on New Testament Themes,* SBT 21 (London: SCM; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1964), 15–47; and G. Bomkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth (New* York: Harper & Row, 1960).

'@'According to Neil1 and Wright *(Interpretation of the New Testament,* 379–403), a "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus has recently superseded both the "first" (i.e., A. Schweitzer's) and the "new" quests. Its distinctives are: (1) use of extra-biblical evidence to reconstruct the cultural milieu of Jesus; (2) a renewed interest in Jesus' Jewishness; and (3) discussion about why Jesus was crucified.

[101]For an overview, see Doty, *Contempora* y New *Testament Interpretation, 28-51;* and the essays in J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, eds., *The* New *Hermeneutic (New* York: Harper & Row, 1964). The movement's master theoretician is H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

The new hermeneutic has made several positive contributions to biblical interpretation. First, it has stimulated a refreshing revival of theoretical reflection on the subject. Biblical hermeneutics used to focus on the various interpretive techniques a reader used to draw out meaning from a text. The new hermeneutic, however, has underscored the complex relationship that links readers and written texts. Second, it rightly underscores the effect a text has on the reader. Previously the assumption was that the interpreter controlled interpretation, that the text was a passive object to be analyzed. Now the interpreter is challenged to reckon with the scrutiny that the text imposes on him or her. In essence, by drawing readers into its world, the text actively interprets their world.

Third, the concept of speech-event in the new hermeneutic properly emphasizes that Scripture must relate to the meaningful existence of its contemporary audience. In other words, interpretation involves more than just defining what the text meant originally. It also entails relating the historical meaning of Scripture to the issues of contemporary life.

As for its weaknesses, the new hermeneutic tends to deemphasize a text's historical meaning and its contribution to the speech-event. Hence, it runs the risk of losing its roots in the biblical text. Again, while opening up new interpretive insights, in effect its existentialist orientation limits what a text can say to the reader, namely, insights into human existence. Readers may not gather biblical insights, for example, into history, science, culture, etc.

The postwar Biblical Theology Movement also left a methodological offspring: the method of canon ***criticism.*** To remedy the movement's weaknesses, B. S. Childs proposed a new context for doing theology-the canonical status of the Bible.[102] Canon criticism regards biblical books as canonical, that is, as the authoritative writings of the Jewish and Christian communities. It also presumes that theological convictions guided those who compiled these books. Hence, it seeks to find their theological meaning by analyzing their canonical shape: the editorial design of their present form.[103]

In conclusion. the twentieth century has seen the emergence of new methods of interpretation and rigorous philosophical reflection on the nature of the interpretive process.[104] Other new methods have joined the ranks of those discussed above. Literary approaches, like the so-called new literary criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction, have generated intriguing interpretations and lively scholarly discussion. Sociological approaches, including feminist, and liberation hermeneutics have also gained a wide hearing. (For a more complete discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these modern approaches to interpretation see the Appendix.)

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[102]Childs *Biblical Theology* in *Crisis,* 99–107. For an introduction to the approach, see J. A. Sanders, *Canon* and ***Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). See our further analysis in Chapter 3.

[103]Childs himself has pursued this task in his ***Introduction to the Old*** *Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), and his ***The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

'"Here we refer readers to the recently published, definitive discussion of contemporary biblical interpretation in A. C. Thiselton, ***New Horizons in Hermeneutics*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

CHAPTER THREE

The Canon and Translations

The word "canon" comes from the Greek *kanōn*, meaning "list," "rule," or "standard." **The canon** of Scripture refers to the collection of biblical books that Christians accept as uniquely authoritative. We accept it, but how do we know we have the right collection of books? Why do these sixty-six writings command our attention but not others? Did any other books ever "compete" for inclusion in the canon, and if so, why were they excluded? The question of which books belong in the Bible becomes crucial for a study of hermeneutics that asserts that certain documents, and only those documents, remain normative for all believers. Our discussion becomes all the more urgent because Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians have never agreed on the extent of the OT. What is more, many liberal Christians today suggest that, although all branches of Christianity traditionally have agreed on the contents of the NT (since at least the fourth century), the criteria for that agreement may no longer be acceptable. Some would argue that other ancient Christian and even Gnostic writings are as valuable as parts of the canonical NT.[1] In this chapter we will sketch, in turn, the rise of the OT canon, the development of the NT canon, the criteria of canonicity, and the implications for hermeneutics in a new discipline known as canon criticism.

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[1]Three important recent studies of the formation of the Christian Bible that challenge the legitimacy of the ancient criteria of canonicity are H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) (mildly); H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) (moderately); and L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) (significantly).

The Canon of the Old Testament

Since the Reformation, Protestants have accepted the thirty-nine books, from Genesis to Malachi, that appear in all editions of the Bible in print today. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, preserve various so-called apocryphal (from the Greek word for "hidden") or deutero-canonical (a second canon) books that were influential throughout the first 1500 years of church history.[2] These books include such works as 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira[ch], and not to be confused with Ecclesiastes), Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Some of these works are historical in nature: 1 and 2 Maccabees describe the history of key portions of the intertestamental period, while 1 Esdras largely reduplicates material found in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. 2 Esdras is an apocalypse of secret revelations purportedly given to Ezra. The two books of Wisdom somewhat resemble the canonical book of Proverbs. Baruch resembles parts of the prophecy of Jeremiah, and the Letter of Jeremiah could be characterized as an impassioned sermon based on the canonical text of Jer 11:10. Devotional literature is represented by the two Prayers. The remaining books are (at least partially) legendary novels illustrating virtue and vice by means of their main characters. The three works known as Susanna, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, and Bel and the Dragon all appear as subsections within a longer form of the book of Daniel. Apocryphal additions to Esther also exist.[3]

Protestants have defended the shorter OT canon, asserting that these thirty-nine books were the only books that the Jews of the time of Christ and the apostles accepted into their canon of Scripture. The other books, presumably though not demonstrably all of Jewish origin (some exist now only in Greek or Latin and not Hebrew), date from the intertestamental period after the time of Malachi. The Jews never believed they were inspired in the same way as the earlier biblical books. In fact, widespread testimony in later rabbinic literature (primarily from the second through fifth centuries after Christ), as well as in Josephus (a first-century Jewish historian), outlines the Jewish belief that prophecy (or at least divinely-inspired writings) ceased after the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the latest of the minor prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.[4] This means that no **book dated later than about 450400 B.C.** could be considered part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and therefore, part of the Christian OT. Such claims should not unduly denigrate the apocryphal books, for they provide valuable information about historical and theological developments between the testaments and often prove inspiring, even if not inspired, reading. One should remember that Roman and Eastern belief in some of these works as authoritative stems from a later period, removed by at least a couple of centuries from the NT era, when Christianity had largely lost sight of its Jewish roots.[5]

Since the pioneering work of A. C. Sundberg, however, it is often argued that, because the NT reflects widespread use of the Septuagint (the Greek OT, abbreviated LXX), which included much of the Apocrypha, first-century Christians must therefore have believed in the canonical status of apocryphal works.[6] However, the NT authors never quote these works directly as they do the rest of the OT. With LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, "it is probably safe to assume that the Old Testament they used was identical with that known today."[7] The evidence of Phi10 and Josephus points in the same direction. Lee McDonald disputes these claims, citing numerous possible allusions to the Apocrypha in the NT,[8] but none appears as unequivocally as the numerous direct quotations of undisputed OT literature. What is more, it is not clear that even the fairly undeniable allusions to apocryphal books (e.g., Wis in Rom 9:21 or Sir 51:23–27 in Mt 11:28–30) prove that early Christians viewed these works as canonical. Paul, for example, alluded to Greek poets and prophets (Acts 17:28; Tit 1:12) and Jude quoted the pseudepigrapha (other Jewish intertestamental literature) on two different occasions (w. 9, 14), even though Christians never claimed canonicity for any of these sources.[9]

In fact, Christians often came to value the Apocrypha for hermeneutically illegitimate reasons. Even as early Christian interpreters often read in to OT texts allegorical and Christological meaning that could not have originally been intended (see Chapter 2), so also the apocryphal books were often preserved and cherished because of "Christian readings" of them, which in retrospect we can see were not valid. For example, the Wisdom of Solomon contains the verse, "Blessed is the wood through which righteousness comes" (14:7). In context it refers to Noah's ark, but early Christians prized it as an apparent prediction of the cross of Christ. Baruch 3:36–37 speaks of God who "found the whole way to knowledge," which "afterward appeared on earth and lived among people." In context, God's knowledge is personified as a woman, much as wisdom is in Proverbs 9, but many church fathers interpreted the passage as a reference to Christ's incarnation.

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[2] For a complete list of the OT canons of the Roman Catholic Church and each of the various Eastern Orthodox churches, see H. P. Ruger, "The Extent of the Old Testament Canon," *BT40* (1989): 301-8.

[3] A standard edition of the Apocrypha is the *Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (RSV), ed. B. M. Metzger, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1977). A very readable introduction and survey of these books is B. M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha (New* York: Oxford, 1957). One major commentary series, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday), is somewhat unique in including volumes on the Apocrypha as well as the OT and NT. To date, commentaries have been completed on all but Tobit.

[4] For texts and discussion see R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 369-75.

[5] The fullest, most recent exposition of this traditional Protestant defense is Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon.*

[6] A. C. Sundberg, *The* Old *Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1964).

[7] W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, F. W. Bush, Old *Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 21.

[8] McDonald, *Canon, 45, 172-77. A* more modest and convincing list and discussion of possible allusions appears in Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha, 158-70.*

[9] For a response to the view that the earliest church fathers viewed the Apocrypha as canonical, see Beckwith, Canon, 386-95.

These misreadings seem harmless enough, but in other instances the question of whether or not the Apocrypha should be viewed as canonical takes on greater significance. Probably the most famous example comes from 2 **Macc 12:44–45** which extols the virtue of praying for the dead to help make atonement for them: From this text, more than from any other, developed the Roman Catholic practice of praying for those who died, in hopes of speeding their way through purgatory and on to heaven. No NT text, however, clearly speaks of the existence of purgatory, so Protestants reject its existence. Both Paul (Phil **1:23**) and the thief on the cross (Lk **23:43**) expected to be with Christ immediately after death.

Modern scholars, Protestant and Catholic alike, often admit that some ancient Christian uses of the Apocrypha were **inappropriate.**[10] Nevertheless, many still challenge the inviolability of the Protestant canon. Again, particularly since Sundberg, many claim that the Jews of Jesus' day did not have a fixed collection of authoritative Scriptures.[11] All agree that the five books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) became canonical at least by the time of Ezra's reading of the Law or the time of the Samaritan schism with Israel (because Samaritans accepted only the Law as canonical) ca. **500–400 B.C.** The writings of the Prophets, which included Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Rings, as well as Isaiah through Malachi (minus Daniel), were probably all recognized as uniquely authoritative at least by 200 **B.C.** All appear, for example, among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Q**umran,** which date **from** that time onward. They were translated into Greek (the Septuagint or LXX) as part of the Hebrew Scriptures by 198 **B.C., and the** prologue to Ecclesiasticus, probably written no later than the **mid-100s B.C.,** refers to both Law and **Prophets** as Scripture. Conservative scholars have **often** argued that these books were recognized as inspired and therefore normative much earlier, in many instances perhaps as soon as they appeared.[12] Certainly conservatives and liberals differ widely as to the authorship and therefore dating of many of the OT **books.**[13] But even if the dates of the acceptance of the Law and Prophets are as late as the critical consensus outlined here claims, they still well predate Jesus and the apostles, and the traditional Protestant argument remains persuasive.

Controversy is more intense regarding the third traditional division of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Writings. This catch-all category includes all of the books not classified as Law or Prophecy: Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and Daniel. **Many** argue that the Writings may have included at different times any or all of the **Apoc**rypha and that the canon of the OT was not limited to the books Protestants now

[10]See **esp. the introductions and annotations to the apocryphal books and the above-cited texts in Mettger, ed., *Apocrypha*. This edition (and only this one> is accepted by Protestants and Catholics alike.**

[11]Sundberg, *Old Testament,* 107–69.

[12]E.g., **N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 136-47; and R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 178.**

[13]Cf., **e.g., the evangelical texts by LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush (*Old Testament)* and R. K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969]) with those of B. W. Anderson (*Understanding the Old Testament,* 4th ed. [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 19861) and J. A. Soggin (*Introduction to the Old Testament,* 3rd ed. [Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 19891) all pass.**

accept until after the proceedings of a Jewish council at Jamnia (also spelled Jabneh or Javneh) in approximately **A.D. 90. In other** words, it is claimed that the OT canon was not decisively determined within Judaism until the end of the writing of the NT books. This more liberal view may agree that it is logical to follow Jesus' lead in treating as Scripture what he, with Jews of his day, accepted as Scripture. But they insist that we simply cannot know which books he would have had embraced.

Though this view of the OT canon often prevails in scholarly circles today, it **is** not the most probable. A closer examination of what occurred at Jamnia shows that, more likely, discussions there dealt with challenges to and questions about books that were already widely established as **canonical.**[14] A variety of quotations from writers no later than the mid-first century **A.D.** strongly suggests that the Writings as well as the Law and Prophets were already fixed in number at an earlier time. **Josephus** speaks of "only 22" books "containing the record of all time and justly accredited" (Contra ***Apion* 1:38–41**). He goes on to specify the five books of Moses (the Law) and thirteen books of prophecy and history, which from later Jewish lists we can reconstruct as Joshua, Judges and Ruth (as one book), 1 and 2 Samuel (as one), 1 and 2 Rings (as one), 1 and 2 Chronicles (as one), Ezra and Nehemiah (as one), Esther, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations (as one), Ezekiel, Daniel, and the 12 minor prophets (as one). "The remaining four books," **Josephus** concludes, "contain hymns to God and principles of life for human beings." These would be Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Luke **24:44** recognizes a similarly fixed, threefold division of the Hebrew canon ("the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms"), as does the earlier first-century Jewish writer **Philo** ("the Laws, and Oracles given by inspiration through the Prophets, and the Psalms and the other books whereby knowledge and piety are increased and completed," ***De Vita Contemplativa* 25).** The Greek prologue to Ecclesiasticus (mid-second century **B.C.**) **also** specifies "the Law and the Prophets and the other books of the fathers." And at Qumran all thirty-nine OT books except Esther have been found, but only one of the Apocrypha (**Tobit**), though of course the existence of a book within the Dead Sea sect's library does not by itself prove (or disprove) its canonicity.

The interpretation of this and other evidence remains disputed, but Sid Leiman, from a Jewish perspective, (followed by Roger **Beckwith** from a Christian perspective) sets out all the texts in great detail, including many later rabbinic discussions.[15] **Leiman** and **Beckwith** plausibly conclude that the entire twenty-two book canon (following Josephus' enumeration) was already well-established before the writing of Ecclesiasticus in the mid-second century **B.C.** Even more common are references to twenty-four books, but ancient lists make it clear that this number

[14]See **esp. J. P. Lewis, 'What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" *JBR 32 (1964):* 125–32; and R. Newman, "The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon," *WTJ* 38 (1976):319–49. On the sources for the faulty understanding of this council, see D. E. Aune, "On the Origins of the 'Council of Javneh' Myth," *JBL* 110 (1991): 491-93.**

[15]S. **Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976), 51-124 lays out all the rabbinic texts. Beckwith, *Canon,* 16–104, discusses the nature of the witnesses and their sources.**

results simply from dividing Judges and Ruth, and Jeremiah and Lamentations, into two parts. Attempts to deny the significance of widespread belief in the cessation of prophecy (again found as early as the second century B.C. in, e.g., 1 Macc 9:27) point out that not every Jew shared this belief,[16] but they do not successfully dislodge the typical Protestant claim that most first-century Jews recognized no inspired and canonical writers after the days of Malachi. Less certain, but still plausible, is the additional proposal of Leiman and Beckwith that the final collection of these books and the separation of the Prophets and Writings into distinct categories occurred at the time of and under the influence of the great Jewish revolutionary hero, Judas Maccabeus, in the 160s B.C. (cf. 2 Macc 2:13–15).[17]

On this view, later rabbinic debates focus more on matters of interpretation than of canonization. The five books that appear in those discussions are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, Song of Solomon, and Esther. Rabbis raised questions about these books because of the apparent contradiction in Prov 26:4–5, the tension between Ezekiel's picture of the new temple (Ezek 4048) and early biblical commands about God's sanctuary, the seeming "secularity" of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, and the lack of reference to God in Esther coupled with its institution of a new, non-Mosaic festival (Purim). The only apocryphal book discussed was Ecclesiasticus, which was deemed too late to be canonical.'* To be sure, in later centuries, after the writing down and codification of the Oral Law (first in the Mishnah about A.D. 200 and then in the greatly expanded Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds of the fourth and fifth centuries), there was a sense in which these works too were treated as canonical. But all this substantially postdates NT times, and even then most rabbis apparently still accorded a privileged place to the original written Torah (our OT) .[19]

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the Jews agreed upon the boundaries of the Hebrew canon in NT times. The order of its books, however, is less clear, largely because at that time individual documents were still written on separate scrolls. One ancient Jewish tradition, possibly the oldest, puts the order as: the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Rings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve minor prophets), and the writings (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles) (*b. B. Bat.* 14b). This arrangement sometimes proceeds chronologically (Joshua-Rings; Daniel-Nehemiah), and sometimes thematically (Ruth ends with David's genealogy, a fitting introduction for the Psalms of David; Chronicles sums up almost all of OT history).

[16]See esp. F. E. Greenspahn, "Why Prophecy Ceased," *JBL 108* (1989):37–49.

[17]Leiman, *Canonization,* 29; Beckwith, *Canon, 152.*

'*Be&with, Canon, 283-91, 318–23.

[19]D. Kraemer, "The Formation of Rabbinic Canon: Authority and Boundaries," *JBL* 110 (1991): 613-30. Kraemer's interpretation also implies that one need not resort to Leiman's somewhat artificial and confusing distinction between inspired and uninspired canonical works in the rabbis' discussion of Apocrypha and later Jewish writings. Interesting, too, is the characteristic rabbinic term for Scripture's effect on those who touched it: it "defiled the hands" (because the profane was coming in contact with the sacred).

Modern Hebrew Bibles preserve the order, Law, Prophets, and Writings but change the sequence of some of the books within the last two categories.[20] English Bibles are based on the arrangement of the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint), in which the Prophets and Writings are interspersed within each other in order to create a past-present-future sequence: Genesis through Esther describes the history first of the human race and then of Israel from creation to the fifth century B.C.; Job through Song of Songs includes psalms and wisdom for present living; and Isaiah through Malachi preserves that form of prophecy that is mostly proclamation (foretelling and forthtelling) rather than historical narrative.[21] The order of these books of prophecy sometimes follows chronological considerations and sometimes decreasing length of the documents.

The Canon of the New Testament

Clearly one may not appeal to the teaching of Jesus to determine which books belong in the NT even if he did hint of future Spirit-inspired Scripture (note a possible inference from Jn 14:26; 15:26). One might expect, therefore, less agreement among Christians as to the boundaries of the NT than to the limits of the OT, but in fact, historically, there has been much more unanimity. Still, agreement did not appear instantly in the formation of the NT canon.[22]

Since the first Christians inherited a "complete" Bible from the Jews, it might seem surprising that they were willing to add ***any*** books to what they termed Scripture. But in viewing Jesus as the fulfillment and authoritative interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures (based on Jesus' own claims in Mt 5: 17–40), they already had relativized somewhat the value of those writings. Increasingly, the story of Jesus and the preaching of the gospel took on greater significance. So it was natural for them to write down the story and message about Jesus and to view it at least as authoritatively, if not more so, than the previous writings, which they believed had prepared the way for that gospel. OT history provided a precedent with the prophets as commentators or "appliers" of the Law of Moses. The concept of covenants proved instructive, too. Jeremiah had prophesied about a coming new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), which Jesus and the NT writers claimed that his death established (Lk 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8–13). If the older covenant with Moses led to a collection of writ-

[20]For details see F. F. Bruce, *The* Canon of *Scripture* (Leicester and Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988), 29.

[21]The reason Jews could include historical books as part of "prophecy" stems from their understanding of a prophet, more broadly, as an accredited teacher of moral law. See esp. J. Barton, Oracles of *God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy* in Israel *After the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For one plausible explanation of the sequence of the twelve minor prophets, see E. Dyck, "Jonah among the Prophets: A Study in Canonical Context," *JETS* 33 (1990): 63-73.

[22]The best overviews are Bruce, Canon; D. G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon,* ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 315–42; and B. M. Metzger, *The* Canon *of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

ten Scriptures, it would be natural to expect God to guide Christian writers to in**scribe** a newer collection of Scriptures. This kind of reasoning seems to be implied by the discussions near the end of the second century in Tertullian (Contra ***Marcion*** 4:1) and Clement **of Alexandria** (Strom, **1:9; 3:11; 4:21; 5:13**).

But belief in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation as Scripture began to emerge much earlier. Already two of the last NT writings refer to earlier Christian works as Scripture (1 Tim **5:18,** quoting Lk **10:7;** 2 Pet **3:16,** referring to an unknown number of Paul's epistles). Although some critics date 1 Timothy and 2 Peter well into the second century, a growing number of scholars recognizes that late first-century dates are more probable, and the traditional views that put **them** in the sixties are still not **impossible.**[23]

The earliest noncanonical Christian literature that has been preserved dates fi-om about A.D. 90 through the mid-second century in what has come to be collected and referred to as the Apostolic Fathers.[24] This title is somewhat misleading because it refers to the generations immediately ***following*** the apostolic era. These works include numerous epistles from early church leaders to various Christian individuals or communities (e.g., from Clement to Rome; from Ignatius to Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna, and to St. Polycarp; **from** Polycarp to the Philippians; **from** an unknown author to one Diognetus; and from an unknown author taking the pseudonym of Barnabas to a general Christian audience). Like the NT epistles, these letters give instruction concerning various aspects of Christian living. For the most part they follow the teaching of the NT writers, though newer developments may be traced, for example, a growing preoccupation with the virtue of martyrdom or an increasing emphasis on an episcopal church hierarchy. Additional works include a more or less historical narrative of The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp; a manual called The ***Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*** (or the ***Didache***) on church order, especially regarding baptism, the Eucharist, and false prophets; and a series of commands, parables, and visions allegedly given by God to a Christian writer known as Hermas the Shepherd, replete with instruction on the themes of purity and repentance.

In various parts of the Roman empire, the writings of Barnabas, Hermas, and perhaps Clement seem to have gained a brief following among some Christians who prized them as highly as **other** books that eventually became part of our NT. But this following never involved a majority of Christians and was relatively short-lived. A study of most of the Apostolic Fathers in fact reveals that the authors of these writings were themselves conscious of not being as authoritative as the apostolic writings. In addition, they liberally quoted and alluded to those earlier books in ways that acknowledged their greater authority and, at times, their scriptural status.

[23]For the Pastorals, see the survey of views in D. Guthrie, New *Testament Introduction,* 4th ed. (Leicester and Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), 651, and the lengthy defense of Pauline authorship on 607–49. For 2 Peter, see Guthrie, *Introduction,* 811–42. Among proponents of pseudepigraphy, R. Bauckham *(Jude, 2 Peter, WBC 50* [Waco: Word, 19831 157-58) is most convincing with a date between A.D. 80–90.

[24]The best introduction and translation is that of J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, rev. and ed. M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

For example, Ignatius, bishop of Smyrna, wrote to the Trallians in the early second century, "I did not think myself competent for this, that ... I should order you as though I were an apostle" **(3:3).** A generation or two later 2 Clem **2:4** quoted Mk 2:17 verbatim, after a citation of Isaiah, with the introduction "another Scripture says." Not surprisingly, the Apostolic Fathers most often cited the words of Jesus in ways that suggested they viewed them as of the highest **authority.**[25]

In the middle of the second century, the first major impetus to the explicit discussion of a Christian canon came fi-om the heretic **Marcion. Marcion believed that Jesus** and the God of the OT were opposites, and that anything in Christian writings that smacked of Judaism had to be expunged. He therefore promoted a "canon" of edited versions of the Gospel of Luke and various epistles of Paul, but nothing else. The rise of Gnostic writings, also beginning about the mid-second century, provided a further stimulus. Many of these purported to contain secret revelations from Jesus, following his resurrection, to one or more of his followers (most notably James, Peter, John, Thomas, Philip, and **Mary).**[26] Also, as persecution against Christians intensified, especially toward the close of the second century and periodically in the third, it became more crucial for Christians to agree on what books they were willing to die for (when they defied orders to burn all their holy books). So, beginning about A.D. 150, and continuing without complete agreement for another 200 years, they produced a series of lists of Christian books to be treated as Scripture.

Probably the earliest of these lists is the so-called Muratorian fragment from the late second century. It includes the four Gospels, Acts, all thirteen letters attributed to Paul, two letters of John, the letter of Jude, and Revelation. It also curiously refers to the Wisdom of Solomon, and it notes that in Rome the Apocalypse of Peter was read, though some questioned it, as in fact some did the Apocalypse of John (Revelation). Around this time Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, recognized a similar collection with the addition of 1 Peter.[27] At the turn of the third century, Tertullian **first used the** Latin ***testamentum*** in referring to a NT. The word translates the Greek ***diathēkē*** **("covenant")** and should not be interpreted, as we often understand "testament" in English, as referring to a will. Tertullian recognized twenty-three of our NT books as authoritative, omitting James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John, about which he is simply silent.[28] Early in the third century, Origen refers to all twenty-seven, but notes that six are disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude (as quoted in Eusebius, ***H.E.*** 6:25.8–14).[29] This situation seems to have persisted until the fourth century.

[25]The significance of the evidence of the Apostolic Fathers has regularly been exaggerated by conservatives and unduly denigrated by liberals. Particularly balanced, though somewhat limited in scope, is D. A. Hagner, "The Sayings of Jesus in the Apostolic Fathers and Justin Martyr" in *Gospel Perspectives V,* ed. D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 233–68.

[26]The standard collection and translation is J. M. Robinson, ed., *The* Nag *Hammadi Library* (Leiden: Brill, 1977; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

[27]Irenaeus nowhere gives one definitive list of these works, but one may be pieced together from a variety of references presented and discussed in Bruce, *Canon,* 170–77.

[28]Again Tertullian's views reflect a mosaic of sources. See Bruce, Canon, 180–83.

[29]At the'same time, Eusebius himself accepted Hebrews but not Revelation. Origen doubted the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, not its inspiration.

As with the rabbinic discussions about certain OT books, however, questions about these six writings focus more on internal evidence (issues arising from the texts themselves) than on external evidence (doubts about their inspiration or the conditions under which they were written). The one exception is Hebrews. Some believed it came from Paul; others proposed different authors or pled ignorance. But in the case of James, then as later, questions focused on harmonizing his view of faith and works with that of Paul. Doubts about 2 Peter focused on the differences from 1 Peter in style and contents. Arguably 2 and 3 John were too personal to be universally relevant. Jude's quotation of the intertestamental Jewish apocalypse known as 1 Enoch and his apparent allusion to an apocryphal work known as the Assumption of Moses puzzled some. And the millennial theology of Revelation troubled many who were becoming increasingly amillennial in outlook..

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter-time festal letter of A.D. 367, was the earliest-known Christian writer to endorse without hesitation the twenty-seven books that now comprise our NT. His views were subsequently ratified by the Councils of Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397). Only minor debates persisted from that time. Due to these minor debates, some writers argue that the NT canon was not closed until the time of the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in the early 1500s, if even then.[30] Such a position leaves the door open, then, for certain sects, most notably Mormons, to add their own formative documents to the canon.[31] But while it is true that one cannot prove either Christian or Jewish canons ever to have been so conclusively closed as to preclude all further discussion, it is abundantly clear that no later sectarian literature could ever pass the early Church's criteria for canonicity (see below). Most obviously, such writings could not meet the criterion of widespread use from the earliest days of the faith to the present.

As with the OT, the final arrangement of NT books combined chronological and topical concerns with issues of length of documents. The Gospels were naturally placed first, as they described the origins of Christianity in the life of Jesus. Matthew assumed first place because, as the most Jewish of the Gospels, it provided the most clear link with the OT.[32] Then Mark, Luke, and John followed in the order of their composition. Even though Acts was Luke's second volume, it was separated from his Gospel by John's work when the four Gospels were all grouped together. But it naturally came next as the historical sequel to the events of Jesus' life.

[30]This is one of the complaints of M. J. Sawyer, "Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament," *GTJ* 11 *(1991):* 29-52, against the traditional Protestant defense of the canon, which leads him to appeal for a return to the Reformers' emphasis on the witness of the Holy Spirit. But it is not clear he appreciates the degree of subjectivity (far greater than that of the standard criteria discussed below) that this introduces into the discussion when it is made the ***primary*** criterion. Mormons, for example, stress the same criterion for accepting the Book of Mormon as Scripture, and it is virtually unfalsifiable.

[31]See esp., S. E. Robinson, ***Are Mormons Christians?*** (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), *45-56.*

[32]Some would also argue that it was written first, though that discussion is beyond our scope. See the NT introductions in the bibliography at the end plus the standard commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels.

After Acts came the Epistles. As Paul was the premier apostle to the Gentile world and the most prolific epistle writer, his letters were naturally placed first. Paul's epistles were then divided into letters to churches (Romans-2 Thessalonians) and letters to individuals (1 Timothy-Philemon). Within these two sections the Epistles were arranged in order of decreasing length, except that books written to the same church or person were kept together even when this pattern was broken (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy). Even though it is just slightly shorter, Galatians may have been placed before Ephesians as a frontispiece to the collection of Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) because of its use of the term ***kanōn*** or "rule" (Gal 6:16).[33] Hebrews was placed immediately after the avowedly Pauline epistles because many thought it came from Paul, but it was not placed within the collection since it was anonymous, and many others disavowed Pauline authorship. The writings of James, Peter, John, and Jude were then added in that order, probably in decreasing order of the prominence of their authors in the earliest church. James the brother of Jesus was originally the head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15). Eventually, after Peter arrived in Rome, he supplanted James in empire-wide significance. John the son of Zebedee was another one of Jesus' inner three apostles (with Peter and James his brother). Jude, another brother of Jesus, clearly figures least prominently in early Christian writings. Finally, Revelation, with its focus on the end of history, formed a fitting conclusion to the canon.[34]

Even though the NT canon has remained well-established since the fourth century, numerous voices today clamor for a reconsideration of its boundaries. Particularly noteworthy are those students of ancient Gnosticism who argue that texts like those found at Nag Hammadi (esp. the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, the Apocryphon of James, the Gospel of Philip, and the Treatise on the Resurrection) preserve traditions of Jesus' teaching at least as valuable as those found in our canonical Gospels, and that they date from at least as early a time period, that is, the mid-first century.[35] Almost certainly every one of these non-canonical sources (except Q) is dated at least seventy-five years too early! No clear evidence for the existence of those documents predates the mid-second century, and a careful comparison of their teachings with those of the Gospels shows them to be mostly later than and, where they run parallel, dependent on the canonical four. It is possible, to be sure, that otherwise unparalleled but authentic sayings of Jesus may have occasionally been preserved in these texts, but a substantial percentage of them reads more

[33]This last point is by far the most dubious but is a plausible suggestion of W. R. Farmer in *The Formation of the New Testament Canon,* with D. M. Farkasfalvy (New York: Paulist, 1983), 79-81.

[34]See esp., R. W. Wall, ***Revelation*** (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 25-32.

[35]See e.g., H. Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," ***HTR*** 73 (1980); and R. Cameron ed., *The* ***Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982). J. D. Crossan, *The* ***Historical Jesus*** (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), 427-50, locates in age and authenticity Thomas, the Egerton Gospel, the Gospel of Hebrews, sources for the Gospel of Peter, and Q all to the first layer of tradition (A.D. 30–50), Mark in the second layer (A.D. 60–80), and Matthew and Luke later still (A.D. 80-120).

like later Gnostic revisions and corruptions (if not outright fabrications) of earlier traditions of Jesus' words and deeds.[36]

Criteria of Canonicity

The reasons the Jews came to accept the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scriptures as arranged in modern enumeration are largely lost in antiquity. The main reason given in the rabbinic discussions revolves around their inspiration. But this only throws the question back one stage-Why were these books believed to be inspired or "God- breathed" (cf. 2 Tim 3 :16)? Conservative scholars have often tried to link inspiration and canonicity to prophecy. The Law was given by God to Moses, they argue, who was also called a prophet and who was largely responsible for the composition of the Pentateuch. Moses, they claim, anticipated a succession of divinely accredited prophets (Deut 18:17–19) who were responsible for the books the Jews included among the Prophets. What is more, even many of the Writings come from prophetic authors (e.g., David and, for some of the Psalms, Asaph the seer).[37] But this view fails to account for all of the biblical books and probably pushes the evidence for prophetic authorship (even of the books it does account for) farther than is defensible.

A second view links canonicity to the concept of covenant. The Law established God's covenant; the historical narratives described Israel's obedience and disobedience to the covenant; the prophets called people back to a proper relationship to the covenant; and the Wisdom Literature expanded the theme of obedience to it.[38] This theory has fewer holes in it than the previous one, but it also remains rather broad in nature and without much ancient testimony to corroborate it. While plausible, it must remain a theory. Christians will probably have to rest content with the traditional Protestant argument outlined above. To state it rather colloquially, "What was good enough for Jesus (as a representative Jew of his day) is good enough for us."

More evidence survives suggesting criteria for the canonicity of the NT. Again, inspiration is more a corollary of canonicity than a criterion of it.[39] But other criteria may helpfully be classified under three headings: apostolicity, orthodoxy, and catholicity. All of the NT writings were believed to have apostolic connections. Though not necessarily written by one of the original twelve apostles (this would apply only to Matthew, John, and Peter), they came from the apostolic age (first century) and could be closely associated with those who were considered apostles (including Paul), or closely associated with Jesus (such as the epistles of his brothers,

[36]See esp., C. Tuckett, Nag *Hammudi and the Gospel Tradition* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986); and J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (New* York: Doubleday, 1991),112–66. For a more specialized study, cf. C. L. Blomberg, "Tradition and Redaction in the Parables of the Gospel of Thomas," in Gospel *Perspectives* V, 177–205.

[37]See esp. Harris, *Inspiration.*

[38]See esp. M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

[39]Bruce, Canon, 268.

James and Jude). Thus, Mark was traditionally associated with Peter, Luke with Paul, and Hebrews, if not from Paul himself, then with one of his intimate companions.[40] Although many of these traditional authorship claims are widely disputed today, a cogent case can still be made for each of them.[41]

Second, Christians believed that the theology and ethics promoted by the NT books as a whole cohered-a belief not held by most of the Gnostic challengers. To call all the NT writings orthodox does not preclude a wide measure of diversity among them, but it does imply that none of the texts actually contradicts another one. This claim is widely rejected today," even though it remains thoroughly defensible.[43]

Third, books were preserved that had proved useful for a large number of churches from the earliest generations of Christianity to the present. One can only speculate as to why the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians, before our 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 5:9), was not preserved. It obviously was apostolic and presumably orthodox, but quite plausibly was not as relevant for other groups of believers outside of Corinth. Christians often ask the tantalizing question, "What would happen if such a letter was discovered and proved highly relevant?" This question is in fact just a specific form of the broader question, "Is the Christian canon open or closed?" Now because we are persuaded that no church tradition is on a par with Scripture, so that the authoritative church pronouncements of the fourth and fifth centuries cannot ultimately determine the canon, then we must say that the canon *theoretically* remains open—if some additional document could meet all the criteria for canonicity. But practically, the canon is closed, since a work that had not been used for nearly twenty centuries could not meet the criterion of catholicity and would almost certainly not command the acclaim of more than a minority of Christians today?

Canon Criticism

In response to the often atomistic approaches of traditional historical criticism, a new form of biblical analysis has developed in recent years known as canon or canonical criticism. Initially due to the extensive writings of Yale professor Brevard

@Suggestions from the first centuries of the church's history include both Paul and Barnabas; from the Reformers they include Apollos, Luke, and Clement of Rome; A. Harnack in the nineteenth-century suggested Priscilla and Aquila.

[41]See esp. Guthrie, *Introduction;* D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), both ad loc.

[42]Just about every nonevangelical NT theology is predicated on the assumption of irreconcilable diversity. The three most recent book-length examples are E. Schweizer, *A Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991)—relatively conservative; J. Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought* (Oxford: University Press, 1991)—moderate; and H. Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990)—radical.

[43]See esp. D. Guthrie, New *Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981).

[44]See esp. Metzger, Canon, 271-75.

Childs, canon criticism seeks to move beyond standard source, form, and redaction criticism and to interpret the biblical texts in their "canonical shape" (i.e., their present form).[45] Canon criticism does not reject the reconstructions of modern historical criticism as to how the various documents developed, but it finds little value in these methods for preaching or ministry in the life of the church. Bather, it calls the Christian community to accept the wisdom of its ancestors and to interpret passages and books of Scripture as they finally took shape.

In some cases, canon criticism is difficult to distinguish from the renewed emphasis in literary criticism on interpreting possibly composite documents as unities (see below). So, for example, one reads Genesis as a literary unity, looking for the themes that cut across the supposed layers of tradition that modern OT source criticism has usually identified (J, E, D, P—from the so-called Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomistic, and Priestly writers). Within a canonical framework Isa l-39 and 40-66 are read as a unified piece of literature rather than parceled out to different periods of time separated by over 200 years as historical criticism often does. Likewise, 2 Corinthians is treated as a coherent whole-not broken down into chapters 1-7, 8, 9, and 10–13 as separate documents. In this respect canon criticism is doing what evangelical scholars have done all along, because, at least in the United States, they did not usually accept the modern theories of source criticism in the first place.

In other instances, canon criticism focuses on agreements rather than disagreements among allegedly divergent texts. Again, the claims of more liberal scholars are not rejected but simply set to one side. Childs, for example, believes with many that the two gospel infancy narratives (Mt l-2 and Lk l-2) contradict each other in numerous places. But instead of following redaction critics who focus on those distinctives as keys to Matthew's and Luke's emphases, he prefers to stress the features the texts have in common: the Spirit-influenced virgin birth, the child who is to bring salvation, the fulfillment of OT prophecy, and the need to accept and adore the Christ-child.[46]

Canon criticism also tempers the urge to absolutize one of two or more competing strands of biblical theology. Exodus, for example, presents a supernatural view of God's intervention in the lives of his people, whereas Genesis provides a much more "naturalistic" understanding of God's providence acting in ordinary human events (Gen 50:20).[47] Liberals have often rejected the former picture and conservatives have often neglected the latter. Canon critics, however, call Christians to balance the two. Again, evangelicals may reject the claims that such examples really involve outright contradiction, but they should welcome a renewed emphasis on the unity of the Scriptures and a balanced appropriation of their diverse themes and theological perspectives.

[45]See esp. B. S. Childs, ***Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); id., The New ***Testament as Canon: An Introduction*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

[46]Childs, New ***Testament,*** 161–65.

[47]In fact a gradually diminishing role of the direct intervention of God into human affairs has been seen as a'unifying feature of the narrative of Genesis itself. See R. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," ***JSOT25 (1983):*** 3–16.

Sometimes, for canon critics the final form of the text does not mean the final form of an individual book of Scripture; rather, the final form indicates its theological role in the context of the later, completed canons of the OT and NT. That is, ***all*** historical issues may be bracketed. Thus Acts can be studied, not as the sequel to Luke's Gospel as it was originally intended, but as an introduction to the epistles that follow. For example, Acts can be seen to describe and legitimize the ministries of Paul to Gentiles as well as of James and Peter to Jews, even while showing how "Paul's Gospel" ultimately became more dominant. This reading paves the way for an understanding of the legitimacy of the epistles of both Paul and James, but it also explains why historically Paul has been given more prominence, even as the position of his letters in the NT canon suggests.[48] So, too, in the OT, even though many of the psalms originally were composed in unrelated contexts, their position in the collection of the 150 may shed some light on how the "canonical community" interpreted them. Most obviously, Psa 1, with its classic contrast of righteous and wicked, can be seen to establish the theme for the entire collection. Psalms 144–150, all praise psalms, form a fitting climax and point to activity that should be the culmination of the life of all God's people.[49]

In still other cases, canon criticism functions as a bridge between biblical and systematic theology (more on these disciplines to follow). A study of the theology of Matthew by itself, for example, would show that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was intended primarily for those who were already disciples (Mt 5: 1). A study of the Sermon's use in church history shows that it has often been read in light of one of Paul's views of the Law: as a statement of God's unrealizable demands meant to drive people to their knees in repentance and faith in Christ. Canon criticism suggests a mediating approach: Jesus' ethic is at least partially realizable because of the potential for obedience made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' original audience knew nothing of the significance of the cross; yet, that event does not transform his words into a preparation for the Gospel. In light of the whole canon, Jesus' sermon cannot be limited just to its function when he first spoke it, but neither can any other single scriptural witness, such as Paul, be allowed solely to dictate its interpretation.[50] In like fashion, a study of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, each on its own, would disclose that only the first of these three prophets had an earnest preoccupation with why innocent people suffer. But the widespread use of rhetorical questions directed to God throughout the three books suggests that this theme is more important for the collection of prophecies than might otherwise result from a study of the sermons of each prophet in isolation.[51]

In sum, canon criticism's focus on the "final form" of a text can mean two quite different things. It can refer to what the actual author or final editor of a given book wrote or put together—roughly equivalent to what we mean by the

[48]R. W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles in Canonical Context," ***BTB*** 18 ***(1986): l-31.***

[49]For these and other examples from the Psalms, see G. H. Wilson, "The Qumran Psalms Manuscripts and the Consecutive Arrangement of Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter," ***CBQ 45 (1983): 377-88.***

[50]Childs, New ***Testament, 75.***

[51]R. W. Pierce, "A Thematic Development of the Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi Corpus," ***JETS 27 (1984): 401-l 1.***

"autograph" of a particular biblical document. To the extent that evangelical doctrines of inspiration focus on the autographs alone and not on their previous tradition-histories,[52] this preoccupation of canon criticism offers a welcome corrective to those who find only certain, supposedly oldest layers of a text authoritative (e.g., the most authentic words of Jesus in a given Gospel or the oldest Jahwist strata in a book of the Law).

But when "final form" or "canonical shape" refers to how a completed book of Scripture was interpreted centuries after its composition, when it was combined with other Scriptures, then we simply have an observation, often rather speculative, from the history of exegesis. More often than not, these interpretations deflect attention from the original intention of the texts. As Metzger helpfully explains, the canon is "a collection of authoritative texts," not an "authoritative collection of (authoritative) texts."[53] In other words, the canonical placement of the books was not inspired; the writing of the books was. After all, their placement was not determined by interpretive judgments about the contents of those books or the concerns of their original authors and editors. The most important lesson of a study of canon criticism, therefore, is sometimes a lesson in how ***not*** to interpret the Scriptures! But to the extent that such study helps us focus on the biblical autographs as literary unities, or on the biblical canon as a theological unity, then it is most surely to be welcomed.[54]

James Sanders practices a quite different form of canon criticism, one which probably ought to have a different name.[55] Sanders' study focuses on canon not so much as a ***product*** but as a ***process Canonical*** hermeneutics, then, refers to the way in which one biblical writer read, rewrote, and/or reapplied earlier Scripture, for example, Deuteronomy's reworking of the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, the Chronicler's rewriting of parts of the Samuel-Kings narrative, or the NT quotations of and allusions to the OT. But these topics are not new, and they are probably best studied under other headings such as redaction criticism, midrash criticism, and the history of exegesis.

What may be more significant is Sanders' claim that the hermeneutics used in these scriptural interpretations themselves should be normative for believers. This

[52]Several conservative writers have explicitly referred to their studies of this nature as canon-critical: e.g., J. H. Sailhamer, "The Canonical Approach to the Old Testament: Its Effect on Understanding Prophecy," *JETS* 30 (1987): 307-l 5; and J. N. Oswalt, "Canonical Criticism: A Review from a Conservative Viewpoint," *JETS* 30 (1987): 317-25.

[53]Metzger, Canon, 282-84.

"For more philosophical critiques of canon criticism from an evangelical perspective, see S. Fowl, "The Canonical Approach of Brevard Childs," *ExpT 96* (1985): 173-76; D. A. Brueggemann, "Brevard Childs' Canon Criticism: An Example of Post-Critical Naivete," *JETS 32 (1989):* 311–26. An important symposium on canon criticism from a diversity of theological and critical perspectives occupies the entire issue of *JSOT* 16 (1980). Balanced assessments of strengths and weaknesses appear in C. F. H. Henry, "Canonical Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *SBET 8 (1990):* 76–108; and M. C. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," in New *Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 255-94.

[55]See esp. J.A. Sanders, Canon *and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); also id., ***From*** *Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

question is raised, for example, whenever one asks: Can Christians today interpret the OT in the same way the NT writers did? Sanders believes the answer is clearly, yes. We offer our qualified agreement, though we often disagree with him in his actual assessment of the methods employed (see pp. 13945).

Texts and Translations

Ideally, hermeneutics should be practiced on the autographs of Scripture—the original documents penned by the various biblical writers. However, since none of these exists, the next best choice is to read and interpret the modern critical editions of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts: the ***Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*** (BHS) for the OT and the Nestle-Aland (26th edition) or United Bible Societies' (3d edition) ***Greek*** New ***Testament (GNT).*** These usually reflect the best reconstructions that scholarship has so far produced of what those autographs most likely contained. But many Bible interpreters do not have the language skills to read these documents either, so they must rely on translations of Scripture into their native tongue. But how does one choose among the many translations that are available? Two factors should be considered. First, to what extent does a given translation utilize the most reliable findings of modern textual criticism reflected in works like the BHS or GNT? Second, what kind of translation is it? Is it highly literal, highly paraphrastic, or somewhere in-between? To help the student answer these two questions we will discuss several pertinent issues.

Textual Criticism

Since this is not a manual on exegesis (interpreting the Bible in its original languages), we will discuss textual criticism only briefly.[56] Much of the work of textual critics involves tedious and painstaking comparison of dozens of ancient OT manuscripts and versions, and hundreds (thousands if one includes small fragments) of portions of Greek NT texts from the early centuries of the Christian era. The vast majority of the differences between the manuscripts stem from the mechanics of copying by hand the contents of a written document. A brief introduction to that process will enable readers to understand why manuscripts were not always copied perfectly.

Ancient writing on scrolls and codices (manuscripts in book form) did not look much like print in modem books. In the oldest manuscripts words were written in

[56]Helpful introductory guides include P. K. McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); R. W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: From the Septuagint to Qumran* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); J. H. Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); and P. W. Comfort, *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). More technical but more thorough studies are E. Würthwein, The *Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); and K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament,* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1989).

capital letters with no use of lower case and no spacing between words, punctuation, hyphenation, paragraphing, section headings, or any of the other devices of modern writing. Also, in the case of Hebrew and Aramaic, generally just consonants were written. The vowels (later represented by symbols underneath the consonants) were supplied by scribes later, centuries after the books were written and the canon was complete. To imagine what this might look like for an English reader, we might conceive of the NIV of Gen 1: 1-2 as appearing:

NTHBGNNNGGDCRTDTHHVNSNDTHRTHNDTHRTHWSFRMLSS
NDMPTYDRKNSSWSVRTHSRFCFTHDPNDTHSPRTFGDWSHVRNG
VRTHWTRS.

John 1:1-2 wouldn't look quite so bad because vowels were included in Greek manuscripts:

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHEWORDWASWITHGOD
ANDTHEWORDWASGODHEWASWITHGODINTHEBEGINNING.

Naturally one wonders how anybody could read such writing. But those who read these languages had learned the method from childhood, and in the case of Hebrew had learned what vowels should be added to the consonants mentally or orally. Nevertheless, modern readers do well to remember that the original Scripture texts looked quite different from our own. No one dare claim inspiration for chapter and verse references (these were added in the middle ages),[57] word division and punctuation (which began about the sixth century), or Hebrew vowels (finalized in writing in about the ninth century).

Many of the differences among later biblical manuscripts, therefore, resulted from the ambiguities of the older documents, especially with respect to word division. However, the context usually clarified the correct reading. But other mechanical errors occurred: letters, words, or whole lines were accidentally omitted or repeated as the scribe's eye jumped back to the wrong place in the text being copied. Spelling variations or mistakes intruded, when two adjacent letters were reversed, or when one letter was substituted for another that was similar in appearance. But most of these errors are trivial, detectable, and correctable, and do not significantly affect the overall meaning of the larger passages in which they appear. Occasionally, there are interesting exceptions. For example, should 1 Thes 2:7 read "we were gentle among you" or "we were little children among you?"[58] The two readings

"Chapter divisions were introduced by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, at the beginning of the thirteenth century; verses, by Robert Estienne (Stephanus), in the mid-sixteenth century.

[58]Most modern versions adopt the former translation. For the latter see, for example, The New *Testament* by C. B. Williams (Chicago: Moody, 1963; repr. of 1937 ed.) and The New *Testament* by W. F. Beck (St. Louis: Concordia, *1963).*

in the Greek differ only by an additional n- to begin the second word: *egenēthen ēpioi* "we became gentle" vs. *egenēthen nēpioi* "we became infants."[59] Is it more likely that a scribe accidentally added or omitted the n-?[60]

Or should Gen 49:26 read, "Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains" or "... greater than the blessings of my progenitors" (i.e., "those who conceived me")? The phrase "the ancient mountains" (הררי עד; *har'ārê 'ad*) in Hebrew looks similar to "those who conceived me" (עד הוֹרי; *hôray'ad*), if one letter (ר; *r*) is replaced with a similar looking letter (ו; *ô*).[61]

Obviously, textual variants in verses of great doctrinal significance introduce important ambiguities. Usually Psa 2: 12 has been seen as messianic, in keeping with the traditional rendering of the Hebrew (נשקו־בר; *naššᵉqû-bar*), as "Kiss [i.e., reverence] the Son" *(NIV).* But the last two letters (בר; *bar,* reading from right to left) are not the normal Hebrew for "Son" (which is בן; *bēn,* as in verse 7), and the LXX translates the command into Greek as "take hold of discipline," which cannot be extracted from these Hebrew letters at all. Modern translators, therefore, have sometimes supposed that these six letters, along with those of the preceding two words, were at some point rather dramatically rearranged from an original נשקו ברגליו ברעדה (*naššᵉqû bᵉraglāyw birᶜādâ*) to the existing MT ברעדה נשקו־בר וגילו (*wᵉgîlú birᶜādâ naššᵉqû-bar*). They propose a non-messianic rendering: "Kiss his feet" (RSV referring to God). Thus instead of "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling, Kiss the son," Psa 2:1 l-12a then reads, "Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet."[62]

Less complex, but equally significant, is a NT example from Lk 22:19b–20. Did a later scribe first add, "given for you. This do in remembrance of me. And likewise the cup, after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you"? Or were these words accidentally omitted in the exemplar (an influential manuscript widely copied for a large. number of other manuscripts)?[63] Examples could be multiplied. But we insist that no doctrine of Christianity rests solely on textually-disputed passages. There are numerous other Messianic psalms and prophecies besides Psa 2:12, and there are three other accounts of Jesus' words at the

[59]Recall, originally these were written in all capitals with no spaces. They would differ only in the presence of an extra -n. Compare *ΕΓΕΝΗΘΕΝΗΠΙΟΙ (we* were gentle) with *ΕΓΕΝΗΘΕΝΝΗΠΙΟΙ— (we* became infants).

@The standard source for explaining the cases for and against the major textual variants in the New Testament is B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commenta y on the Greek New Testament (New* York: UBS, 1971). Particularly useful is Metzger's description of how the five-member committee that produced the UBS GNT arrived at its decisions to rank a certain reading with an {A}, {B}, {C} or {D} level of confidence. In this particular example, the committee adopted the reading *nēpioi* (infants) but gave it a relatively doubtful {C} rating. It is a close call. Note various translations.

[61]On which, see esp. J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commenta y on* Genesis, ICC 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), 532–33; and E. A. Speiser, Genesis, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 369–70. The alternate reading lies behind the LXX.

[62]For details, and alternative proposals, see W. L. Holladay, "A New Proposal for the Crux in Psalm II, 12," *VT* 28 (1978): 110–12.

[63]For details, see I. H. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 36–38.

Last Supper, one of which very closely agrees with the wording of Luke's disputed text (1 Cor 11:24–25).

The science of textual criticism nevertheless plays a crucial role in proper hermeneutics. All of the other methods described in this book are somewhat inconsequential if we cannot determine with reasonable probability what the original words of the Bible actually were. The good news is that the vast majority of the Bible is textually secure.[64] Readers of English translations, especially of the NT, need not wonder if textual variants lurking behind every verse they read would drastically change the meaning of the passage. Estimates suggest that at least 97 percent, if not more, of the original NT can be reconstructed from the existing manuscripts beyond any measure of reasonable doubt. The percentage for the OT is lower, perhaps only about 90 percent.[65] But good editions of the various modern English translations contain footnotes that alert readers to most of the significant textual variants (as well as important alternate translations). Serious students of the Bible would be wise to obtain such editions of the Scriptures.

Even with all of this help, Christians often ask two important questions for which there are no simple answers. First, why did God in his providence not insure that an inerrant, inspired original was also inerrantly *preserved?* Second, how do we as Christians deal with those portions of traditional translations (like the KJV) that modern discoveries have shown were not part of the original autographs? The first question takes on added significance in light of other religions that claim, however erroneously, that their sacred writings have been perfectly preserved (most notably the Book of Mormon and the Qu'ran/Koran). To be sure, we do not know God's hidden motives. Perhaps he did not want us to idolize a book but to worship the God who became incarnate in Jesus. Leaving the transmission of Scriptures to fallible human beings parallels leaving the proclamation of those Scriptures to sinful and potentially rebellious disciples. God does not choose to override free will in either case, and he reveals and inspires only at particular moments in human history. But there is a sense in which we can discern his providence in the amazing extent to which the texts have been preserved.

The second question becomes particularly acute with regard to the two longest passages (printed in most Bibles) that almost certainly did not appear in the original manuscripts: Mk 16:9–20 (an additional account of Jesus' resurrection) and Jn 7:53–8:11 (the story of the woman caught in adultery). The necessary approach should be clear-whatever was most likely in the original texts should be accepted as inspired and normative; what was not in those texts should not be given equal status. But application proves more difficult. As noted elsewhere in this book, Jn 7:53–8:11 may be a true story, from which we can derive accurate information about Jesus' view of the Law, even if it did not originally form part of John's Gospel. On the other hand, there is almost no evidence to support Jesus ever having

"Contra the claims of religions like Mormonism or Islam that affirm the inspiration and authority of the OT and NT but then assert that these Scriptures have not been reliably copied at crucial points (e.g., in passages that teach the full and unique deity of Christ).

[65]See N. L. Geisler and W. Nix, ***A General Introduction to the Bible*** (Chicago: Moody, 1968), *365-66.*

said, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk 16:16), as if baptism were necessary for salvation, or for the promise that believers may pick up snakes, drink their venom, and yet not be harmed (Mk 16:18). One unnecessarily risks suicide by treating that text as normative! But in both Mark and John, the textual evidence is very strong for rejecting these passages as inspired Scripture.[66]

Or what about verses in which the NT quotes the OT but follows the Septuagint, even though the meaning in the Greek translation does not accurately reflect the Hebrew of traditional OT manuscripts? These differences prove more difficult to assess. The traditional Hebrew versions, known as the Masoretic text (MT), date from no earlier than the A.D. 800-900s. The existing Septuagint (LXX) manuscripts go back an additional half a millennium or more. It is possible, therefore, that at times the LXX accurately translated a Hebrew original that later became corrupted. Portions of OT books found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) from as long ago as 200 B.C. have suggested that occasionally, though not often, this was exactly what happened. Compare, for example, Heb 1:6, which quotes a longer form of Deut 32:43 found only in the LXX and DSS.[67]

Aramaic Targums, which combined free translation with occasional explanatory additions and commentary, may at times also reflect an older text. Interpreters, for example, have often wondered how to account for the end of Eph 4:8, "he gave gifts to men," when the Hebrew of Psa 68:18 that Paul is quoting reads "you received gifts from men." But at least one early Targum contains an Aramaic equivalent to Paul's word, so it is possible that its author reflected the intent of the original He brew.[68]

In other instances the NT may quote the LXX because it was the most well-known Bible to first-century Jewish readers outside Israel, even when it differed from the Hebrew, so long as the point at stake was not affected. Thus, James in Acts 15:17 quotes the LXX of Amos 9:11–12 in which the Greek, "that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name" is quite different from the Hebrew "so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations may hear." Yet James' point can be justified from either version-when God restores Israel, Gentiles will become an integral and united part of his new chosen people along with Jews.[69] Of course, not every NT use of the LXX can be explained in these ways. (For additional discussion, refer to the section on the use of the OT in the NT).

Perhaps the most important hermeneutical principle to learn from textual criticism is that one must not derive theological or ethical principles solely from passages that

[66]The UBS GNT gives an {A} rating in each instance.

[67]On which, see esp. J. de Waard, ***A Comparative Study of the Old Testament Text in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the New Testament*** (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 13–16.

[68]Cf. A S. Wood, "Ephesians" in ***Expositor's Bible Commentary,*** vol. 11 ed. F. E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 57; R. Schnackenburg, ***The Epistle to the Epbesians*** (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 176-77; and A. T. Lincoln, ***Epbesians, WBC 42*** (Dallas: Word, 1990), 242–44.

[69]This is the approach frequently taken and well defended by D. L. Bock, ***Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology,*** JSNTSup 12 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987).

are **textually** uncertain. When significant textual variants appear in a given passage, the sensible Bible reader will draw interpretations and applications that can be defended from whatever version of the text one adopts. So, too, syntheses of biblical doctrine and practice should always be based on textually certain passages.

Techniques of Translation

Modern versions of the Bible must be evaluated according to both their textual foundations and their translation techniques. It is helpful to arrange the various English translations along a spectrum from highly literal to highly **paraphrastic.**[70] There is no perfectly literal translation from one language to another of any extensive piece of writing because the structures and vocabularies of languages vary considerably. The literal word- by-word equivalent of Spanish **"una** piiiata **pequeña rompí** yo" in English would be "a piiiata small broke I." But English does not function this way; we have to say "I broke a small piiiata." What is more, **piñata** is not an English word (though many English speakers have come to understand it), and we have no one-word English equivalent. One would have to replace the one Spanish word with a long English phrase like "a large, colorful **papier-mâché** animal stuffed with candy and hung **from** the ceiling for people to bat at in a game." Likewise, even the KJV, **often** viewed as the most literal of Bible translations, **occasionally** has to resort to paraphrase, as in 1 Pet 1: 18, where the one Greek word ***patroparadotou*** ("father-tradition") must be rendered "received by tradition **from** your **fathers."** The most literal "translations" are interlinear Bibles, but by themselves they are often virtually unintelligible. They are actually not translations at all, but merely decode literally the biblical words into English equivalents.

Nevertheless, certain versions try to adhere as closely to Hebrew or Greek grammar and syntax as possible, while still being understandable in English. These may be called ***formally equivalent*** translations. The **NASB** is a prime example. Other versions seek to reproduce thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word and are called ***dynamically equivalent*** translations. They seek to produce the same effect on readers today that the original produced on its readers. These versions are less concerned to translate consistently a given Greek or Hebrew word with the same English word. Dynamically equivalent translations often reword a passive sentence into an active sentence, reflecting better English style ("I was hit by him" would equal "he hit me."). For example, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted" (Mt **5:4)** becomes in the **GNB,** "Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them!" Idioms and figures of speech **often** become more intelligible by means of modern equivalents or nonidiomatic language ("laying down one's neck" in Rom **16:4** might become "risking one's neck" or even "risking one's life").

Paraphrases go one step further; they add explanatory words or phrases that do not correspond to anything in the original text and are not necessary to preserve

[70] On the theory and practice of translation, see esp. E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of* ***Translating*** (Leiden: Brill, 1964); **and** J. **Beekman and** J. Callow, *Translating* ***the*** *Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

the **sense of the passage, but which, nevertheless, give** the **text added** freshness **and impact. One example is J. B. Phillips' rendering** of 1 Pet 3:2 1:

> **And I cannot help pointing out what a perfect illustration this is of the way you have been admitted to the safety of the Christian "ark" by baptism, which means, of course, far more than the mere washing of a dirty body: it means the ability to face God with a clear conscience.**

Compare this with the more literal versions. Many times, the more a reader seeks formal correspondence the less understandable the text becomes. On the other hand, paraphrases that are the easiest to read and the most lively run the greatest risk of departing from the text's original meaning. Many translators thus believe that the ideal is to try to strike a balance between preserving the original form and preserving the **meaning.**[71]

The Major English **Translations**[72]

Since it was completed in 1611, the Ring James Version of the English Bible has dominated the field. The first "authorized" version, **after** previous efforts by men like William Tyndale and John Wycliffe ran aground of ecclesiastical authorities, the KJV was a masterpiece of formal equivalence rendered into the common vernacular of seventeenth-century England. A team of scholars commissioned by James VI bypassed the Latin Vulgate, which had dominated Christianity for 1000 years, compared prior English translations with the best Hebrew and Greek manuscripts available to them and produced a painstaking, monumental version of the Scriptures. But the English language has changed dramatically in the last 400 years, **and the discovery of many new Bible manuscripts much older than those available in 1611** make the KJV far less valuable today. The KJV, of course, has been revised frequently; no edition in print today reads exactly like the original. The most famous twentieth century edition of the KJV, the **Scofield** Reference Bible, contains numerous marginal notes to indicate where obscure English has been updated. The New Ring James Version **(NKJV)** offers an even more thorough rewrite.

The textual base in each of these editions and versions of the KJV, however, remains unchanged. A handful of textual critics continues to defend the so-called Majority Text (the 80 percent or so of NT manuscripts that roughly agrees with the KJV). They argue that if this were not the earliest text-form, it would not have survived in so many manuscripts.[73] But, in fact, most of these manuscripts come

[71] One popular way of striking this balance among fairly conservative translations is to render unknown terms as literally as possible and then to supply an explanatory phrase in parentheses or a footnote. For additional discussion and debate on the larger philosophical issues at stake, see D. J. Hesselgrave, "Contextualization and Revelational Epistemology," with responses by M. A. Inch and W. A. Grudem, in ***Hermeneutics, Inerrancy,*** *and the Bible,* ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 691-764.

[72] The two best surveys are S. Kubo and W. Specht, *So Many Versions?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); and J. P. Lewis, ***The*** *English Bibk from* ***KJV*** *to* ***NIV,*** 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

[73] See esp., Z. C. Hodges and A. L. Farlstad, eds., ***The*** *Greek New Testament According to the* ***Majority Text*** (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

from the "Byzantine" family of texts associated with the world power that ruled after the fall of Rome. So naturally their manuscripts of the NT were most widely copied and well-preserved. But none of the oldest manuscripts, most of which were discovered since 1611, come from this tradition, and so our knowledge of what the biblical writers themselves actually wrote has improved greatly since the days of the KJV. We really ought to be thankful, for example, that Mark did not write the KJV rendering of Mk 16: 18 (see above), but readers who limit themselves to the KJV will never know this. Readers of the NKJV will know about the differences among manuscripts, if they read the footnotes, but they will naturally conclude that the better readings are those of the KJV. For this reason, we cannot endorse the widespread use of these versions when alternatives are available.[74]

Revision of the KJV based on new textual discoveries in both testaments began with the British Revised Version (RV) in 1885 and the American Standard Version (ASV) in 1901. But the most dramatic manuscript discoveries, including the DSS, have all occurred since then. The first truly modern translation, still highly literal (or formally equivalent) but abreast of the scholarly state-of-the-art, was the Revised Standard Version (RSV) completed in 1952. Unfortunately, it received unduly negative press in some conservative circles because of occasional controversial renderings. Most famous was its use of "young woman" instead of "virgin" in Isa 7:14. Others criticized the RSV because of its somewhat liberal use of conjectural emendation (proposing different consonants in the Hebrew text, even when no known variants support those proposals) in seemingly garbled OT passages (as in the illustration from Psa 2:12 above).[75] But, when it appeared, the RSV was far superior in fluency and accuracy to any other English version available. The RSV was updated in 1971, and in 1990 a New Revised Standard Version (NW) appeared. Some of the prominent changes include the use of inclusive language instead of masculine nouns and pronouns when both men and women are in view. It also includes an inclusive language lectionary that uses inclusive language for the Godhead-a much more controversial move.

After the RSV first appeared, many English and American readers began to feel the need for versions of Scripture that were easier for the average, biblically-illiterate person to read. Paraphrases, produced by individuals rather than the larger committees that worked together on the other versions, began to appear. J. B. Phillips published his NT in England in 1958. An American, Ken Taylor, published his "Living Letters" in 1962. Taylor eventually completed the Living Bible Paraphrased (LBP) in 1971. Phillips and Taylor were also often harshly criticized for taking undue liberties with the text. In the Living Bible Paraphrased, Psa 119:105 (literally translated, "you are a lamp unto my feet") became, anachronistically, "Your words are a flashlight to light the path ahead of me." In Acts 4:36, "Joseph ... surnamed Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)" turned into the rather slang,

[74]For a detailed defense of these claims, see D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

[75]For a good summary of most of the complaints that led certain evangelicals to seek new, alternate translations to the RSV, see R. L. Harris and S. E. Hardwick, "Do Evangelicals Need a New Bible Translation?" CT 12 (1968): 1242-47.

"Joseph ... nicknamed 'Barny the Preacher"'! And Phillips' rendering of Acts 8:20 (usually translated, "May your money perish with you") became shocking to many ("To hell with you and your money!"), even though Phillips correctly comments in a footnote that this is a quite defensible and a highly literal translation of the Greek. Critics often overlooked that these versions were not written to replace more traditional translations; rather, they aimed to make the Bible come alive and to be read by people who would not otherwise read Scripture at all. To that extent they succeeded remarkably.[76]

Translations that sought dynamic equivalence as a middle ground between formal equivalence and paraphrase included, most notably, Today's English Version (TEV) of the NT (1966), which ten years later was expanded to become the Good News Bible (GNB), along with most of the newer translations being published by the United Bible Societies in languages other than English. The British produced the New English Bible (NEB; NT in 1961 and OT in 1970), which falls somewhere between dynamic equivalence and paraphrase but often relies on idiosyncratic textual criticism. Improvements, revisions, and the addition of some inclusive language to the NEB resulted in the Revised English Bible (REB) of 1990. The American Bible Society has recently issued a new translation entitled the Contemporary English Version (CEV, the NT appeared in 1991). A widely used children's Bible proved so popular with adults that it was revised and "upgraded" for a wider audience as the New Century Version (NCV). It, too, employs inclusive language for people, dynamic equivalence translation principles, and is arguably the most readable of all the new versions.

Many evangelicals were unhappy with one or another feature of the first efforts to improve on the KJV and ASV. Either they suspected liberal bias or found paraphrases too free, but they agreed updating was desperately needed. So two translations stemming from evangelical teams of scholars were produced, the first by Americans, the second by an international group. The former, a revision of the ASV, was called the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and was completed in 1971; the latter, the New International Version (NIV), was finished in 1978. The NASB is highly literal, to the point of being rather stilted occasionally. The NIV falls in between formal and dynamic equivalence and appears to be the translation most likely to attain widespread, long-term use in evangelical circles, much as the RSV and NRSV have in more ecumenical circles.[77] Sadly, no translation has appeared, nor (to our knowledge) is one being planned that would combine the best of evangelical and ecumenical scholarship. Since all translations reflect at times a certain theological bias, Christians are not likely soon to agree on an "authorized" successor to the KJV.

[76]In 1992 The LBP continued to rank third in sales of all English language versions of the Bible (after the NIV and KJV). A team of approximately seventy scholars is presently revising the LBP, which, hopefully, will retain its popular style but correct inaccuracies in the current paraphrase.

[77]The importance of these two translations has led to entire hooks about their production: K. L. Barker, ed., *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); and B. M. Metzger, R. C. Dentan, and W. Harrelson, *The Making of the New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Choosing a Translation[78]

Which translation is the best to use? The basic answer is: It depends on your purpose or occasion in reading the Bible. If, for the sake of doing word studies or outlining a passage, you want a version that generally tries to reflect the actual structure of the biblical language and that translates key terms with the same English word as often as possible, then follow the NASB or, with a few more exceptions, the RSV or NRSV. If you are looking for a translation with fresh thoughts and insights for a young or beginning reader in simple and vivid language, consider the Living Bible. For easy reading that is closer to the original and not quite as innovative, use the GNB, NCV, or CEV. For the best overall balance between literalness and readability, consult the NIV. For dramatic and poetic readings in classic Elizabethan English, dust off the KJV!

Above all, whenever you are serious about studying a passage intensively, especially when you are teaching it to others or dealing with controversial exegetical or theological issues, consult more than one translation. For memorization, choose the translation you prefer and use it consistently. But for valid interpretation, if you cannot read the biblical languages, you must compare several versions lest you miss an important possible translation. Editions that print four parallel columns from different versions are particularly helpful in this respect.[79]

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[78]Cf. also E. H. Glassman, *The Translation Debate: What Makes a Bible Translation Good?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981); and L. Foster, *Selecting a Translation of the Bible,* 2d ed. (Cincinnati: Standard, 1983). Much else could be said about other modern translations. In Roman Catholic circles the two most important are the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible. The former has been fully revised as the New Jerusalem Bible; the latter has had only the New Testament revised. Both break with the traditional Catholic practice of following the Latin Vulgate and go back instead to the Greek and Hebrew. The NAB is reasonably similar to the NIV in its place on the spectrum of literal vs. free translation; the JB is closer to the REB. In Judaism, The New Jewish Version is a significant modern rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures into contemporary English. Various pseudo-Christian sects use their own versions. The New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses is widely known because of its unjustifiable translations of passages that teach Christ's deity or the personality of the Holy Spirit (both of which the Jehovah's Witnesses deny). The Mormons rely on their own edition of the KJV, since the Book of Mormon often quotes the Bible in the King James text-type, even when older manuscripts prove that the original Scripture writers wrote something different. This fact alone disproves the Book of Mormon's claim to be a reliable translation of tablets predating the KJV by fifteen centuries or more.

[79]E.g., *The Comparative Study Bible* [NIV, NASB, Amplified, KJV] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); or *The New Testament in Four Versions* [KJV, RSV, Phillips, NEB] (New York: Iversen-Ford, 1963). Particularly useful is the verse-by-verse listing of interesting translations and paraphrases that comprises *The Bible from 26 Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

PART II

THE INTERPRETER AND THE GOAL

CHAPTER FOUR

The Interpreter

Suppose two chemists decided to conduct a similar experiment. While one carefully followed the experimental design with accuracy and precision, the other worked carelessly and failed to follow the procedures or make the measurements precisely. Which of these two chemists would have the more accurate results? Without doubt, the chemist who worked with accuracy and precision. The same is true of Bible interpretation. If interpretation is to succeed, the interpreter must possess certain competencies and must work with correct and accurate methodology. Generally speaking, careful and accurate work produces the best results, regardless of the practitioner. It is our goal to present responsible, careful methods for accurate interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures. Those who practice these methods with rigor and care will have the best possible prospects of success in this endeavor. The techniques furnish correct insights regardless of who utilizes them.

However, we are still faced with a dilemma, for in addition to accurate methodology, the interpreter's set of convictions or presuppositions about the nature of Scripture profoundly affects his or her work. For example, the interpreter who rejects the possibility of resurrection must explain all such biblical "events" as myth or legend—certainly not as literal history. Whatever these passages may convey to modern readers, said interpreter will reject the reality of such events. So the two topics, qualifications and presuppositions, go hand in hand. In this chapter we will discuss qualifications first and then will consider presuppositions. Then, building on that foundation, we will consider the role of preunderstanding in the interpretive process.

Qualifications of the Interpreter

Faith

All understanding requires a framework or context within which to interpret. Thus, to understand a lecture about the properties of antiquarks, one must have at least some knowledge of theoretical physics. The more knowledge the listener has about theoretical physics, the more understanding he or she will gain from the lecture. Likewise, if the Bible is God's revelation to his people, then ***the essential qualification*** *for* **a *full understanding of this book is to know the revealing God.*** To know God we must have a relationship with him. The Bible uses the term "faith" to describe the essential element in this relationship. "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6). Only the one who believes and trusts in God can truly understand what God has spoken in his Word. This makes sense, for how can one understand a text from the Bible that purports to be a word from God if one denies that there is a God or that the Bible is from God?

Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 2:14 that the ability to apprehend God's truth in its fullest sense belongs only to the "spiritual person." So while excellence in methodology is a necessary qualification, we allege that excellence alone does not suffice for understanding the Bible as divine revelation. Such divine revelation is gained only through possessing the spiritual sensitivity that God gives to those who have faith in Him, to those who believe. Thus, faith is foundational for a full comprehension of the Scriptures. It is not the only qualification, nor does it guarantee correct interpretation, but it is the foundation for correct interpretation.

Do not misunderstand. We do not arrogantly assert that one who does not believe cannot understand the Bible. Unbelievers can grasp much of its meaning. They may discover what it asserts or claims even when their own beliefs or value systems lead them to deny those claims. Thus, a competent, unbelieving scholar may produce a superior technical commentary on a biblical book-perhaps even better written than many believing Christian scholars could write-but that unbelieving scholar cannot understand and portray the true ***significance***[1] of the Bible's message, for his or her ultimate commitments are not to the Bible as divine revelation. The unbelieving scholar will not accept the Bible as God's revealed truth, will feel justified in arriving at conclusions that conflict with such a "high" view of Scripture, will reject depictions of miracles as fables or myth, and will account for "God-language" as a prescientific way of explaining the unexplainable. But if through a

'The difference between the findings of unbelieving versus believing scholars is often one of volition, not cognition. Through their careful work, both may come to the same understanding of a text's *meaning.* But due to their different faith commitments, only the believer can perceive the text's true ***significance*** and be willing to obey the truth conveyed. We discuss the distinction between meaning and significance later.

study of the Scripture this unbelieving scholar should become convinced of its truthfulness, he or she would need to become a believer: one **who confesses Christ as Lord and submits to the truth of God's Word. Only when a person comes to that position can he or she understand the Bible's message as "God's personal word to me."**

Obedience

A second requirement, following close upon the requirement of faith, is the **willingness *to put oneself "under" the text, to submit one's will to hear the text and obey its author.*** Hermeneutics cannot be limited to the grammatical-historical techniques that help the interpreter understand the original meaning of the text. More precisely, the work of the technical scholars can get so caught up in a world of academic inquiry that the significant issues the original biblical authors were trying to communicate become lost or are determined irrelevant. N. Lash states the point forcefully:

> **If the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be "heard" today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be "heard" as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness.***

This means that true interpretation of the Bible can never be merely an exercise in ancient history. We cannot genuinely understand what a text meant without it impacting our lives. Interpretation involves a crucial dialectic between the historical origin of a text and the perspective of the modern reader or interpreter. To focus only on the former consigns the Bible to the status of an ancient and irrelevant artifact. Yet to abandon the historical reference and seek only for some felicitous significance for today is equally misguided. Scripture loses all normativeness if all "readings" of its text can claim equal validity. Genuine interpretation requires a fusing of the ancient and modern horizons where the meaning of the ancient text helps interpreters come to new understandings of themselves.[3] As Lash properly insists: "the articulation of what the text might 'mean' today, is a necessary condition of hearing what that text 'originally meant.'"[4] Though Lash does not take the point this far, we insist that full understanding comes only to the sincere follower of the God who revealed-the follower who diligently seeks to practice the message of the text studied.[5]

[2]N. Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" ***Ex Auditu*** 1 (1985): 17.

[3]We borrow the image of the fusing of horizons from A. C. Thiselton, ***The Two Horizons*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) who in turn depends upon H. G. Gadamer whose work Thiselton thoroughly analyzes.

*Lash, "Martyrdom," 18.

[5]The writer of Psa 119:97–104 exemplifies the perspective of the obedient believer. The psalmist desires that God's commands be "ever with me." Speaking to God, his practice remains to "meditate on your statutes," and he seeks to "obey your precepts." "I have not departed from your laws," he says to his God.

Illumination

For his part, God provides the resource for such obedient understanding of his truth: the illumination of the Holy Spirit. A corollary of the requirement of faith is the ***regeneration of the Holy Spirit.*** That is, once people have committed their lives in faith to Jesus as Lord, the Bible speaks of a work that God performs in them. This internal operation enables believers to perceive spiritual truth, an ability unavailable to unbelievers (cf. 1 Cor 2:6-16; 2 Cor 3:15–18). This illuminating work of the Spirit does not circumvent nor allow us to dispense with the principles of hermeneutics and the techniques of exegesis. It does mean that a dynamic comprehension of the significance of Scripture and its application to life belongs uniquely to those indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Though scholars possess an arsenal of methods and techniques with which to decipher the meaning of the biblical texts, interpretation falls short of its true potential without the illumination of the Spirit. Neither methodology nor the Spirit operates in isolation from the other. Neither is sufficient in itself. For though the Spirit may supernaturally grant to a reader the true meaning of a text, independent of any study, we posit that the Spirit rarely, if ever, operates in this manner. On the other hand, methods alone are not sufficient to understand profoundly and exactly the true meaning and significance of Scripture. Then how are methodology and illumination interwoven?

First, consider whether one can depend simply upon the Holy Spirit for understanding the Bible apart from methods and techniques. Origen (ca. A.D. 200) might have been the earliest defender of this practice, but if so, he was certainly only the first in a long line that continues to this day. The reasoning often goes like this: if the Holy Spirit inspired the original writers, then certainly he can impart his meaning without recourse to such means as historical or grammatical study. C. H. Spurgeon countered such pretension with some advice to budding preachers in "A Chat about Commentaries":

> Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think of ways that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have labored before you in the **field of exposition.** If you **are of that opinion, pray remain so, for you are** not worth the trouble of conversion, and like a little coterie who think with you, would resent the attempt as an insult to your infallibility. It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.[6]

In the pulpit this error may sound like this:

> Dear friends, I have consulted no other books or human sources or worldly wisdom. I have considered no commentaries. I have gone right to the Bible—and only the Bible-to see what it had to say for itself. Let me share with you what God showed me.

[6]C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries,* rep. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981, from original 1876 edition), v.

As B. Ramm, who invented a similar quote, observes, **"This sounds very spiritual,"** but **in fact "it is a veiled egotism" and a "confusion of the inspiration of the Spirit** with the illumination of the Spirit."[7] The Spirit's work of illumination does not grant new revelation.[8]

Unfortunately, some deeply spiritual people have purported some obviously incorrect interpretations of the Bible. Being indwelt by the Spirit does not guarantee accurate interpretation. Though the creative work of the Spirit cannot be diminished, the Spirit does not work apart from hermeneutics and exegesis. Rather, he provides the sincere believer that indispensable comprehension of the text (that "Ah, ha!") by working within and through methods and techniques. An encounter occurs between the Spirit of the Word and the human spirit. Swartley says,

> In the co-creative moment, text and interpreter experience life by the power of the divine Spirit. Without this experience, interpretation falls short of its ultimate potential and purpose.[10]

Certainly, we cannot "program" this creative encounter; it requires a stance of faith and humility before the Lord of the universe who has revealed his truth on the pages of Scripture. Yet in seeking to hear his voice, the interpreter becomes open to true understanding. ***Prayer puts one in the position to hear and understand.*** For the Christian, prayer is an indispensable ingredient to the proper understanding of Scripture. We must ask God to assist our study and to speak to us through it so that we might understand his truth and will for our lives. We do not substitute prayer for diligent exegetical work. We pray that we will do our work well, that we will be sensitive to the Spirit's direction, and that we will be obedient to the truth of what we discover. We openly admit our bent to sin and error and our finitude; we ask for an openness to receive what God has revealed and a willingness to learn from others throughout the history of interpretation.

Membership in the Church

As Bible interpreters we must be wary of the trap of individualism. ***We need to recognize our membership in the Body of Christ, the Church.*** We do not work in a vacuum; we are not the first ones to puzzle over the meaning of the Bible. We

[7]B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation,* 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 17-18.

[8]One of the striking features of most heresies or cults is their use of Jesus' words recorded in Jn 14–16, especially verses like 14:26, 15:26, and 16:5–16. In fact, Jesus does not promise that the Holy Spirit will provide new truth or revelation to all succeeding Christians throughout the Church Age. Rather he refers to the inspiration of the Spirit in providing the NT canon of Scripture. The Spirit's role in relationship to believers today is not to reveal new truth; he did that in producing the NT. His role now is to enable believers to apprehend and apply the truth revealed in Scripture.

We do not wish to deny that God works in the lives of unbelievers, even through the Scriptures. We merely stress the Holy Spirit's illumination in the lives of believers in keeping with 1 Cor 2:14–16.

[10]W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 224.

require the enrichment, endeavors, and assistance of our fellow believers to check our perceptions and to affirm their validity. Likewise, our conclusions, if they are correct, have importance for others. The Church throughout the ages, constituted by the Spirit, provides accountability; it offers the arena in which we can formulate our interpretation. Such accountability guards against maverick and individualistic interpretations. It provides a check against selfish and self-serving conclusions by those who lack the perspective to see beyond their own circumstances. And since the Church of Jesus Christ is a worldwide fellowship, it crosses all cultural boundaries and parochial interests-a reality we deny if we limit our interpretations and formulations of God's truth to personal attempts to understand Scripture. If we discover the meaning of God's revelation, it will make sense or ring true to others in Christ's worldwide Body when they openly assess the evidence we used to reach our conclusions.

Appropriate Methods

The final qualification has been assumed, but we need to make it explicit: ***we need methods that are appropriate to the task of interpretation.*** This task requires diligence and commitment, hard work and discipline. It requires the pursuit of excellence and learning in all dimensions (language, history, culture, theology) that relate to the study of the Scriptures.

If the best interpretation involves a fusing of the horizons of the ancient text and those of the modern interpreter, then interpreters must be aware of their own worlds as well as those of the texts-the worlds of the ancient Near East or the Roman Empire of the first century A.D. as well as the modern world. There is no substitute for diligent study and the use of available tools. The interpreter must cultivate a sensitivity to hear and learn from all the information available. This requires study and practice.

Issues that concern factual matters in interpretation cannot be settled by an appeal to prayer or the illumination of the Holy Spirit. One cannot know through prayer that Baal was a fertility god worshipped by the Canaanites or that the Jews of Jesus' day regarded Samaritans as hated half-breeds. The identity of the "sons of God" in Gen 6:1–4 or the "spirits in prison" in 1 Pet 3:18–22 cannot be determined by simply reading and rereading these texts in a prayerful and humble way. One must study history and culture to discover the nature of the "head coverings" in first-century Corinth (1 Cor 11:2–16). Today the Bible interpreter is privileged to have numerous, excellent tools that provide facts and information about the ancient world and the biblical texts. Capable interpreters become acquainted with such research tools and use them to the best of their ability. If the goal of interpretation is to determine the meaning the text had for its original author and recipients, then the diligent interpreter must be committed to using historical sources.

Does this mean that without a competence in biblical languages and a mastery of all the critical historical and linguistic tools no one can understand God's message in the Bible?. No, for certainly no one can attain total proficiency, and even were it obtainable it would not guarantee correct interpretation. Without doubt, a

simple, sincere, and uneducated believer can comprehend the central truths of the Bible. The diligent Christian with even an average education who is willing to study, and who has access to the fine tools now available, can arrive at the central meaning of virtually every passage in the Bible. The believer who can acquire expertise in the biblical languages in addition to further training in biblical studies, history, culture, and theology, will become that much more qualified to explain the meaning of most verses and even many of the more obscure or controversial texts. Finally, the scholars who have advanced training, research, and specialization are able to perform closely reasoned and technical studies, write commentaries, perform textual criticism to determine the original texts, translate and evaluate ancient literature that sheds light on the Bible, and produce modern versions of the Bible.

Presuppositions for Correct Interpretation

The computer industry has popularized **a basic truth, immortalized in the acronym, GIGO-garbage in, garbage out. That is, what you get out directly depends on what you put in.**[11] **This principle is especially true in interpretation. The aims and presuppositions of interpreters govern and even determine their interpretations. When Charlie Brown expects to find the shapes of ducks and sheep in the clouds overhead, he finds them! Like Charlie Brown, interpreters can find in a text precisely the meaning, and *only the* meaning, they expected to find-as anyone who has read or listened to debates over biblical scholarship will attest.**

No one interprets anything without a set of underlying assumptions. When we presume to explain the meaning of the Bible, we do so with a set of preconceived ideas or presuppositions. These presuppositions may be examined and stated, or simply embraced unconsciously. But anyone who says that he or she has discarded all presuppositions and will only study the text objectively and inductively is either deceived or naive. So as interpreters we need to discover, state, and consciously adopt those assumptions we can agree to and defend, or we will uncritically retain those we already have, whether or not they are adequate and defensible.

Indeed, interpretation depends not only upon the methods and qualifications of interpreters but also upon their presuppositions. Thus, the development of an approach to hermeneutics involves two components: (1) an essential set of presuppositions that constitutes its starting point, and (2) a deliberate strategy involving methods and procedures that will determine viable interpretations and assess competing alternatives. Such a strategy will also require some means of verifying that the preferred interpretation is superior to the alternatives.

That is why we present here the assumptions or presuppositions that we believe are necessary for an accurate interpretation of the Bible. Not all interpreters or readers will align themselves with this position, though we hope that many do (and that others will be persuaded to).

[11] Paul comprehended that principle well in expressing his counsel to the Philippians: "... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, ... -think about such things" (Phil 4:8).

Presuppositions about the Nature of the Bible

Inspired Revelation

The view of the nature of the Bible that an interpreter holds will determine what "meaning" that interpreter will find in it. If the Bible owes its origin to a divine all-powerful being who has revealed his message via human writers, then the objective of interpretation will be to discover the meaning located in the divinely inspired document. If the interpreter adopts an alternative explanation of the Bible's origin, then he or she will prescribe other goals in interpreting the text.[12] We adopt the presupposition that ***the Bible is a supernatural book, God's written revelation to his people given through prepared and selected spokespersons by the process of inspiration.*** This has been the Church's universal creed throughout its history.[13]

Our defense of this view derives from the Bible's view of itself. The NT describes the OT as "inspired," using a term literally meaning "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16), an allusion to Gen 2. It further affirms that the Holy Spirit carried along the writers as they spoke the words of God (2 Pet 1:20–21). The OT language affirms divine inspiration with quotations like, "The LORD says, . . ." (e.g., Gen 6:7; 26:2; Exod 6:2; 12:43; 1 Sam 9:17; 1 Kgs 9:3; Zech 4:6), indicating that the spokespersons believed they were speaking God's message, not simply their own. When the NT writers quote the OT, they demonstrate their belief that the OT derives from God himself (e.g., 2 Cor 6:16; Mt 19:5/Gen 2:24; Acts 4:25/Psa 2:2; Rom 9:17/Exod 9:16).

In addition, various NT writers' views of other portions of the NT disclose their verdicts about the nature of the Bible. Peter clearly views Paul's writings or letters in the same category as the "other scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). After employing the introductory formula, "for the Scripture says," Paul proceeds to quote from both Deuteronomy and Luke (1 Tim 5:18/Deut 25:4; Lk 10:7). In places Paul seems to express the recognition that the apostles' teaching parallels that of the OT writers (1 Cor 2:13). John identifies his words with the "true words of God" (Rev 19:9).[14]

Of course, we do not argue that because the Bible claims to be God's Word the question is settled. That would simply beg the question. Christians do not accept

[12]If the Bible records the religiously inspired thinking of pious Jews and Christians but is not divine revelation itself, then interpreters may feel free to handle it precisely and only as they do other ancient religious books. Such interpreters may seek to explain on the basis of sociological or anthropological models (among others) how the Jewish or Christian religious communities came into existence and how they formulated myths such as the crossing of the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds) or Jesus' resurrection to explain their religious experiences and longings.

[13]In defense of this statement, see J. D. Woodbridge, ***Biblical Authority*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[14]"For a thorough treatment of this issue, see W. A. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Modern Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," ***Scripture and Truth,*** ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), ***19-59.***

the Qu'ran's view of itself, nor that of the Book of Mormon. Though a man claims to be a fish, he remains a man. We cannot conduct the necessary apologetic **defense** of the Scriptures here but we do argue that the general reliability of those historical portions of Scripture that can be verified lends credence to the Bible's overall truthfulness. Further, Jesus accepted the inviolability of the OT (Jn 10:35), and we are inclined to follow his lead.[15]

We accept, then, that the Bible is God's Word in written form, that it records God's self-disclosure, as well as his people's varied responses to his person and his acts in history. Certainly human writers composed the Scriptures in the midst of their own cultures and circumstances, writing out of their own experiences and with their own motives for their readers. The Bible is a human book. Yet, somehow, God superintended their writing so that what they wrote comprised his message precisely. The Bible is God's Word.

Authoritative and True

It follows from the first presupposition that ***the Bible is authoritative and true.*** Being divine revelation, the Bible possesses ultimate authority. For this reason, it must constitute the measure for all human belief and behavior. It speaks truthfully about who we are and how we are to live, so rejecting the message of the Bible means rejecting the will of God.

What God says must be true, for God cannot lie nor will he mislead.[16] Conservative scholars have usually maintained that inspiration implies inerrancy-that what God authored must of necessity contain no errors.[17] Others defend the Bible's "infallibility," which allows that a greater amount of imprecision is present in the Bible.[18] Some prefer to defend a more "limited inerrancy" in which the biblical

[15]On these two points in defense of Scripture's truthfulness see, first, C. Armerding, ***The Old Testament and Criticism*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); K. A. Kitchen, ***Ancient Orient and the Old Testament*** (Chicago: Intervarsity, 1966); E. M. Yamauchi, ***The Stones and the Scriptures (New*** York: Lippincott, 1972); C. L. Blomberg, ***Historical Reliability of the Gospels*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1987); F. F. Bruce "Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?" in ***Evangelical Roots,*** ed. K. S. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978); and, second, J. Wenham, ***Christ and the Bible,*** 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

[16]The author of Num 23:19 distinguishes between God and humans in their ability to lie: God does not. See also 1 Sam 15:29; Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18. James 1:13 asserts that God never puts evil in a person's path. Rather, God only does what is good. Assuming, then, that the entire Bible is God's revelation, this revelation cannot mislead nor can it present what is untrue. This may appear to reason circularly; yet historically, Judaism and Christianity have always affirmed God's goodness and truthfulness on the basis of their Scriptures. R. Nicole provides a helpful appraisal of how both testaments present the nature of truth as factuality, faithfulness, and completeness: "The Biblical Concept of Truth," in ***Scripture and Truth,*** ed. Carson and Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 287-298.

[17]The classic exposition is B. B. Warfield, ***Revelation and Inspiration*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927). Other examples of this position include: C. F. H. Henry, ed., ***Revelation and The Bible*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959); N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley, eds., ***The Infallibk Word*** (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946); C. F. H. Henry, ***God, Revelation, and Authority,*** 6 vols. (Waco: Word, 1976-79); and E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus, eds., ***Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

[18]See, e.g., I. H. Marshall, ***Biblical Inspiration*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 66.

'authors did not err in what they intended to teach theologically, but may have erred in other incidental (to their purposes) issues.[19] To the left of these conservatives we might locate the so-called neo-orthodox theologians who argue that the Bible *only* becomes the Word of God as it is faithfully read, preached, and apprehended by believers.[20] Finally, still further to the left are those liberal scholars who grant the Bible inspiration only insofar as all the world's great literature is inspired. Hence, they accord it no divine status and study it only as they would other ancient (religious) documents.[21] For them the Bible has at best only limited authority (i.e., the same as any other ancient document or writing) and no privileged claim to truth.

For us, the Bible is true in all it intends to teach. Its statements convey what is factual; its record is faithful and reliable. This includes all its individual parts as well as its overall message. This is not the place for an exhaustive defense of the Bible's truthfulness, but we do cite several NT texts that, in our estimation, assume this conclusion (e.g., Jn 10:35; 17:17; Tit 1:2; Mt 5:18). The psalmist likewise affirms that God's commands are utterly perfect (119:96). We believe that this represents the position of the Church throughout its history.[22] We also believe this presupposition alone does justice to the Bible's character and claims of truthfulness.

We realize that this presupposition is held by only a minority of scholars today, though it is standard for believing Christians. How do we handle apparent contradictions or errors? Following our supposition of truth, we are bound to seek viable solutions or admit that with the present state of our knowledge we cannot find a solution. This does not mean that no solution exists; it simply means that we do not know how to solve the problem at this time. When responsible exegesis can suggest a possible solution, we claim some vindication, even if we cannot be absolutely confident that our solution is certain. It means that the charge of "error" is not mandated. And when every possible solution seems contrived or tendentious, we consciously adopt a more "agnostic" stance toward the problem: we frankly admit that at present we do not know the best way to solve the problem. In fact, in the vast majority of cases, plausible solutions to alleged problems or contradictions ***do*** exist so that our withholding judgment in certain instances is not simply special pleading.[23] This is no more presumptuous than assuming a modern, scholarly, critical omniscience about such questions.[24] Our presupposition of truthfulness disposes us to reject the position that the Bible errs and to assume, rather, in such instances that the data, our knowledge, or our theory to explain the evidence remains deficient.

[19] J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, ***The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible (New*** York: Harper, 1979).

[20] K. Barth remains the prime example: Church ***Dogmatics*** (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936, 1956), I/1, 98–140; I/2, 457-537.

[21] See J. Barr, ***Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

[22] L. Morris, I ***Believe in Revelation*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), defends the inherent authority of the Bible, though see Rogers and McKim, ***Authority and Interpretation***.

[23] To *see* how often this is the case in the Gospels, see Blomberg, ***Historical Reliability.***

[24] D. R. Hall, ***The Seven Pillories of Wisdom*** (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990) provides an excellent and witty exposure of how much faulty reasoning occurs in the guise of scholarship.

A Spiritual Document

A second conclusion follows from the view that God has revealed his message in the Bible: ***the Bible manifests unparalleled spiritual worth and a capacity to change lives.*** The Bible has the unique power to affect the reader spiritually. Scripture results from the living word of the living and all-powerful God, a ***word*** that has inherent power (see particularly Isa 55 and Heb 4:12–13). This makes the Bible a unique book in human history-useful in ways unlike any other book. Various individuals (the average Christian reader, theologian, professor, preacher, Sunday School teacher) use the Bible in different ways and for different purposes (devotion/nurture, corporate worship, preaching, teaching, ethical guidance). As we will see, such Christian interpreters share many hermeneutical principles and methods in common with those who expound other kinds of literature. But we acknowledge this added spiritual dimension for the Bible and take it into account in interpreting (rather than deny its presence as do many liberal critical scholars).

We explore the Scriptures and find life-giving and life-changing truths. As we respond in faithful obedience, we worship and praise the God of the Bible. The Scriptures give direction to our thoughts and guidance to our lives. They have an animating and uplifting effect as the Spirit of God uses their truth in the lives of the faithful. To treat the Bible in any other way (merely like an inspiring book) robs it of its central purpose as God's revelation to his creatures.

Characterized by both Unity and Diversity

One source of difficulty in interpreting the Bible derives from apparently conflicting facts: it is a unit yet it is diverse. If one Author is responsible for the Bible's formulation, then we assume a symmetry or harmony in its overarching message. In this sense the books of the Bible could be compared to an orchestra. Though there are a wide variety of instruments in the orchestra producing different sound effects, and at time perhaps even seeming to be out of tune, they all contribute to a total harmonious effect. The instruments blend together in a marvelous and melodious symphony. Likewise, Christians assume that ***divine authorship conveys to the Bible an inherent unity or coherence.*** Biblical scholars have sought to depict the Bible's unity in various ways (e.g., a theological theme, the promise/fulfillment motif, typology, the idea of progressive revelation, or a canonical approach).[25] At this point

[25] Among the variety of relevant works, the reader might consult these: H. H. Rowley, ***The Unity of the Bible*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) weighs recurring themes in the Bible. W. Eichrodt, ***Theology of the Old Testament, 2*** vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967) champions the promise/fulfillment approach. M. C. Parsons provides a helpful introduction to those reviving a strong interest in canon in "Canonical Criticism," in New ***Testament Criticism and Interpretation,*** ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 255-94. Major players adopting this approach include B. S. Childs, ***Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); J. Sanders, ***Torah and Canon*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); and Barr, ***Holy Scripture.*** A leading proponent of a typological approach is G. von Rad, ***Old Testament Theology, 2*** vols. (New York: Harper, 1965), especially 2: 319-35.

no single proposal has met with universal agreement, even from those willing to grant the possibility that a unity exists.

More easily, perhaps, we can demonstrate ***the Bible's diversity.*** It exists as two very different "testaments" written in a variety of languages, in different cultures, over a vast span of time. The Bible embodies a diverse collection of kinds of literature: legal, historical, poetic, prophetic, gospel, epistolary, and apocalyptic. Added to all this, the various authors write with distinct purposes, to different audiences. on different topics, and with varying emphases. These result in multiple differences as one compares writings within a testament and between testaments, not to mention across the centuries. No one would question that such a collection would be diverse; that it would have unity is more difficult to imagine.

An Understandable Document

We affirm that the Bible is *understandable;* it is an accessible book. It presents a clear message to anyone willing to read it, and that is why people throughout history have understood its teachings. This does not imply that it is a simple book or that anyone may easily grasp everything it contains. Its profundity exhausts the human mind, for it derives from God himself and deals with the most important and urgent issues of human existence, now and eternally. Yet, the Bible is not a puzzle or cryptogram whose solution remains hidden from all but an Clite group who know the code. Written so that common people could apprehend its truth, the Bible's central message remains clear even after scores of intervening centuries.

Forming the Canon of Scripture

As Protestant scholars we ***accept the 66 books of the*** *canon as* ***the entirety of God's scriptural record to his people.*** Catholics, of course, include the Apocrypha in their canon.[26] Canon has the figurative sense of "ruler," "measuring rod," and therefore refers to a norm or standard. We use it here to speak of the list of authoritative books that comprise Holy Scripture. Though not a very "tidy" matter, canonicity affirms that, guided by the Spirit through various historical processes over a span of several centuries, the Church separated out and accepted certain books due to their apostolic origin or basis in Jesus' life and ministry, or because they were useful for her specific purposes (e.g., preaching, catechetical training, refuting heretics, worship) or because of their consistency with the orthodox teaching of Jesus and of thd apostles, et al. Added to the completed "Old Testament" canon (established by the Church's Jewish predecessors), this process enabled the Church to fix the extent of the canon. The canon marks the boundaries of God's written revelation. The procedure of Scripture formation stands completed. In interpretation the Church does not seek new revelation that would add to the Bible, for that process ceased. Bather, the Church seeks to understand what was revealed and collected in the canon.

[26]For more details see our discussion of canon and textual criticism earlier and the literature cited in the footnotes.

We presuppose, as well, that the science of textual criticism has given us the best approximations possible of the autographs of the original canon, given the current state of knowledge. In other words, though we do not possess the original copies of any of the books (or even parts) of the Bible, textual critics have taken us very close to what they must have said. Thus the ***Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*** and the Nestle/Aland ***Novum Testamentum Graece, 26th*** edition (which is virtually identical to the United Bible Societies' The Greek New ***Testament'*** third edition) are surely very close to the original documents of the Bible. Together these volumes constitute our canon.

Presuppositions about the Nature of the Interpreter

Interpretation always derives from the interests or concerns of the interpreter. People interpret the Bible for a reason and with some agenda. They may want to understand more about Assyrian culture and history, or they may desire God's help in a personal crisis. The Bible can help, we believe, in both quests.

Those who believe the Bible possesses authority as divine revelation use it for both the religious purposes of nurture, worship, teaching, and guidance, and for the nonreligious purposes of understanding some aspect of Israel's history or appreciating its literary dimensions. At the same time, the person who subscribes to a different view of the nature of the Bible also adopts an agenda for studying it and finding significance in that study. An unbelieving scholar typically wants to study the Bible only for nonreligious purposes such as historical reconstruction or literary criticism. Where the agendas overlap, say to explain the causes of infant sacrifices in ancient Israel (2 Chr 33:6), many scholars-evangelical or liberal-will adopt similar methods and techniques.

The task of interpretation always operates out of a personal framework. Both the interpreters' presuppositions and their personal or professional interests specify that framework. These will determine the questions and methods they deem appropriate for the text as well as the explanations they will accept or allow. The real division of the interpretive house does not usually occur on the levels of agenda or method (for interpreters often share similar methods and goals); rather it occurs on the level of ***attitude toward the Bible's trustworthiness.*** Scholars may be prone to suspect findings of an earlier prescientific era or to line up with the most popular current school of thinking. These factors influence all scholarly endeavors. Scholars are also affected by different preconceived ideas, perhaps even on what are the "assured results" of scholarship up to that point.

We do not mean that a believing interpreter will always be right in an interpretation or that an academically-oriented interpreter will be wrong. Indeed, as we have noted, a liberal scholar might produce a finer and more accurate exegesis of a given text than an evangelical counterpart. Equally, the believer must defend his or her specific interpretation and demonstrate its validity. We simply argue that even when scholars apply the same methodology, their differing presuppositions will open the way to potentially different results. If a scholar says, "Paul says X, but he was influenced by his rabbinic background, and we know he is certainly wrong," the

scholar is permitting modern values or philosophical positivism to lead to a rejection of a teaching of the Bible. On the other hand, those who accept the Bible as God's revelation expect it to provide true information, and they would never utter such a statement. They may not like what Paul teaches (they may even choose to disobey his instructions), but they are bound to acknowledge that he has written the word of God.

If interpreters choose to work within the Bible's own framework (e.g the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing God; the reality of the supernatural; the fact that God speaks in the Bible), the results will be of one kind. Interpretations will correspond to the affirmations the biblical writers themselves make. Such interpreters will engage in detailed and scholarly research on all kinds of issues. Religious language (God, angels, demons, faith, kingdom of God) will be appropriate and valid. However, if an interpreter operates within a modern, secular, naturalistic viewpoint, then certain categories must be excluded as out of its realm. For example, such a perspective cannot pronounce on resurrection from the dead or other "supernatural" phenomena since the truth of these phenomena cannot be confirmed by scientific criteria.

In other words, two scholars, an evangelical and a liberal, might both research literary elements in the Gospel narratives. They might come to similar conclusions about most issues-say the background of the pericope in the life of Jesus, the editorial work of an Evangelist, et al. But how would they handle the mention of "demons"? The evangelical is disposed to admit the existence of such creatures, if for no other reason than that the Bible affirms their existence. The other scholar may state that ancient peoples attributed certain infirmities to demons, but today we "know" better and ascribe them to psychological causes.

Modern scientists cannot study miracles for they are beyond the orbit of scientific analysis. Biblical scholarship built solely on the foundation of rationalism and science is compelled to find naturalistic explanations for the biblical accounts of miracles. Evangelicals, on the other hand, accept the miraculous in the Bible as factual.[27] However, evangelic& cannot defend their position simply by resorting to dogmatic pronouncements. No amount of protesting can dislodge the scientists, for, according to their presuppositions, miracles do not occur.

As evangelicals we can, however, conduct a defense of our position. We concede the validity of rational, historically defensible arguments. We are committed to being logical. We bind ourselves to the facts of history, but we insist this does not obligate us to a nonsupernatural explanation of the biblical record. However it does force us to engage in careful historical argumentation to show that the bib&al accounts are defensible and historically credible, even if in the end they cannot be scientifically proven.[28] We insist that to hold evangelical presuppositions is not to commit intellectual **suicide nor to relegate ourselves to a hopelessly obscurantist dogmatism. The evangelical faith is committed to a defensible, historically-credible explanation of the Bible—within the bounds of the Bible's own claims about itself and its origins. Rather than reject logic and reason, the evangehcal study of the Bible welcomes any method or approach that enables the Bible's meaning and significance to be understood.**

Presuppositions about Methodology

We want to employ any method or technique that enables us to discover the meaning of a text, regardless of who developed or perfected it. In short, we must be willing to use whatever methods yield accurate understanding.

For example, an interpreter who operates with our presuppositions about the nature of the Bible may well employ certain techniques of form or redaction criticism to discover the unique perspectives of the OT story of Joseph or of one of the Gospels. However, that same interpreter may find it more difficult to embrace the results of these methods in the hands of practitioners whose inherent stance presumes that a miraculous incident that appears in a gospel account really originated decades later in the life of the early church. The form critic may insist that miracles as recorded in the Gospels simply did not happen. These issues are presuppositional. So, if a method or technique is "neutral" (an obvious and noncontroversial example is grammatical analysis), we do not object to using it to understand the meaning of a text. But where a method, of necessity, adheres to a basic stance or presupposition that is inconsistent with our views about Scripture, then we find that *use* of the method unacceptable or at least requiring modification.

We do not deny that the Bible is a human document that must be read and studied just like other human documents. The key question is, did the events the Bible records actually happen as recorded? Israel remembered her past as genuine history (see Deut 26:5–9; Josh 24:2–13; Psa 78). Paul insisted that the Scriptures record Jesus' resurrection as true and factual history (1 Cor 15:3–8, 17–20, et al.). This great apostle argued for the significance of the factuality of this central Christian event in history. The honest historian ought to be free of preconceived notions that simply deny the possibility that an all-powerful God could act in human history. Hence we must be open to what we call miracles and supernatural explanations of biblical reports of the miraculous. This need not be circular reasoning. Rather, it constitutes an attempt to understand the Bible on its own terms.

Because the Bible owes its origin to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:21), it would be illegitimate to subject it to methods that deny or reject its divine

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[27] We discuss the phenomenon of miracles in the section devoted to the Gospels in the chapter on the genres of the NT. See key literature in Blomberg, ***Historical Reliability,*** 73–112.

[28] In addition to the literature cited in defense of Scripture's truthfulness cited above see for the OT, K. A. Kitchen, ***The Bible In Its World*** (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977); and P. C. Craigie, ***The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 255-90. For a helpful introduction to the role of the historical method in NT studies see D. A. Hagner, "The New Testament, History, and the Historical-Critical Method," in New Testament ***Criticism and Interpretation,*** ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 73–96. Hagner concludes his essay with several valuable modifications of the historical-critical method that will counter its unwarranted negative conclusions (89–91). On the historical veracity for the Gospels see also I. H. Marshall, ***I Believe in the Historical Jesus*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

status. A poetic line in Psa 96:12 reads: "Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy." Literary criticism recognizes that one cannot apply literary canons for interpreting one kind of literature (say historical narrative) to another genre (poetry). One might get an "interesting" reading by a "nonpoetic" interpretation of that line from the psalm, but it would be beyond the bounds of what the text seeks to convey. Similarly, we believe that our presuppositions about the nature of Scripture preclude avenues of study that deny its essential character.

We embrace the historical method in our investigation of the meaning of Scripture.[29] Since faith is tied to what happened in history, we commit ourselves to know biblical history. We agree with the affirmation of 2 Pet 1:16: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories." Thus historical and literary methods become essential to understand and explain the biblical record. We reject the kind of "faith" that simply believes what it wants to believe. Faith and history need not be at odds; they ought to and do inform each other.[30] If Jesus did not really and truly rise from the dead, then the Christian faith, Paul argues, is groundless and worthless!

This means that Christian interpreters walk a tightrope, but they do it self-consciously and openly. No interpretation occurs apart from presuppositions. As evangelical interpreters we approach the Bible with commitments. We affirm the Bible's uniqueness, and we acknowledge this commitment before we begin the process of interpretation. At the same time we drink deeply at the well of rational methods and seek to exegete each passage with integrity, accuracy, and sincerity. We want to employ whatever techniques help us understand the Bible accurately. So we reject a gullible naïveté that simply believes what it wants to believe. We must subject even our presuppositions to scrutiny and defend them adequately. But with that self-conscious reflection and defense we interpret by using all methods at our disposal. Yet rationalism is not the final word. Some rational methods without a substructure of proper presuppositions will yield results antithetical to an evangelical view of Scripture. We must test our presuppositions and reject any that we find unacceptable-i.e., the humanistic or naive stance that avers that scientific or presuppositionless interpretation is possible or desirable.

We admit that our presuppositions about the nature of the Bible could be construed as a kind of biased dogmatism. At the same time, we admit our commitments and argue that, after ***thorough study, we*** find no alternative more acceptable. All who study the Bible must confirm the nature and character of the text; they must settle for themselves precisely what they make of the Bible. What is its origin? What authority does it possess? Do its claims stand "over" the interpreter or must the Bible's claims be judged by other criteria? If so, who determines those criteria?

[29]D. A. Hagner puts it well: "Because revelation comes to us in and through history, historical criticism is not an option but a necessity. 'Criticism' here means the making of informed judgments. In this sense no one who attempts to interpret or explain the Bible in any way can avoid the 'critical' method" ("The New Testament," 75).

[30]I. H. Marshall, ***Luke: Historian and Theologian***, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) defends this third Gospel against the charge that theology and history are mutually exclusive categories.

This cannot simply be a leap in the dark to whatever position one likes or prefers. Such ultimate questions bear careful and concerted thought.[31]

Thus we read the Bible as God's Word to us and use that presupposition to monitor how we use various methods of interpretation. We will study and interpret the Bible to accomplish maximum understanding with what we deem to be the best and most appropriate methods to gain that knowledge. Yet we must carefully avoid the opposite danger of uncritically allowing our presuppositions to lead to unwarranted and irrational interpretations.

Presuppositions about the Goal of Hermeneutics

We are convinced that the goal of hermeneutics is to enable interpreters to arrive at ***the meaning of the text that the biblical writers or editors intended*** *their* ***readers to understand.*** The authors and editors produced literature of various kinds. Adopting our view of the nature of the Bible, we believe that in the divine/human concurrent activity of inspiration God purposed to communicate with his people. Thus all biblical texts convey meaning at both the human and divine levels.

'Hence we adopt as a basic presupposition to understand the ***text's meaning*** in contrast to an approach that argues that interpretation involves bringing meaning to a text. As we will see, many "reader response" approaches to interpretation fashion various meanings when they encounter a text. On a more subtle level, church communities or denominations want texts to affirm their understanding of theology. Throughout history, Christians have developed many traditions that they seek to defend from the Bible.[32] Blatantly or subtly, interpreters can substitute their meaning for the text's meaning.

Hermeneutics succeeds when it enables modern readers to understand the meaning of the original biblical texts—the meaning the people at the time of the texts' composition (author, editor, audience, readers) would have most likely understood. In some instances that meaning is readily apparent. Without much help a reader of the Bible can understand the narration: "One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat" (2 Kgs 4:8). It would fill out our understanding to know more

[31]This requires conscientious analysis typically referred to the realm of apologetics. Key volumes students may want to consult that defend this evangelical view of the Bible include: R. Nash, *Word of God, Word of* ***Man*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); G. Lewis and B. Demarest, eds., ***Challenges to Inerrancy:*** A Theological *Response* (Chicago: Moody, 1984); B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, **1961);** and C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* **esp.** vols. 2 (1976), 3 (1979), **and 4 (1979).**

[32]The Catholic Church's historical claim that the Gospels' mention of Jesus' brothers and sisters **(e.g.** Mk 3:31ff., parallels; 6:3; Jn 7:3–5; cf. 1 Cor 9:5) refers to cousins not siblings derives, we argue,, from' its dogma concerning Mary's perpetual virginity, rather than a precise understanding of the texts **meanings.** See **the** frank assessment of that issue from a Catholic scholar of the first rank, J. P. Meier, *A* Marginal *Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* **(Garden** City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), **318-32.** He concludes, "if . . the historian or **exegete is** asked to render a judgment on the New Testament and patristic texts we have examined, viewed simply as historical sources, the most probable opinion is that the brothers **and sisters of** Jesus were true siblings" (331).

about the prophet Elisha and to know where Shunem was located, but aside from such matters the text makes clear sense. In other places we may need a detective's extraordinary skills to disclose a text's meaning, as in the section that informs us that Christ "was put to death in the body but made alive by [in] the s[S]pirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ..." (1 Pet 3:18–19). In any case, we seek to understand the text. Only when we grasp the meaning in the original text, to the best of our ability, may we proceed to explore its significance for us today.

We cannot always discern an author's meaning with certainty. Only the creators of documents know what they really intended, and in the case of the Bible, they are unavailable for consultation. All we have are the texts they composed. What is more, our modern preunderstandings may inhibit or cloud our abilities to apprehend their meanings accurately. Our personal prejudices may undermine our discernment. But as we explore the various dimensions behind a text by means of responsible principles of hermeneutics, we can have a certain degree of confidence, in most instances, that we have approximated the meanings the authors intended to convey. ***We presuppose the goal of hermeneutics to be the*** meaning ***the biblical writers "meant" to*** communicate ***at the time of the*** communication, ***at least to the extent that those intentions are recoverable in the texts*** they ***produced.***[33]

As a corollary to this, God's role in inspiration assures that the Bible spoke not only to its original readers or hearers, but it also speaks to us today." An inspired and authoritative Bible has significance and relevance beyond its original circumstances. Further, we assume that the meaning God wanted it to have today corresponds to the original meaning. On the basis of the solidarity of the human race and the spiritual plight we share, the ancient meanings will speak more or less directly to the human condition today. The questions the Bible addresses concern ultimate issues, in addition to merely localized or immediate matters. As we learn God's mind, expressed by human authors long ago, we find understanding and significance for our concerns today. Any quest for other "meanings" from the Bible lacks that objectifying basis in God's revelation. The meaning found in the text alone provides this foundation.

Preunderstandings of the Interpreter

Snow falls regularly during the winter months at the seminary where we teach in Colorado. Several years ago we found it humorous when one of our newly arrived African students expressed shock at seeing snow fall from the sky during our first snowstorm that winter. Her only previous encounter with snow had been in pictures, and she assumed that snow somehow came up out of the ground like dew. Arguably, it was a logical assumption, though it turned out to be false. Similarly, we all have certain suppositions or assumptions of the world based upon our prior

[33]For a recent defense of textual meaning as the essential goal of interpretation, see Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Over-Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[34]Paul affirmed as much to his Roman readers in Rom 15:4.

experience, training, and thinking, and we interpret our experiences on the basis of these presuppositions. They maybe true or false-or partly true or false-but they filter everything we encounter. Knowingly and unknowingly we construct a body of beliefs and attitudes that we use to interpret or make sense of what we experience. These beliefs and attitudes are called "preunderstandings," and they play a significant role in shaping our view of reality. No one is free from them; it is impossible to interpret reality in a "totally objective" way.

All we know has been molded in some way by the preunderstandings that we bring to the process of interpretation. In the past, hermeneutics concentrated on the ancient world of the texts and the techniques for understanding what texts meant "back then." Now we recognize that far more attention must be given to what the interpreter brings to the interpretive process. We need to know ourselves, as well as the object of our inquiry. Thiselton observes, "historical conditioning is two-sided: ***the*** modern ***interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition."***[35] He adds, "hermeneutics cannot proceed without taking account of the existing horizons of the interpreter."[36] Borrowing the metaphor of "horizon" from Gadamer (the limits that a point of view or understanding presents), Thiselton argues that "the goal of biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter's own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged."[37]

Definition of Preunderstanding

The term ***preunderstanding*** describes what the interpreter brings to the task of interpretation. Ferguson provides a succinct definition: "Preunderstanding may be defined as a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it."[38] It is the basic and preparatory starting point for understanding. Our preunderstanding constitutes where we begin as we currently are. Indeed, preunderstanding is desirable and essential.[39] Certain background knowledge and experiences can be pertinent to understanding other experiences or situations. For example, most of us can make only limited sense out of a medical prescription. We know it prescribes that a determined quantity of a specific medication should be taken at definite times, but apart from that limited preunderstanding, we are probably in no position to understand more about the medical terms and symbols. Similarly, our African friend now understands pictures of snow better because her preunderstanding has been enlarged by firsthand experiences of falling snow.

[35]Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 11 (emphasis his). He goes on to observe, "Everything is understood in a given context and from a given point of view" (105).

[36]Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 237.

[37]Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, *xix*.

[38]D. S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 6.

[39]Before we go further, we need to insist that preunderstanding be distinguished from bias or prejudice. Indeed, bias is only one element of a person's preunderstanding. We will take up these distinctions further below.

What are the various elements that constitute preunderstanding, and how are they derived? Preunderstanding consists of the total framework of being and understanding that we bring to the task of living: our language, social conditioning gender, intelligence, cultural values, physical environment, political allegiances, and even our emotional state at a given time. These elements construct and govern our individual worlds. They formulate the paradigm that helps us function and make sense of the world.

D. S. Ferguson discerns four categories of preunderstanding:[40] (1) *informational: the* information one already possesses about a subject prior to approaching it; (2) *attitudinal: the* disposition one brings in approaching a topic, also termed prejudice, bias, or predisposition; (3) *ideological:* both generally, the way we view the total complex of reality (world view, frame of reference) and particularly, how we view a specific subject (point of view, perspective); and (4) *methodological:* the actual approach one takes in explaining a given subject. Possible approaches include scientific, historical, and inductive. Different approaches will influence the type of results obtained, though in another sense interpreters employ specific methods precisely to guard against undue interpretive bias.[41]

We cannot avoid or deny the presence of preunderstanding in the task of biblical interpretation. Every interpreter comes to study the Bible with prior biases and dispositions. If we ask about the origin or basis of our preunderstanding, we will find it in our prior experiences, conditioning, and training-political, social, cultural, psychological, and religious-in short, all our lives up to this point. Even our native language influences our view of reality All these color and in many senses determine how we view the world. Each individual processes all these factors to frame a world-view.

The Role of Preunderstanding

Obviously, preunderstanding plays an enormously influential role in the process of interpretation. For example, in this modern era those whose *ideology* (to use Ferguson's third category) allows science alone to settle matters of fact will tend to reject supernatural explanations of the biblical record.[42] People with such an ideology will insist upon natural explanations for biblical incidents like the parting of the Red Sea (Exod 14:21–22) or the resurrection of Jesus (Lk 24:5–7; par.). In this view, miracles must be ruled out, for enlightened people "know" that they simply don't happen: seas do not divide, dead men do not return to life, the blind do not suddenly see, nor do people walk on water. Possessing such a view, some, like R Bultmann, may explain reports of miracles in the Bible as simply myth-ways in which primitive people expressed their religious experiences.[43] Bultmann sought to

[40]He admits there are degrees of overlap between them and that a single act of preunderstanding contains elements of all four.

[41]Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics, 12.*

[42]It should be clear here that the discussion of presuppositions overlaps that of preunderstanding. Part of the total preunderstanding an interpreter brings to the task consists of his or her presuppositions.

[43]See R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM, 1960); and id., *The History of the Synoptic Tradition (New* York: Harper & Row, 1963).

"demythologize" the NT accounts (i.e., to remove the mythical elements, while seeking to retain and explain the underlying religious ideas). Furthermore, as a convinced existentialist Bultmann explained the phenomena of the NT in terms of that philosophical system. Typically, he found the essence of the NT to be the call to decision and "authentic existence" to embrace the summons of God as expressed in the gospel. Clearly, scientism's ideology influences the interpretive results, just as adopting the Bible's own world-view allows for alternate explanations of the data.[44]

In an extremely insightful essay, "Our Hermeneutical Inheritance," Roger Lundin traces the historical and philosophical roots of contemporary approaches to understanding.[45] He compares the deductive approach of Descartes with the more inductive one of Bacon. He then shows how American Christians in the nineteenth century combined Scottish common-sense-realism with the scientific approach of Bacon to develop their basic hermeneutical approach. Lundin observes, "To get at the meaning of the Bible, they merely employed the inductive techniques exploited with considerable success by the natural scientists."[46] He argues that "inductive Bible study" was very much the product of historical processes, particularly the assimilation of Enlightenment thought in America, and not necessarily the only, or a self-evident and universally superior method.[47] Interestingly, Lundin observes how this fascination with the inductive approach to biblical interpretation opened the door for any group, denomination, or cult to sanction its beliefs on the basis of its own exacting study of the Scriptures.[48]

[44]Speaking of the eplstemological stance of the scientific method, D. Tracy observes, "Scientism has pretensions to a mode of inquiry that tries to deny its own hermeneutical character and mask its own historicity so that it might claim ahistorical certainty" *(Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 19871, 31). For many scholars this "certainty" excludes the possibility of the miracles recorded in both Testaments. We could cite many other examples. For the attitudinal dimension of preunderstanding, Wellhausen's anti-judaism led him to denigrate the Law (see Lou H. Silberman, "Wellhausen and Judaism," *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 75-82; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Getting At the Roots of Wellhausen's Understanding of the Law of Israel on the 100th Anniversary of the Prokgomena* (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979]). It seems likely that Hegel's ideological influence underlay Wellhausen's view that Israel's history evolved through three distinct phases (R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study,* JSOTSup 53 [Sheffield: JSOT, 19871, 43). Gunkel's form criticism-a methodological element-significantly affected a whole generation of OT scholarship (cf. D. A. Knight, "The Pentateuch," in *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters,* ed. D. A. Knight, et al. [Philadelphia: Fortress and Chico, CA: Scholars, 19851, 264, who observes, "... it is now inconceivable to conduct critical exegesis without attention to form, genre, Sitz im Leben and intention"; see also W. Klatt, *Hermann Gunkel,* FRLANT 100 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1969]). Likewise, canon criticism has opened up important insights on the interpretation of the Psalms (see G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of tbe Hebrew Psalter,* SBLDS 76 [Chico, CA: Scholars, 19851, 139-228; and B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 19791 504-25).

[45]In R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton and C. Walhout, The *Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster,' 1985). See also Lundin's essay, "Hermeneutics," in *Contemporay Litera y Theory: A Christian Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 149-71.

[46]Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics, 21.*

[47]We do not mean to imply here that we reject the possiblity of an inductive approach to Bible study, or that one should not be systematic and methodical in study. We have more to say about this below.

[48]Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, The *Responsibility of Hermeneutics, 22.*

Lundin concludes that, in reality, no one reads Scripture-or any literature, for that matter-in a completely disinterested way, even though "many of us cling stubbornly to our belief that we can approach a text with Cartesian cleanliness and Baconian precision."[49] Alluding to the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, Lundin concludes, "the idea of a disinterested interpretation of a literary text becomes an impossible one for hermeneutical theory."[50]

It would seem then that preunderstanding may be viewed either as a desirable asset or a dangerous culprit. Alas, asset or culprit may be in the eye of the "pre-understander"! Of course, to the extent that the interpreter requires some preunderstanding prior to coming to a text, it is indispensable. But equally, the preunderstanding may distort the reader's perception of reality and function like a prejudice adversely affecting the interpreter's ability to perceive accurately.

What we must take into consideration is that we do not always consciously adopt or clearly recognize our preunderstandings or the role they play in the interpretive process. As the proverbial goldfish remains unaware of the water in which it swims, we are not always conscious of our views of reality. Nor do we realize how extremely idiosyncratic our preunderstandings may be-no one else sees the world as we do.

These preunderstandings may be more or less influential on the process of interpretation depending upon their relevance to the issue at hand. For example, our African student's misunderstanding of the origin of snow probably made little difference in her understanding of the text, "Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18). On the other hand, an ideology-like 'one's view of the possibility of miracles-makes a major difference in how one interprets the accounts that Jesus rose from the dead. These two examples also illustrate that some preunderstandings may have more far-reaching implications than others. One only affects (and risks distorting) our reading of texts that concern snow. The other regulates how we read every incident or claim in both testaments that purports to be miraculous.

Preunderstanding concerns what interpreters expect to "find" when they interpret the Bible. Historians, using the best methods of rational inquiry, expect to uncover something about the ancient world. But most historians will not expect to discover God or be able to speak about God as the result of that inquiry. They will demur, saying that their methods of inquiry cannot investigate such matters. Using historical methods, they can say only what a certain people believed or wrote about God. Likewise, a historical/grammatical analysis of the Bible can uncover what the ancient texts say, but that same exegetical work can never assure that what those texts say is true. In the words of Morgan and Barton, "Historical understanding of the texts does not provide contemporary religious guidance unless one is already convinced of their authority."[51] In other words, Buddhists approach their

[49]Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics,* 23.

[50]Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics, 24;* also see Lundin, "Hermeneutics," 158-63.

[51]R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 186.

"scriptures" convinced they will provide religious guidance. So do Muslims when they read the Qu'ran and Mormons when they read the Book of Mormon. Again, to quote Morgan and Barton: "Rational methods are indispensable, but they read the texts as human utterances, and cannot themselves speak normatively of transcendence."[52] To read the Christian Bible as normative Scripture requires that one's preunderstanding include the presupposition that it is revealed truth.

In the face of new evidence, our African student did not hesitate to adjust her erroneous preunderstanding about the origin of snow. One of our challenges as interpreters is not simply to identify and take into account our preunderstandings but also to adjust or revise them, or courageously jettison those that prove to be erroneous. We must learn to recognize our preunderstandings and to evaluate their worth. We must have a basis on which to amend them or judge them to be unchangeable.

A Philosophy of Interpretation as Preunderstanding

We have to make a decision about our basic stance in interpreting the Bible. When most people think of biblical interpretation, they think of understanding ancient documents. Indeed, up until the 1940s or so the essential concerns of hermeneutics were to investigate the world of the biblical author or editor, the resulting texts, and the original readers of those texts. That is, in biblical interpretation one was concerned with the historical locus of the text-what happened in the ancient world that resulted in what was written in the text. More recently, however, scholars have come to understand that historical ***methods*** prove useful only when one's objectives focus on recovering what happened or was written in history. If one chooses to ignore the history a biblical text reports and focus on the text only, then different methods and different conclusions will follow.

So while Morgan does not intend a literary approach to supplant or deny the results of historical or linguistic study, he argues that in today's pluralistic and rationalistic world literary approaches "allow a large range of legitimate interpretations of the Bible."[53] Morgan believes that to attempt to find "the single correct answer" (i.e., ***the*** correct interpretation of a text) would result in a hopelessly fragmented Bible that "would offer from the distant past various pieces of information with little relation to the present."[54] In other words, he implies that because people bring to the Bible various preunderstandings and they use the Bible for various purposes, no one has the right to say only one approach, **if any,** is valid or true. Then are we left with a kind of hermeneutical cafeteria where we must grant legitimacy to every method of interpretation and to all interpreters? May people simply choose how they want to study the Bible, then employ appropriate methods, and finally display their conclusions?

Since in this pluralistic age we live with many truth-claims-those of the Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, and Christian, to name a few-Morgan believes it simply will

[52]Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation,* 186.

[53]Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation, 286.*

[54]Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation,* ***286.***

not do to arrogantly claim that a correct historical reading of the Bible supports solely one's own religious perspective. Thus, he argues, if we read the biblical accounts as literature, religious people can simply affirm their views and positions on other grounds and not make a historical use of the Bible serve that function. Morgan does not want to expunge historical-critical exegesis; rather, he seeks to relegate it to its proper place of fine tuning existing theological formulations and keeping honest those who already base their religion on the Bible.

But this call for a hermeneutic more committed to pluralistic openness leaves interpreters liable to the grave danger of relativism. If the greatest virtue is tolerance or avoiding interpretations that offend those of other religions, then do we simply abandon the search for truth? Do we set aside the Bible when we seek what is true?[55] Again, Morgan recognizes this inherent danger, but only calls for the critical eye of well-trained historians and linguists "to call rubbish by its name."[56] But it is not clear how, if all literary approaches are equally welcome, the historians and linguists can sufficiently challenge as rubbish a specific "literary reading" of a text. For if the historical perspective-what the text actually meant at the time written—does not have the major and controlling influence, then various "readings" might be termed equally legitimate, whether they be capitalist, Marxist, liberation, process, feminist, or African-American.[57] This is our point: we welcome literary methods for they enable us to understand and appreciate the Bible's literary dimensions. But in using literary methods we cannot abandon the texts' historical moorings. We insist that the "historical" focus provides the best avenue to a legitimate "literary" reading. We do not want an either-or approach.[58]

As noted above, someone may adopt a certain philosophical position and proceed to interpret through that grid. For example, building on a framework of existentialism, Heidegger and Bultmann argue that the biblical texts have meaning only when we as subjects can engage those texts and their significance for our

[55]Historically, Christianity has claimed that it is uniquely true-that in Jesus we have the way, truth, and life, the only way to God (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). In a well-reasoned book H. A. Netland defends this currently unpopular assertion of Christian exclusivism. He asserts, "where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false" (Dissonant *Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Intervarsity, 19911, 34). Netland's point is *not* that all the claims or teachings of other religions are false, or that they possess no value, or that Christians can learn nothing from them. Rather, when religions make conflicting claims to truth, the Christian position is the true one. Netland's work presents a compelling defense of the historic Christian faith. All missiologists and philosophers of religion will need to examine what Netland has presented. See also L. Newbigin, *The Gospel* in a *Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC, 1989).

[56]Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation, 289.*

[57]We will take up below our defense of textual meaning as the primary goal of hermeneutics.

[58]To be fair, neither does Morgan argue for literary methods to replace historical ones. He realizes how subjective any interpretation can be, even those that purport to be "historical." He wants a historical framework to govern only those studies whose aims are historical *(Biblical Interpretation, 287).* But, argues Morgan, where one's aims are religious or theological, other methods (i.e., literary) need to provide the framework. History, for Morgan, takes the back seat. But, we protest, theological beliefs must also be rooted in history, as the Apostle Paul argues concerning Jesus' resurrection in 1 Cor 15:13–23.

being.[59] Though their point has clear merit, they severely limit truth or reality to what corresponds to our personal experience. What can justify such a presumption? We must question whether Bultmann truly views the Bible as divine revelation. If the Bible is not fundamentally different from other literature, one can study it with the same methods and approaches as other literature. Who would argue, then, that existentialist categories provide valid grids for interpretation? But if the Bible is qualitatively different from other literature, as God's authoritative revelation, then its categories and its content surpass our existential human condition. Existential categories are not the only preunderstanding, though they may work for people like Bultmann. Regardless of the preunderstanding, the addition of faith to the interpreter's preunderstanding allows him or her to see new meanings in the text. From the position of faith the interpreter can see that the Bible records the words and activities of the transcendent God in human history.[60]

The so-called ***new hermeneutic*** followed upon Bultmann's more existential understanding of hermeneutics.[61] Instead of employing methodology or process for determining the meaning of texts (i.e., what they historically intended to communicate), practitioners of the new hermeneutic focused attention on the modern situation-how the ancient text speaks with power and freshness today. They studied the text through the lenses of today, rather than seeking to understand life today through the interpretation of the text. "What reality or view of authentic existence is conveyed in encounter with Scripture?" they asked. For them, understanding meant to hear the Word of God as an event, in some ways like what happened when the words of Jesus' parables first impacted his hearers. It was more than a talk; Jesus' words altered their circumstances and they had to respond. The message "as word-event is grounded in something deeper than, and prior to, conscious thought."[62] But what about the objective message conveyed in the Bible? Is the message that is relayed to the hearer in any sense the correct message? What about the meaning the text had for its original readers? Ferguson's critique is well-founded:

[59]Thiselton cites Bultmann's declaration that "it is valid in the investigation of a text to allow oneself to be examined by the text, and to hear the claim it makes" (Thiselton, ***Two Horizons,*** 191). Additionally, Bultmann argues that to believe in the cross of Christ "does not mean to concern ourselves ... with an objective event ***(ein objektiv anschaubares Ereignis)*** ... but rather to make the cross of Christ our own, to undergo crucifixion with him" (211). Finally, Thiselton says, "Bultmann insists that through history the interpreter comes to understand ***himself.*** His relationship to the text is not theoretical but ***existentiell.*** Only thus does the text 'speak'" (287). Bultmann rightly has been criticized because he places so much emphasis on the existential dimension that for him it matters little if any objective or historical events recorded in the NT even occurred. This is a serious flaw for, though Christ's death or resurrection may be inspiring "mythical events," if they did not actually occur in history, how can they provide objective atonement or assure the Christian's own resurrection?

[60]For a rather exhaustive treatment of these more existential approaches, including Gadamer and Bultmann, see Thiselton, ***Two Horizons.*** Also consult the review by W. W. Klein in ***Trinity Journal,*** n.s. 2 (1981): 71-75.

[61]Representatives include: J. M. Robinson and J. Cobb, eds., *The* New ***Hermeneutic (New York:*** Harper & Row, 1964); R. W. Funk, Language, ***Hermeneutic and Word of God (New*** York: Harper & Row, 1966); and G. Ebeling, ***God and Word*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

[62]In these words Thiselton is citing Ebeling (Thiselton, ***Two*** *Horizons,* 344).

> What, for example, happens to history as a means of God's self-disclosure? Once again, it would appear that the content of the *kerygma* as an object of faith has been obscured. There is little recognition that the crucifixion and resurrection are historical events themselves creative of language, not merely 'language events.' Language as the only hermeneutical guide fails to do full justice to history.[63]

Liberation theology is another approach to interpretation that illustrates the importance of preunderstanding.[64] The role the Church should perform in bringing justice to the poor (initially in Latin America) was the starting point for this approach. These theologians do not simply study the Bible on the basis of a set of principles; they interpret the Bible on the basis of an agenda with the goal of justice for the poor. Often Marxist, this ideological base becomes for these theologians the preunderstanding for interpreting the Bible and for developing their political agenda.

Similarly, ***process theologians*** adopt a stance or preunderstanding through which they view the Bible. Following philosopher A. N. Whitehead, they understand reality as a process, a maelstrom of causes and effects in which humans make sense out of their world.[65] George Lucas suggests,

> process philosophy is distinguished from other movements by its stress on the primacy **of change, becoming, and the event character of reality, in opposition to what Whitehead termed the static or 'vacuous' actualities of traditional substance metaphysics.**[66]

According to these theologians, language is fluid, imprecise, and capable of a variety of meanings. Thus, understanding language cannot be exact for it conveys reality by way of abstraction. Since all reality exists in such a state of fluctuation, the meaning of a text in Scripture cannot be precise or authoritative. Neither the author's intention nor some historical meaning of a text determines the goal of understanding for

[63]Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 174.

[64]Representatives include: G. Gutierret, A *Theology* of *Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); J. Miguez-Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Sfhutfon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); J. L. Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976); and J. P. Miranda, *Communfsm in the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982). We recognize the danger in attempting to characterize a movement in so brief a paragraph, but more nuanced comments will appear in the Appendix where we discuss various social-scientific methods for Bible study.

[65]Some representatives include D. Brown, R. E. James, and G. Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought (New* York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971); J. B. Cobb and D. R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); and J. B. Cobb, *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Manchester: University Press; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982). See also A. N. Whitehead, Science *and the Modern World (New* York: Macmillan, 1927). Again we risk, yet attempt to avoid, caricatures in what follows.

[66]G. R. Lucas, *The Genesis of Modern Process Thought: A Historical Outline with Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press and the ATLA, 1983), 5. This book provides a basic survey of process thinking with extensive bibliographies. See also id., *The Rehabilitation of Whitehead* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1989). Cf. J. R. Sibley and P. A. Y. Gunter, eds., Process *Philosophy: Basic Writings* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1978), which compiles twenty-one essays on various aspects of process thinking in five parts: epistemology, metaphysics, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

process hermeneutics. Process interpreters do not search for propositional truth; they simply process what the reader has encountered in the text. Their preunderstanding is clearly self-conscious and becomes a grid through which they understand the Bible.[67]

As we note in the Appendix, biblical scholars have gained many insights from various behavioral sciences. For example, studies about the ***social context*** of the early Christians have clarified many pages of the NT.[68] Meeks illumines the nature of the early Christian church by evaluating the various aggregations of people in the Greco-Roman world. For example, the phrase "the assembly at X's household" in the NT points to a common Roman grouping and suggests a model for understanding the nature of the Church.[69] Certainly one's culture, whether ancient or modern, provides reasonable meanings for life's phenomena.

Because of this, E. V. McKnight argues that the nature of the modern reader's preunderstanding has led to a fundamental shift in the hermeneutical task. In his view, "A ***reader-oriented approach*** acknowledges that the contemporary reader's 'intending' of the text is not the same as that of the ancient author and/or ancient readers."[70] He observes, further, "Biblical texts are perceived and interpreted in quite different ways as a result of changes in world view and in social surroundings within any given world view."[71] In a later paragraph he summarizes: "Readers make sense. Readers may perform their role constrained by their cultural contexts and critical assumptions and remain unaware of their potential as creative readers."[72] For McKnight, the modern interpreter's ability to read the biblical texts "creatively" is a major gain. Such readers attain a new freedom because they are "no longer constrained by traditional dogmatic and/or historical-critical goals of reading and interpretation."[73] Clearly, McKnight's view greatly relativizes the Bible's teachings. Since, for McKnight, the Bible's teachings are the product of a series of ancient cultures and their primitive or precritical world-views, then they can have no

[67]In R. Nash, ed., Process *Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), various evangelical scholars respond to different facets of process philosophy and theology. They provide helpful assessments that compare process theology to classical theism and various theological and philosophical issues and offer personal judgments of the usefulness of process thought.

[68]Obvious examples include B. J. Malina, *The* New *Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) and W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians (New* Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), who attempt to apply sociological methods. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1974), an earlier work, also explores important social issues in the ancient world, but not with a self-consciously sociological agenda. For further insight see our subsequent discussion and bibliography under social-scientific methods in the Appendix.

[69]Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 75. See texts such as 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15; et al. Meeks goes on to discuss households, voluntary associations, synagogues, and schools to provide insights into how the fledgling church began to organize itself. To these, Tidball adds "the city community" or *politeia* as a social institution reflected in the early church (D. Tidball, The *Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19841, 76-79).

[70]E. V McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 150 (our emphasis).

[71]McKnight, *Postmodern Use,* 149.

[72]McKnight, *Postmodern Use,* 161.

[73]McKnight, *Postmodern Use,* 161.

necessarily abiding authority for modern people. In this view whatever authority or application the Bible may have for people today must pass through this grid: that it comprises culturally and historically conditioned documents, and that its cultures and ours today are radically different. For McKnight, the reader's perception of the text, *not the text itself,* is the ultimate basis of authority for the meaning of the text.

Testing Preunderstandings

How can we know if our preunderstandings correspond to truth? G. Lewis argues that by proposing and then verifying our presuppositions we can proceed with our interpretive task without being hopelessly mired in a vicious hermeneutical circle.[74] Lewis observes, "Presuppositions carry only provisional authority until adequately tested and affirmed."[75] One test of our preunderstandings is whether they correspond with the biblical data. Yet a critic may ask why the Bible assumes the role of ultimate authority. Any answer requires some further explanation. Why do Christians presuppose that the Bible is foundationally true?

Thoughtful Christians insist that accepting the Bible's truthfulness is not merely a prejudiced dogmatism, an undefended presuppositionalism that simply assumes its stance. That is to say, we do not position ourselves in the camp of those whom apologists technically call "presuppositionalists" (e.g., C. Van Til). In this view, one starts by assuming such tenets as God's existence or the truthfulness of revelation in the Bible.[76] We are more happy with a modified evidentialist or verificationalist stance.[77] That is, we believe we must start with certain hypotheses

[74]G. R. Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions of Non-Evangelical Henneneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible, eds.* E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 61326. Scholars employ the technical term "hermeneutical circle" in several ways: (1) asking questions of the text whose answers subsequently reshape the questions that are then posed to the text, etc.; and (2) the phenomenon by which one cannot understand constitutent parts of a whole without some comprehension of the whole, while at the same time recognizing that an understanding of the whole comes by combining an understanding of its component parts (see Thiselton, *Two Horizons,* 104). In neither instance are we doomed to subjectivity; indeed, the burden of this book is to enable understanding to proceed with objectivity. In fact, as we will show below, perhaps changing "circle" to "spiral" alters the image enough to see we are not doomed to a "vicious circle." *So see G.* R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991), 6, 14.

[75]Lewis, "Response," 620.

[76]In Van Til's words, "To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method. The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism" (C. Van Til, *The Defense* of the *Faith* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 19551, 116). Van Til took issue with his colleague B. B. Warfield who taught that apologetics was a prior and separate discipline to establish the truth of Christianity before one moved to the other theological subjects. Rather, Van Til says, "All the disciplines must presuppose God, but at the same time presupposition is the best proof (C. Van Til, An *Introduction to Systematic Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 19741, 3). At this point we find ourselves more in sympathy with Warfield than Van Til.

[77]See E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 103121, for a helpful discussion of what constitutes verification in apologetics.

that we test and either accept or reject. We must evaluate the evidence for the Christian claims in light of all the alternate truth claims.

We believe that such an approach establishes the viability and defensibility of the historic Christian faith. It explains the issues of existence and reality with fewer difficulties than all competing alternatives. We do not claim proof in any scientific sense. But in Carnell's words, "the Christian finds his system of philosophy in the Bible, to be sure, but he accepts this, not simply because it is in the Bible, but because, when tested, it makes better sense out of life than other systems of philosophy make."[78] We soundly reject a view that the Christian position is merely a "leap in the dark" opinion, no better (or worse) than alternatives that many people "sincerely believe." Western culture exalts relativism and pluralism as great virtues, almost nonnegotiable axioms. We believe, in contrast, that absolute truth exists and that it cannot be relativized so that contradictory claims are equally valid. We believe that to accept the Bible's veracity best accords with the evidence.

A Christian Preunderstanding[79]

As responsible interpreters we seek to employ whatever rational methods will enable us to understand the correct meaning of the biblical texts. But when it comes to making judgments about the "theological" significance of those texts, we must go beyond our analytic methods. Though we share many of the critical methods of the secular historians, we do so with our own preunderstanding of the significance of the documents we are studying.

Secular historians may view the Bible only as a collection of ancient religious texts. To treat it as such-which often occurs in academia or among theologically liberal critics-cannot lead to valid conclusions about the religious value or significance of the Bible. The results are clearly "sterile." However, as authors we believe that the Bible is the divine word of God. Only from that stance can we use our historical and critical methods and arrive at theologically meaningful and pertinent results. Hirsch puts it forcefully: "An interpreter's notion of the type of meaning he confronts will powerfully influence his understanding of details."[80] We posit that our stance provides the best basis for a valid understanding of the biblical texts. Richardson makes this point succinctly,

> That perspective from which we see most clearly all the facts, without having to explain any of them away, will be a relatively true perspective. Christians believe that the perspective of biblical faith enables us to see very clearly and without

[78]Carnell, *Introduction, 102.*

[79]As *we* have indicated at various points already, we position ourselves in the evangelical tradition, within the framework described, for example, by the Lausanne Covenant or the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet what follows need not be limited to "our circle" of Christians. The principles and methods we employ will yield significant understanding regardless of the practitioner, though readers with differing presuppositions and preunderstandings will admit or reject our results in varying ways. To the extent that methods are neutral (and we insist most are), the results will be similar.

[80]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation (New* Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 75.

distortion the biblical facts as they really are: they see the facts clearly because they see their true meaning.[81]

We are members of the evangelical community. We have committed ourselves to the faith understood by evangelicalism. This informs our preunderstanding and provides the boundaries for our reading of the Bible. Though we must always submit to the teachings of the Bible as our sole and final authority, our actual preunderstanding of the Bible as God's revelation guides our interpretation of its pages. We insist, as well, that our commitment to the authority of the Bible derives from our prior conviction of its truthfulness.

In a sense, our subsequent discussion of how to understand a text must be closely tied to this discussion of preunderstanding. A document consisting of words on a page remains an inert entity. What are ink and paper, after all? The significance we give to those words depends to a large extent upon us: what significance do we *want* to give to the words? The modern readers can do anything they please; no court of law restricts how texts can be used or abused. We must decide if we want to hear the words in terms of what they most likely meant at the time they were written, or whether we want to use, or handle, or employ them in other ways. The authors, editors, or communities that formulated the biblical texts obviously cannot contribute to the present process of interpretation. Nor can the first readers be consulted for their input. As ongoing debates in political circles about interpreting the U.S. Constitution illustrate, people today decide how they will use old documents.[82] The biblical texts or the creeds of the church may well claim inspiration for the Scriptures, but modern interpreters still decide how they will handle those claims. Are theology and Christian practice to be based upon what the biblical texts seem to communicate, upon the objectives, concerns, and agendas of the modern community that interpret those authors, or upon some combination of the two? Evangelicals may insist (correctly we believe) upon the primacy of the biblical affirmations; however, as we have seen, the history of interpretation clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of the interpreter's agenda or preunderstanding.

Can we avoid being biased by our preunderstanding? Is there a way to critique and correct our preunderstanding when it so completely encompasses all that we are? If Christians are committed to being thoroughly biblical, then one solution is to subject our views to the scrutiny of Scripture. In other words, where beliefs and commitments derive from our culture and contradict or oppose biblical truth, we must identify them, and, somehow, specify and control their effects in the interpretive process.

What is the optimum Christian preunderstanding? We insist it should be one that derives from the set of presuppositions listed earlier in this chapter. Bernard Ramm agrees with our stance. He argues that the Bible has unique features that make one's interpretation of it different from the interpretation of other literature.[83]

[81]A. Richardson, *Christian Apologetics (New* York: Harper & Row, 19471, 105.

[82]Is our concern to apply the Constitution in the way its original framers intended, or in some other manner?

[83]B. Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," in Ramm, et al., *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

Christians must bring an understanding of these unique features to the process of constructing a hermeneutical system. These presuppositions form the basis of our preunderstanding of the task of interpreting the Bible.

What are the unique features of the Bible that formulate our preunderstanding?[84]

1. First, we must recognize "the *spiritual factor.*"[85] *The* full purpose of the Bible is realized only by the work of the Holy Spirit "who illuminates the mind and witnesses to the veracity of the divine verities."[86] Illumination does not provide data or information (the Holy Spirit does not provide further revelation to the interpreter), nor does illumination guarantee a correct understanding of the meaning of a passage. Ramm agrees that the ministry of the Spirit cannot replace careful analysis and sound exegesis, but it does assure that in conjunction with such diligence the believer can apprehend the significance and scope of God's revelation. The Scriptures themselves describe this scope: "All Scripture is given by God and is useful for teaching, for showing people what is wrong in their lives, for correcting faults, and for teaching how to live right. Using the Scriptures, the person who serves God will be capable, having all that is needed to do every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17 NCV).[87]

So the question is not whether a believer is biased, since all interpreters are biased, but, rather, does "the spiritual factor" irreparably bias the believer and thus prevent an objective and true understanding? Not necessarily. In fact, the opposite is true. Given the spiritual nature of the Bible, only a spiritual interpreter can accurately assimilate its contents. All others will simply miss the spiritual dimension—they may even ignore it altogether, whether consciously or unconsciously. Given the Christian presupposition of the Bible's inspiration, if the divine Spirit who inspired the Bible also enables believers to interpret it, then one could argue that they are better able to discern its true meaning.[88] In fact, if the Bible informs correctly, God promised through the prophet Jeremiah that he would put his instruction in the minds and hearts of his covenant people (Jer 31:33).

This "internal instruction" does not replace learning from the Bible, nor implementing the process of hermeneutics, but it does suggest that God's people occupy a unique position to grasp his message. Paul recognized that only a spiritual person possesses the capacity to apprehend spiritual truths (1 Cor 2: 15f.). Commenting on this text Fee speaks of "the main concern of the entire passage, namely, that God's wisdom can be known only by God's people because they alone have the Spirit."[89]

[84]Ramm's insights are worth consideration. The following discussion owes much to his presentation, "Biblical Interpretation," 18-28.

[85]Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 18.

[86]Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 18.

[87]Technically, of course, this text refers to the OT. But when the Church canonized the NT, in effect it affirmed the same things for the NT.

[88]Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 19.

[89]G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987),109. He goes on to assert Paul's point that only the person possessing Gods Spirit is able to "'discern' in the sense of being able to make appropriate 'judgments' about what God is doing in the world" (117). Finally, "the person who has the Spirit can discern Gods ways. Not necessarily all things, of course, but all things that pertain to the work of salvation, matters formerly hidden in God but now revealed through the Spirit" (118).

God's anointing has educative value (1 Jn 2:17). Concerning this latter verse, Smalley says: "So complete is the spiritual instruction which the true believer has received, John concludes that the need for temporal teaching is removed."[90] Of course, we must view this assertion in context. Smalley notes that in opposition to gnostic teaching, John stresses that "the 'consecrated' Christian ... has no need of (basic?) spiritual instruction. He is already 'set apart' for God's truth."[91] In other words, the believer occupies a privileged position to grasp and implement God's truth.

2. The *entire Bible*—the accepted canon—*is* our *inspired text* and object of study. As Ramm puts it, "The unity of Scripture and the harmony of Scripture is Jesus Christ and the redemption and revelation which centers in him."[92] That is, the Church believes that both testaments constitute a Christian book, for the theme of salvation accomplished in Christ comprises its essential message.[93] The message of both testaments fits together. What the OT teaches finds fulfillment and completion in the NT. In no NT text do we discover any hint that Christians should jettison the OT.[94]

3. ***God has revealed his message in the Bible progressively over time.*** One cannot do justice to interpreting various sections of the Bible apart from recognizing and taking this factor into account. God meets people where he finds them and then, over time, develops and expands his purposes and program in the world and with his people. The Bible reflects this progression as the OT prepares for and, in some instances, gives way to the NT. Where the NT amends the significance or application of the OT in light of Jesus' coming, the NT takes precedence and becomes the glasses through which we view the OT.[95] In many instances the NT does not supplant or alter the OT, and in such places the pertinence of the OT remains. The book of Proverbs is a prime example of sage advice that transcends time and culture. Truth is truth, and we must carefully hear and understand ***all*** sections of the Bible-in ***both*** testaments. We must see how his purposes unfold over time and throughout his revelation in the Bible.[96]

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[90] S. S. Smalley, I, 2, *3* John, WBC 51 (Waco: Word, 1984), 125.

[91] Smalley, I, 2, *3* John, 125.

[92] Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 20.

[93] K. Snodgrass suggests: "At every point early Christians attempted to understand their Scripture [which, of course, was the Old Testament] in the new light of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They used the Old Testament to prove their Christain theology and to solve Christian problems. The Old Testament provided the substructure of New Testament theology. The Old Testament also provided the language and imagery for much of New Testament thought, although this is not always obvious to the casual reader. Therefore, New Testament concepts must be understood from Old Testament passages" ("The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in New *Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19911, 409).

[94] See D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1976) who provides a thorough survey of these issues and balanced conclusions. We provide further perspectives below in our section on Jesus and the Law.

[95] We find an obvious example in the OT commands to sacrifice animals that are superseded and nullified in Christ (Heb 9–10). The former was important and necessary, but in light of the new proves defective. Along the analogy of how old black and white movies are now "colorized" to make them more attractive, insights from the NT often help to cast new light or color on the OT. For further help see W. C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

[96] See our discussion below on the NT use of the OT, pp. 120–32.

4. The whole of ***Scripture*** (its overriding message or teaching) best ***interprets specific parts.*** At the same time, we must derive our understanding of the whole from a careful study of the parts. Isolated texts cannot be construed to overturn well-established teaching. The parts and the whole comprise one piece. Ramm refers to "the self-interpretation of Scripture."[97] In other words, as the Reformers insisted in reaction to Roman Catholic teaching, Scripture-not the Catholic hierarchy-is its own best interpreter, particularly concerning its central teachings.

5. ***Scripture's meaning is*** **clear and plain. The** Bible is not a riddle or cryptogram whose meaning lies hidden and accessible only to a select few or the especially clever. This is not to imply that its meaning is simple or simplistic; indeed, it ***conveys the*** most profound ideas and speaks to issues of ultimate significance and reality. Nor does it imply that all people will understand its message equally well or with identical comprehension. Yet God intends to convey his message to his people and, thus, has cast his words in forms that readily accomplish this purpose.

6. ***The supernatural is affirmed in Scripture.***[98] In contrast to scientific naturalism that refuses to speak of the supernatural, we accept the potential reality of the supernatural. Though God does not "normally" contravene the natural laws of the universe, which he set up, he can, for his own sovereign purposes, act in ways that seem to us miraculous. Thus, when we encounter reports of the supernatural in the Bible, we accept them as credible and possible, provided they are true miracles. We reject the purely naturalistic explanation (or better, rejection) of the miraculous accounts in the Bible, which purports that they were written by gullible people in primitive times. If a supernatural God has acted in human history, we see no valid reason to reject the presence of the miraculous or the possibility that God's revelation would report such incidents.

7. ***The Bible is a theological book.*** Ramm puts it in terms of "theological exegesis."[99] He explains, "Theological exegesis extends grammatical exegesis in that theological exegesis is interested in the largest implications of the text."[100] The Christian interpreter does not simply want to explain the historical meaning of a text but also seeks to draw out its theological significance and implications for people today. (The implications of this point will be covered in detail in chapter 10 on the various uses of the Bible).

Preunderstandings Change with Understanding

Interpreters approach texts with questions, biases, and preunderstandings that emerge out of their personal situations. Inevitably, those preunderstandings influence the answers they obtain. However, the answers also then affect the interpreter: the text interprets the interpreter who becomes not only the subject interpreting but the object interpreted. Recall our African student with her preunderstanding

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[97] Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 23.

[98] Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 24.

[99] Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 25.

[100] Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 26.

Preunderstandings and Objectivity in Interpretation

Following such a discussion of preunderstanding, one may wonder if we are doomed to subjectivity in interpretation. Can we ever interpret the Bible in an objective fashion, or do we simply detect in its pages only what we want or are predisposed to see? Can we only say what is "true for me" and despair of finding truth that is universal or absolute? These questions hinge on the validity of our presupposition that the Bible communicates truth and constitutes God's revelation to us. If God has revealed truth in the Bible, then it seems reasonable also that he has made us capable of apprehending that truth, or at least some measure of it. Thus, though we inevitably bring preunderstandings to the texts we seek to interpret, this does not mean that we cannot apprehend the meaning they impart. Particularly if our goal is to discover the meaning the texts conveyed at the time they were written, we have some objective criteria to validate our interpretations.

Thus we refuse any charge that our view simply jettisons all inductive assessment of the facts or data of the text and its situation. Recognizing the role of our preunderstanding does not doom us to a closed circle-that we find in a text what we want to find in a text-though that looms as an ever-present danger. The honest, active interpreter remains open to change, even to a significant transformation of preunderstandings. This is the hermeneutical ***spiral.*** Since we accept the Bible's authority, we remain open to correction by its message. There are ways to verify interpretations or, at least, to validate some interpretive options as more likely than others. It is not a matter of simply throwing the dice. There is a wide variety of methods available to help us find what the original texts most likely meant to their initial readers. Every time we alter our preunderstanding as the result of our interaction with the text we demonstrate that the process has objective constraints, otherwise, no change would occur; we would remain forever entombed in our prior commitments.

W. Larkin makes the valid point that because God made people in his own image they have the capacity to "transcend preunderstanding, evaluate it, and change it."[102] People are not so captive to their preconceptions that they cannot with conscious effort transcend them. One of the tactics, Lax-kin believes, that fosters the process of evaluating and transcending our preunderstanding as interpreters is to "seek out the definite and fixed meaning intended by the author of the text and to use Scripture as the final critical authority for judging extrabiblical thought-patterns."[103]

The hermeneutical spiral can be very positive as God through his Holy Spirit brings new and more adequate understanding of his truth and its application to

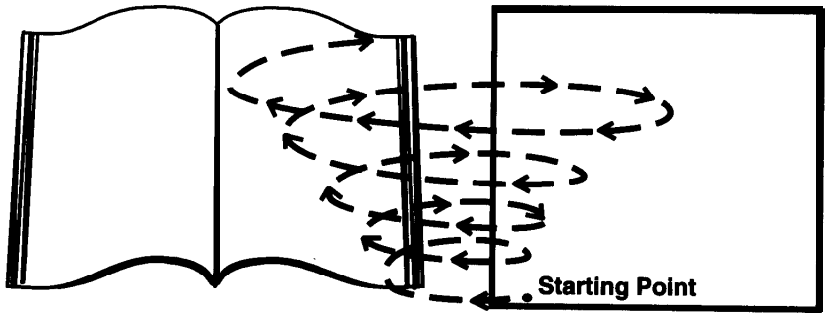
[102]Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics, 299.*

[103]Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics,* 300. However, as we will defend in detail below, we are on safer ground to set as a goal to detect the meaning of a given text rather than the meaning an author intended. Also, Larkin may be overly optimistic when he assures us, "interpreters who consciously set aside their cultural preunderstanding can be confident that the grammatical-historical-literary context will enable them to find the plain and definite meaning of the text" (301). Whether we can set aside our cultural preunderstandings remains a huge question. A good starting point is simply to try to identify them and to assess their influence.

about snow. Once she realized that snow fell from above, that it did not emerge out of the earth, she revised her understanding about this precipitation. In her adjusted understanding it fit in the same category as rain, rather than in the category of dew.

This scenario has led interpreters to speak of a hermeneutical circle, or better, a hermeneutical spiral.[101] Every interpreter begins with a preunderstanding. After an initial study of a Biblical text, that text performs a work on the interpreter. His or her preunderstanding is no longer what it was. Then, as the newly interpreted interpreter proceeds to question the text further, out of this newly formed understanding further-perhaps, different-answers are obtained. A new understanding has emerged. It is not simply a repetitive circle; but, rather, a progressive spiral of development.

HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL



Admittedly there is an inevitable circularity in interpretation. When we posit the requirement of faith to understand the Bible fully and then we go to the Bible in order to understand God's self-revelation in Christ in whom we have faith, the process has a definite circularity. But we argue simply that an appropriate level of preunderstanding is necessary for any kind of knowledge. This, as we have seen, is the nature of all inquiry. Thus, one must have some knowledge of God even to arrive at the preunderstanding of faith. Then that stance of faith enables the Christian to study the Bible to come to a deeper understanding of God and what the Scriptures say. As we learn more from our study of Scripture we alter and enlarge our preunderstanding in more or less fundamental ways. In essence, this process describes the nature of all learning: it is interactive, ongoing, and continuous. When believers study the Bible they interact with its texts (and with its Author), and, as a result, over time they enlarge their understanding.

[101]Cf. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral,* 10, *324;* W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 302; and R. C. Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture: A Theological Perspective," in *Gospel and Culture,* ed. J. R. W. Stott and R. T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 63-78.

believers' lives. If the Bible is true (and this takes us back to our presuppositions), then subscribing to its truth constitutes the most adequate starting point for interpreting its content. But alone that would be insufficient to comprehend the Bible. To understand the Bible's message adequately demands appropriate methodology and the willingness of interpreters to allow the Bible to alter or clarify their preunderstandings. The metaphor of a spiral suggests the most healthy approach to an adequate comprehension of the Bible. As Ferguson has said: "... all knowledge is elusive, and to grasp it demands a great deal of effort on our part, not the least of which is keeping a watchful eye on our own personal and societal forms of preunderstanding."[104]

[104]Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics, 17.*

CHAPTER FIVE

The Goal of Interpretation

When we communicate, we seek to convey a message to others. Implicitly, those who hear or read that message will seek to understand its meaning. We usually say that communication succeeds when the meaning received corresponds to the meaning sent. Within the scope of *written* communication, we can talk about three potential aspects of meaning: (1) the meaning the author intends to convey, (2) the meaning the reader understands, and (3) the grammatical and textual meaning of the words on the page. We may assume that what an author intends to communicate corresponds precisely to the meaning of the text; however, an author may not frame the message correctly or put on paper precisely what he or she meant. In those cases, the author's intended meaning will only match *to a certain degree* what the words on the page mean. Likewise, what a reader understands will not necessarily correspond with either the author's intention or the text's meaning. For these reasons we distinguish among authorial intention, perceived meaning, and textual meaning.

Though one may never completely understand all dimensions and nuances of a specific message, normally the goal of the recipient in communication is to understand what the author/speaker intended. Yet, when we read a literary text or listen to an oral message, we cannot read the author's or speaker's mind; we can only work with the written or verbal message. In biblical interpretation, when we have only the written text to study, our goal is to understand the meaning of that text. Each individual text was written at some time in history in a specific culture by a person with a personal framework of preunderstandings. The author or editor

intended to communicate a message to a specific audience. Our goal is to discover that message in the text.'

So the common-sense approach to interpreting assumes that meaning resides in the message or text and that the author or speaker encoded this meaning in that text. Semanticists may rightly insist that meaning concerns the interaction between human beings. Yet, our role as interpreters of a document (as in a biblical text) is auxiliary to that of the original author or editor. The author encoded the meaning in the text, and our objective is to discover it, at least to the extent that we are able to recover it in the text. As we usually perceive their role, interpreters seek to understand what the author had to say, not to take the text and do something inventive with it that the author never intended. Osborne puts it this way, "The implied author and the implied reader in the text provide an indispensable perspective for the intended meaning of a text."[2] The whole point of developing an arsenal of appropriate interpretive methods and skills is that we are *listeners* or receivers of a message. We do not create the message; rather, we seek to discover *what is already* **h-whether consciously** or unconsciously intended by the authors or editors.

These points may seem rather straightforward but not all interpreters would agree with them. Of course, the biblical writers are not around to insist that we only seek the meaning they intended, nor can they verify that after all our efforts we have interpreted the meaning correctly (even when we discover meaning that goes beyond their intentions). This leads us to several pointed questions in our discussion of the goal of interpretation. Can a modern reader discover "new meaning" in a biblical text (or any text, for that matter)? Are texts capable of more than one meaning, even if their authors only intended a single meaning? And is the author's intention any more significant than other possible meanings in a text?

Obviously, modem interpreters can do anything they please with a text. Even if the author were present to protest, we could play with a text or manipulate it in any way we chose. We could impose on it modem categories or could view it through a grid of our own choosing. We could ask our own questions of it, or demolish and reconstruct it to our liking. We could try to explain the patterns of blank spaces on the printed page. No court of law prevents us from using the texts in any way we please.[3] But the issue we must decide is: what is *our* objective as evangelical interpreters in handling the biblical texts? If we seek to hear what the biblical text means, then this restricts our approach and our methods of interpretation. If our goal is author/text centered, then historical, grammatical, literary, and cultural methods (to name some representatives) predominate. To help us establish au accurate methodology of interpretation we **need to consider some strategic questions that relate to the meaning of the text.**

'Attempting to comprehend written texts is as close as we can get to their authors' intended meanings. On the other hand, authors may write more than they intended, for modern studies have shown that much of what humans communicate occurs unconsciously (e.g., body language). So, again, finding ***textual*** meaning is a worthy goal.

[2]G. R. Osborne, ***The Hermeneuticul Spiral,*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991), 414. See also W. R. Tate, ***Biblical Interpretation*** (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) for his discussion of "Author-Centered Interpretation" (174–85).

[3]Before we throw off all restraints, we stress that in fact some boundaries ***do*** exist in how we use others' words. The courts have a category of "libel" that recognizes that we are not completely free in how we use words.

Levels of Meaning

Does the Text Have One Fixed Meaning or Several Levels of Meaning?

Does a text have only one possible meaning, several meanings, or an infinite number of meanings? Some scholars insist that the only correct meaning of a text is that meaning (or set of meanings) the original author intended it to have. A vigorous defender of meaning as a function of authorial intention is E. D. Hirsch, Jr.[4] As we noted briefly above, others argue that meaning is a function of readers not authors, and any text's meaning depends upon the readers' perception of it. Representatives of those who defend such "reader-response" approaches to meaning include Roland Barthes and Stanley Fish.[5] In their approach meaning does not reside within a text because the author put it there, rather, readers bring meaning to a text. Thus, a specific author does not predetermine meaning, for readers may decipher a variety of possible meanings from a written text. Most of these critics would not argue that readers can make a text say anything they please, but rather that a text may have many possible meanings. Such interpreters reject any concept of a single or normative meaning of a biblical text.

But is a text capable of more than one meaning? Morgan rightly argues that interpretation needs the checks provided by history, exegesis, and other rational. controls to keep it from becoming arbitrary. Yet he espouses a potentially dangerous view when he argues that "without the possibility of finding new meaning in a text, an authoritative scripture stifles development."[6] In other words, to encourage hermeneutical creativity he posits the need to continually find new meanings in the texts. For Morgan, to deny the possibility of finding new meaning increases the likelihood that "theologically motivated scholars are likely to become either biblicist conservatives opposed to any development or ultra-liberals who have little use in their own theologies for what they learn from the Bible."'

Though we repudiate the stance of the ultra-liberals, we doubt that biblicist conservatives constitute an equally abhorrent alternative. Indeed, that is precisely

[4]See especially E. D. Hirsch, Jr., ***Validity in Zntetpretation (New*** Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). We should note here that even Hirsch vacillated between seeking meaning in what the author intended versus what the text meant. We opt for the latter. Our goal is the text's meaning because that is all that we may recover. At the same time we hope that textual meaning provides a fair approximation of the author/editor's intention. That is a better goal than the alternatives, as we shall see.

[5]We have more to say about this methodology below. For examples see R. Barthes, ***S/Z,*** trans. R. Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975); and S. Fish, ***Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*** (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[6]R. Morgan and J. Barton, ***Biblical Zntetpretation,*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 182.

'Morgan and Barton, ***Biblical Zntetpretation, 182.*** We doubt that "development," to use Morgan's term, is a desirable item on the interpreters' agenda. Where the goal is to understand Gods revelation—as it is for us-development smacks of adding to Scripture, an enterprise that for the last book of the Bible, at least, was specifically condemned (Rev 22:18–19). If development means to enlarge our understanding of the text's meaning and its various significances, we can accept its validity.

where we position ourselves. We seek to be conservative in retaining what the biblical texts actually ***mean,*** rather than imposing modern (and perhaps alien) meanings upon them. Then we seek imagination and relevance in finding ***significance and application*** for biblical principles. Morgan seeks to retain "theological flexibility," and this requires what he calls "hermeneutical creativity." But at what price come such flexibility and creativity? Does the Bible present normative truth? Is meaning constant or is it only in the eyes of the beholder? Where are the checks and balances?

Let us focus the question further. Suppose someone read a text from a given author and then presented the author with a meaning that the reader had "discovered" in the text. The author might admit that the "discovered" meaning was not intended even though it is apparent in the text. The text means ***more than the*** author intended. Does this episode imply that when language leaves the mind of an author, it is in the public domain and capable of meaning a number of different things depending upon who reads it? Does the meaning of a text rest solely in what the author consciously intended to convey, or does meaning somehow result from the interaction between the text (language) and the reader?

The biblical authors or the creeds of the church may well claim inspiration and authority for the Scriptures, but modern interpreters still decide how they will handle those claims. Will we base theology and Christian practice upon what the biblical texts communicate or upon the current objectives, concerns, and agendas of the modern community that interprets them? We may insist too glibly upon the former when the history of interpretation clearly demonstrates how often the latter has been the case. Indeed, some argue it should be the case. How we define the task of hermeneutics depends, therefore, on determining our goal. Where does meaning reside? Is it in the meaning of the biblical text or in the reader's acumen?

Before we can determine whether our goal in interpretation is the meaning resident in the original text or something else, we must consider the possibility of multiple meanings within a biblical text. We may suspect multiple meanings exist in a text when we see how a NT writer employs an OT text. When Matthew says that Jesus' protection from Herod's murderous designs *fulfills*[8] the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Mt 2:15; cf. Hos 11:1), did Hosea's words themselves have more than one meaning? In the book of Hosea the writer referred to a ***past*** event: God's rescue of Israel from Pharaoh. But is his reference to God's son also a prediction about a circumstance in the Messiah's life? Did Matthew think that Hosea was speaking of Christ or did he just make up a new meaning he wanted to find in Hosea's text? Did Matthew convey or perhaps uncover a meaning the Holy Spirit intended even though Hosea was not aware of this meaning? How did Matthew arrive at his interpretation? It seems we have several options to consider.

1. ***An author intends only one meaning for a text; so*** this original, historical meaning is the legitimate object of exegesis. In this case, Hosea's intent focused on

[8]The verb "fulfill" also occurs in verses 17 and 23 in this chapter. It occurs five times in chapters 1-2. All present problems for understanding Matthew's use of the OT.

God's rescue of Israel. If so, that raises a question: Can a NT writer discover more meaning in an OT text than what the original writer intended? Walter Kaiser ardently insists that no NT writer ever finds more, or a different, meaning in an OT text than was originally intended by that OT writer.[9] Kaiser does not object to saying that a NT writer might variously apply or develop implications of the OT text that the original OT writer did not intend. That is on the level of significance. Kaiser rejects the idea that a NT author finds additional or different ***meaning.***[10]

However much some may laud this stance, major questions surface. Moo inquires whether God as the divine author may intend meaning beyond what the human writer wrote?[11] Perhaps more troublesome are the data themselves: can we demonstrate that all NT uses of the OT disclose what the original OT author actually intended? Though Kaiser has done an admirable job of defending his case in several problematic texts, we doubt that he has succeeded in each instance, or that it is possible to demonstrate that the OT writers did in fact intend all the meaning that NT writers later found.[12] We suggest there are instances where NT authors found meaning in an OT text that the OT author did not intend.

Note, for example, how the writer of Hebrews speaks as if Psa 45:6–7 was specifically written about Jesus:

> **But** about the Son he says, "Your throne, 0 God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your **God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Heb** 1:8–9).

Some argue that Psa 45 might be messianic,[13] but what about, more astonishingly, Deut 32:43 (as found in the LXX and the Dead Sea Scrolls!): "And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him"' (Heb 1:6)? For a different example, Peter employs Psa 69:25 and 109:8 as in some sense predicting what Judas did and the apostles' need to replace him in their company: "'For,' said Peter, 'it is written in the book of Psalms, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it," and, "May another take his place of leadership"'" (Acts 1:20). Did these OT writers intend these references as "deeper"

[9]For Kaiser's defense and explanation see, esp., The Uses of ***the Old Testament in the New*** (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

[10]Here Kaiser depends heavily on the work of E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch said, ***"Meaning*** is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. ***Significance,*** on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable" ***(Validity in Interpretation, 8).*** He argues that the meaning of a text remains the same while its significance may change a great deal, even to the author.

[11]D. Moo, "The Problem of ***Sensus Plenior,***" in ***Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon,*** eds. D.A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 199.

[12]Moo confronts Kaiser in "The Problem of ***Sensus Plenior,***" especially on pp. 198–201. Another critic is P. B. Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," ***JETS*** 20 (1977): 243–52, though it is not accurate to say that Kaiser always commits this fallacy.

[13]See M. J. Harris, "The Translation of ***Elohim*** in Psalm 45:7–8," ***TynB*** 35 (1984): 65-89.

meanings to their words? We have no means to affirm that they did.

We doubt that in such examples the NT writers discovered the original meanings of the texts they interpreted. To return to our initial example, we still must account for what Matthew does with the text. Though we may generally concur that an author intends a single meaning (sense), at least in a given text, what do we make of instances where it appears a later biblical writer finds a sense beyond the surface historical sense? What other options do we have?

2. ***An author may intend a text to convey multiple meanings or levels of mean-*** &-for instance, a literal level and a spiritual level.[14] Possible examples of multiple meanings occur in apocalyptic literature and predictive prophecy. In both Daniel and Revelation, mythical beasts convey meanings about nations and leaders. Also, Isaiah's prophecy of an upcoming birth (Isa 7: 14) was fulfilled on two levels: in the immediate future (Isa 8:1-10) and in the distant future (Mt 1:23). Are these examples of authors who intended multiple meanings?

In fact, when a later writer finds additional significance in an earlier prophecy (as Matthew did with Isa 7:14), we are hard-pressed to prove that the original text contained that meaning as an additional level. In other words, methodologically we struggle to devise ways to uncover multiple levels apart from explicit statements in the text. That is, if the author did intend multiple levels of meaning, he or she alone can identify intended meanings beyond the historical-grammatical meaning that exegetical methods uncover from the written text.[15] So this solution, too, provides little help for the process of exegesis.

But some may object, "Can't a text be applied to a wide variety of situations?" The answer is, yes, if the question is ***application,*** but, not necessarily, if the issue is ***multiple meanings.*** When we try to make the Bible relevant today, we are not saying that the Bible can have multiple meanings-the original that the author intended and the ones we find pertinent for ourselves. Ideally, a given text bears the meaning its author intended it to have. Though in isolation a text may conceivably have a variety of possible meanings, were the author present to adjudicate, the "correct" meaning of a text would be that which the author intended for it. However, that same meaning can have a variety of valid significances for different readers who read it in their own time and place. An example will help explain this.

Jesus told many parables during his ministry. Subsequently, the evangelists incorporated various ones in their Gospels to serve their purposes for their readers. Throughout the history of the Church countless interpreters have employed these same parables, as we do today in our study and teaching. Does the ***meaning*** that Jesus intended when he spoke a specific parable change throughout its history? No, we argue, but that meaning impacts different situations in distinct ways. For example, the parable of the workers in the field (Mt 20:1–16) is truly puzzling. How outrageous to pay the same wage to laborers who worked one hour and to those who had slaved the entire day! True, one denarius for a day's work was fair, but

[14]Recall our discussion about some of the church fathers like Origen.

[15]Of course, a writer might agree to a "meaning" that a later reader found in the author's work, as we noted above.

don't those who worked more deserve to be paid more? What was Jesus' point? What ***meaning*** did he intend? It could well be to show that salvation is undeserved; God gives his grace to those who don't deserve it.[16]

In the context of Mt 19-20, though, the author juxtaposes this parable with the disciples' faithfulness in serving Christ. Peter had said, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (19:27). The frames at both ends of this parable make essentially the same point: the first will be last and the last will be first. The meaning for Matthew may be that disciples ought to assess their motives in serving Christ. Or perhaps the issue for Matthew's community was the increasing priority and quantity of Gentiles as compared to Jews in the emerging Church. What were the Christians to make of this development? The meaning is single-God gives rewards at his discretion-but it has several possible significances. Ryken notes, "In the kingdom of God where generosity is the foundational premise, ordinary human standards have been abolished."[17] The single meaning is capable of several possible significances through history.[18]

Our point should now be clear. Though a text may find a wide variety of significances-both in the original context and forever after-we cannot confuse ***significance with meaning.*** In other words, unless we can demonstrate that the authors ***intended*** multiple meanings for a text, we can never assume they did. The possibility and presence of multiple applications or significances must be distinguished from what authors or speakers intend to communicate. Apart from clear clues in the context or the genre employed, we must expect that authors intend single meanings.[19] What other options should be considered?

3. ***A later reader could simply invent or read into a biblical text a meaning not intended by the original author.*** In other words, in the process of reading a text interpreters may introduce some sense or meaning that suits their purposes. Returning to Matthew's use of Hosea, the difference from the previous option lies in the purported connection to Hosea. Here, Hosea's text exists only as a jumping-off point for Matthew to devise the later (and perhaps minimally connected) meaning.

[16]In Jesus' context the first persons hired probably represented the Pharisees and scribes who assumed they were working for God all along, while the last persons hired represented the tax collectors and sinners.

[17]L. Ryken, ***Words of Life*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 70. Ryken suggests other possible significances that may apply across the centuries from the first to now. He submits, "Jesus here anticipates what would become one of the great issues in the early church: the Gentiles could be saved without the encumbrances of the ceremonial laws that the Jews had performed for centuries. Was this fair?" Or again, "In any religious group, the disparity of commitment and spiritual exertion among members is immense. Do the slackers deserve salvation?" (All these quotes occur on page 70.)

[18]Of course, the meaning of parables may involve several points, all of which may find a variety of applications. We discuss later both how to interpret and how to apply parables. For further help see C. L. Blomberg, ***Interpreting the Parables*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990).

[19]An example of a double meaning indicated in the context occurs in Jn 3:3 in Jesus' use of ***anōthen*** with its double entendre "again" and "from above." The Greek word ***pneuma*** "wind" and "spirit" continues the scheme. Clearly these are intentional. See D. A. Carson, ***The Gospel of John*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) ad loc.

Some interpreters believe this is the only way to understand how people actually read texts.[20] Once texts exist in writing, readers do with them what they please. Understanding involves text plus reader, and each reader produces a different reading. Note what W. G. Jeanrond says:

> The reading of a text is, rather, a dynamic process which remains in principle open-ended because every reader can only disclose the sense of a text in a process and as an individual. This signifies in its turn that reading is in each case more than the deciphering of the signs printed on paper. Reading is always also a projection of a new image of reality, as this is co-initiated by the text and achieved by the reader in the relationship with the text in the act of reading.[21]

In this view, given the conventions of the interpretive community of which he was a member (Jewish-Christian), Matthew had the prerogative to read Hosea in ways that were appropriate for his concerns.[22] That is, through these Christian and Christological glasses, he could read Hosea and "see" Christ as the Son whom God also protected in Egypt. Interpreters today enjoy the same privileges, such reader-response critics insist. One may put on Marxist, liberationist, or feminist glasses to discover different, equally legitimate readings of a text.[23]

In violent reaction to this approach to interpretation, Steinmetz shows what he thinks of the modem tendency to make texts mean anything readers want when he says,

> Indeed, contemporary debunking of the author and the author's explicit intentions has proceeded at such a pace that it seems at times as if literary criticism has become a jolly game of ripping out an author's shirt-tail and setting fire to it.[24]

He makes a legitimate point that it simply will not do to ignore the author or the historical meaning of the ancient text. Yet we cannot scorn the modern reader's role either, for it is only in the process of reading that meaning occurs. As we saw earlier, Thiselton employs a useful image in entitling his book on hermeneutics "The Two Horizons."[25] Understanding occurs when the horizon of the text fuses with

[20]Such an approach is one of several, often termed "reader-response" criticism, which we mentioned above. See W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1979); S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theo y of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); and two works by E. V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), and *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988). See more on pp. 438–40 below.

[21]W. G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of neological Thinking (New* York: Crossroad, 1988), 104.

[22]S. Fish defends this perspective: "It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features" (*Is There* a *Text?,* 14).

[23]Some pointed examples include L. M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), and L. D. Richesin and B. Mahan, eds., *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First-World Response* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981). See more careful assessment to follow in the Appendix.

[24]D. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today 37 (1980): 38.*

[25]A. C. Thiselton, The *Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

the horizon of the modern interpreter, but only after some "distantiation" occurs—unlike the "no holds barred" approach that occurs with many reader-response critics. It is worth quoting Carson at length where he makes this point.

> Whenever we try to understand the thought of a text ..., if we are to understand it critically ... 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. Failure to go through the distantiation before the fusion usually means there has been no real fusion: the interpreter thinks he knows what the text means, but all too often he or she has simply imposed his own thoughts onto the text.[26]

The historical meaning of the text must play a controlling role. S. D. Moore makes the crucial point that "if our texts do ***not*** contain such [i.e., invariant] properties, what prevents interpretive anarchy in the academy (or in general)?"[27] We cannot simply dispense with the historical sense and do what we please with texts. We doubt that Matthew simply engaged in some arbitrary reader-response reading of Hosea. Then what did he do? Is it possible in any way to replicate his methods? Before we respond to these questions we have further options to consider.

4. ***Along with the literal sense intended by the human author, the Holy Spirit may encode a hidden meaning not known or devised at all by the human author.*** **Thus, in the process of inspiration God could make Matthew aware of a meaning previously intended by the Holy Spirit even though Hosea had no idea his words had that meaning. Matthew recognized a "fuller" sense, sometimes called the *sensus plenior.*** In J. R. McQuilkin's thinking, "the second (hidden or less apparent) meaning ... might have been only in the mind of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the author."[28] The question, then, is whether OT texts possess a surface intentional meaning (intended by both human and divine authors) and an additional underlying meaning or meanings—a ***sensus plenior***—intended by the Holy Spirit. Further, expanding the question beyond certain OT texts later cited in the NT: Can Scripture more generally be said to have this "deeper level" of meaning? Is there a "fuller sense" intended by the divine author beyond what the human author intended that a modern interpreter of the Bible might discover?

Almost by definition, a fuller sense cannot be detected or understood by the traditional historical, grammatical, and critical methods of exegesis. That is, such methods can only distinguish the meaning of the text, not some secret sense embedded in the text that even its author did not intend. If this is true, on what basis might the existence of such a sense even be defended? Do all texts have a deeper meaning? And, if all texts do not have this ***sensus plenior,*** **how do we know which ones do?**

[26]D. A Carson, ***Exegetical Fallacies*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 21-22.

[27]S. D.' Moore ***Litera y Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge (New*** Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 68.

[28]J. R. McQuilkin, ***Understanding and Applying the Bible*** (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 29.

Of course, one response is to simply reject the existence of a ***sensusplenior and*** confine exegesis to what we can defensibly study.[29] If there are no satisfactory answers to the questions posed in the previous paragraphs, we are safer simply to reject that possibility altogether. Safer, to be sure, but we have no way of knowing if we have thus lost an opportunity for legitimate understanding. Another option is to admit, provisionally, the existence of such a sense but to insist that only inspired NT writers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, could find a fuller sense.[30] This position must defend the existence of a deeper level of meaning in the Bible, though it admits our inability to replicate what the NT writers did with the OT texts. In other words, that interpretive option is not available to us who are not inspired (in the technical sense) interpreters of the Bible. We must limit ourselves to historical-grammatical methodology. These first two options result in the same approach to exegesis for the modern evangelical interpreter. A third solution is to welcome a deeper meaning to Scripture, to find it, defend it, and explain it.

Scholars who defend the existence of a ***sensus plenior*** range from Roman Catholics to evangelicals.[31] Catholics typically limit the presence of this fuller sense to that which is confirmed either by revelation in subsequent Scripture (viz., the NT) or via the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants typically limit their admission of a fuller sense to subsequent revelation in the NT alone, though D. A. Oss, adopting a canonical approach, attributes the fuller sense to what derives from a given text's organic relation to the rest of the canon.[32]

How is it possible that when God inspired writers of Scripture he intended a sense separate and different from what the human authors conceived and intended? In reply Moo argues that God could "have intended a sense related to but more than that which the human author intended."[33] Larkin goes even further in asserting

[29]In various places W. C. Kaiser rejects the concept of *sensus plenior,* ***e.g.,*** in "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy,* ed. N. L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 117-47; Uses ***of the Old Testament*** (Chicago: Moody, 1985); and "The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10," *JETS* 21 (1978): 3–18. For an analysis of Kaiser's position see D. L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," part 1 *BSac* 142 (1985): 210–12.

[30]In a noteworthy section near the end of his work, R. N. Longenecker argues that we can reproduce the exegesis of the NT authors only where they employ historico-grammatical methods to understand the OT. We cannot replicate their methods where the NT writers' use of the OT depends upon the Holy Spirit's inspired analysis. See ***Biblical*** *Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 214-19.

[31]A leading Catholic proponent is R. Brown, *The* 'Sensus *Plenior'* ***of Sacred Scripture*** (Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955); "The History and Development of the Theory of a *Sensus Plenior," CBQ 15 (1953): 141-62;* and "The Sensus *Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," ***CBQ*** *25 (1963): 262-285.* Evangelicals include Moo, *"Sensus Plenior," 175-212;* J. D. Kunjummen, "The Single Intent of Scripture-Critical Examination of a Theological Construct," *GTJ 7 (1986):* 81-110; D. A. Oss, "Canon as Context: The Function of Sensus *Plenior* in Evangelical Hermeneutics," *GTJ* 9 (1988): 105-27; and W. S. LaSor, "Interpretation of Prophecy," in B. Ramm, ed., *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 94-117. Finally, see Steinmetz, "Pre-Critical Exegesis," who traces how belief in a fuller sense of Scripture characterized many scholars throughout the history of exegesis.

[32]Oss, "Canon as Context," 107–8.

[33]Moo, "Sensus *Plenior," 204. Of* course, the question is not whether God could have intended a deeper sense, but whether he did and whether we have any means to verify such an intention.

that "many uses of the OT material in the New seem unrelated to the meaning intended by the original writer."[34] Similarly LaSor asks, "Is it not possible for God to present to the author a revelation which by its very nature contains a deeper significance?"[35] Whatever understanding the human author might have had about what he wrote, LaSor argues that he did not intend to convey a deeper level of meaning or fuller sense to his hearers. "But at a later date," he argues, "in the light of further revelation, the fuller meaning becomes clear to readers under the influence of the Spirit who inspired the original author."[36]

Yet, even Moo admits that the construct of ***sensus plenior*** does not handle all the NT's use of the OT. At times the NT writers appeal to what the OT ***human*** author said,[37] even though the meaning the NT author derives is not apparent to us after we subject the OT text to traditional historical methods. And we believe that LaSor mitigates his view of a deeper sense when he also attributes a fuller sense to great poets, philosophers, and other creative thinkers who express a fuller meaning that their disciples develop into schools or systems of thought.[38] This does not argue, then, for a deeper meaning in the texts intended by the Holy Spirit. If LaSor is correct, the fuller sense merely develops further implications or consequences of what the author originally meant.

5. There is a final option, which itself consists of alternative elements. A ***biblical author may have intended a text to have only a single meaning, but a later biblical author may have discovered an additional meaning he saw in that text.*** In other words, if Matthew was performing strict historical-grammatical exegesis of the Hosea quote, he could never assert that it spoke of the Messiah. But using a "creative" exegetical method he posited an additional sense. But where does this additional meaning come from? Is this option open to modern interpreters?

A common answer alleges that some NT writers made use of interpretive techniques that derived from their background in Judaism. In other words, they used some of the methods of the rabbis or the interpreters at Qumran, such as "midrash" and "pesher."[39] Scholars do not easily arrive at definitions of these practices, but several comments will help us understand them better. J. Goldin says of rnidrash:

> All Midrashic teaching undertakes two things: **(1)** to explain opaque or **ambiguous texts and their difficult vocabulary and syntax ...**; (2) to contemporize, that

[34]W. J. Larkin, *Culture* and *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 257. He goes on to cite such examples as Mt 27:9-10/Zech 11:12–13 and Jer 32:6–9; Acts 15:16–17/Amos 9:11–12; Rom 10:6–8/Deut 9:4 and 30:12–14; 1 Cor 2:9/Isa 64:4; 1 Cor 9:9/Deut 25:4; Heb 3:7–11/Psa 95:7–11. Of course, simply because uses seem rather unrelated is no reason to account for the new sense as a *sensusplenior.* As well, we wonder if Larkin really means the NT uses of the OT texts are completely unrelated to the sense intended by the OT writers.

[35]LaSor, "Interpretation" in B. Ramm, ed., *Hermeneutics, 108.* Again, possibilities are not the issue here.

[36]LaSor, "Interpretation," 108.

[37]Moo cites the example of Peter's use of Psa ***16*** in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25–28) in "Sensus *Plenior," 204.* Was the human David speaking about Jesus' resurrection?

[38]LaSor, "Interpretation," 108.

[39]For an introduction to these and other Jewish methods, see our earlier discussion of Jewish interpretive methods. The key literature includes J. L. Kugel and R. A. Greer, ***Early*** *Biblical* ***Interpretation***

is, so to describe or treat biblical personalities and events as to make recognizable the immediate relevance of what would otherwise be regarded as only archaic.[40]

To further clarify the nature of midrash,

> It was a way of delving more deeply than the literal meaning of the word of Scripture, and a method of linking the various parts of the Bible together by the discovery of typological patterns, verbal echoes, and rhythms of repetition.'"

There appear to be examples of the use of midrashic methods in the NT. We cite two to illustrate. One is the well-known technique of *gezerah shawah* (combining various texts that have some verbal correlations) as in Acts 2:25–34.[42] Or note the many uses of the kind of argumentation called *qal wahomer* (from the lesser to the greater) as at Lk 11:13; 12:28; and Mt 10:25. At times such methods seem completely responsible and boil down to issues of common sense. In other instances in the hands of rabbis, they opened the door to rather fanciful connections and interpretations.[43]

The method of pesher had a distinctive trait:

> The authors of the *pesharim* believed the scriptural prophecies to have been written for their own time and predicament, and they interpreted the biblical texts in the light of their acute eschatological expectations.[44]

Hence their use of the introductory phrase, "Its interpretation refers to ..." or more precisely, "This is that." The Qumran sectarians who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls were particularly enamored of the pesher technique as evidenced in their Habukkuk Commentary. Longenecker observes,

> Biblical interpretation at Qumran was considered to be first of all revelatory and/or charismatic in nature. Certain of the prophecies had been given in cryptic and enigmatic terms, and no one could understand their true meaning until the Teacher of Righteousness was given the interpretive key.[45]

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); R. Kasher, "The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature," *Mikra,* ed. M. J. Mulder and H. Sysling, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum,* sec. *2,* pt. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 560–77; E. E. Ellis, "Midrash, Targum and New Testament Quotations," *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black,* ed. E. E. Ellis and Max Wilcox (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, *1969);* R. T. France and D. Wenham, eds., Gospel *Perspectives III: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1983); and C. A. Evans, "The Function of the Old Testament in the New," in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation,* ed. S. McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 163–93.

[40] J. Goldin, "Midrash and Aggadah," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 19871, 9:512.

[41] R. J Z. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion (New* York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 262.

[42] Peter brings together the texts Psa 16:8–11 and 110: 1 to support Jesus' resurrection because both employ the phrase "at my right hand."

[43] For examples see Longenecker, ***Biblical Exegesis,*** 35–38.

[44] Werblowsky and Wigoder, eds., ***The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion, 298.***

[45] Longenecker, ***Biblical Exegesis,*** 43–44. The "Teacher of Righteousness" was the putative leader of the Qumran sect during the composition of much of its literature.

In their view the Teacher alone qualified to explain certain prophecies. What were the techniques that characterized the pesher method? Bruce answers: "The biblical text was atomized in the *pĕšārîm* so as to bring out the relevance of each sentence or phrase to the contemporary situation. ... It is in this situation, not in the logical or syntactical sequence of the text, that coherence was found."[46] Some of the interpretations boggle the imagination.[47]

Peter may have employed (or at least been influenced by) this technique when he used Joel in his Pentecost sermon: "This *is what* was spoken by the prophet Joel ..." (Acts 2:16). Jesus may have engaged in something like pesher in his sermon recorded in Lk 4:16–21 where, quoting Isa 61:1-2 he says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).[48]

Can such methods explain why some uses of the OT by NT writers seem to depart dramatically from what the OT appears to mean on the surface? In some cases, the answer may be, possibly, or even, yes.[49] Clearly the writers of the NT were convinced that they had entered a new era in redemptive history with the coming of Jesus. Naturally, they read the OT in a new light, a process Jesus himself encouraged (e.g., Lk 24:25–27).

We doubt, though, that at these points the NT authors were totally unconcerned about the original meaning of the OT texts.[50] Where their interpretations seem to parallel methods of their Jewish forebears, their uses generally appear extremely restrained. We cannot lump together the apostles, the Qumran exegetes, and the rabbis as if they all operated in the same way. The NT writers borrowed some methods of their Jewish counterparts, but they spurned others. That is, the NT writers, like Jewish interpreters, "appropriated" OT texts for their new situadons-"straightforward identification of one situation or person with another, modification of the text to suit the application, and association of several passages,"[51] for example.

[46] Bruce, "Biblical Exposition at Qumran," *Gospel Perspectives III,* 81.

[47] Bruce provides examples of their conclusions, 81-96.

[48] See Longenecker, ***Biblical Exegesis,*** 70–75, 99–103, 129-32, where he makes a convincing case for further possible examples in the NT.

[49] Though, one point that the various articles in *Gospels Perspectives ZZZ* make repeatedly is, "very little that can confidently be traced back to the first century AD is 'midrash proper' (France, "Postscript," 291). Thus, France goes on to express "real surprise that 'midrash' has been taken to be a major factor in the search for the literary affinities of the gospels" (291). We might add, "and for the rest of the NT."

[50] Clearly, in a textbook like this we cannot pursue the intricacies and implications that a thorough analysis of this issue requires. We must again direct the reader to ***Gospel Perspectives ZZZ*** for the necessary clarification and defense of these assertions.

[51] Moo, "*Sensus Plenior,*" ***194.*** Their approach was restrained and guided by the historical events of their experience. France, "Postscript," ***Gospel Perspectives III, 296,*** observes about the Gospel writers, "But the point where we have found it necessary to dissent from the attribution to the gospel writers of a 'creative midrash' which produced unhistorical stories in historical form out of the Old Testament texts is in the observation of the ***secondary*** role of the Old Testament texts in relation to the gospel traditions." That is, the historical events of Jesus' life and ministry provided the touchstone; the Evangelists did not creatively employ the OT to invent "history." They were primarily historians, not novelists.

To the methods of midrash and pesher we must add another. *Typology* may be the best way to explain how NT writers often used the OT. R. T. France sets out a clear definition: "the recognition of a correspondence between New and OT events, based on a conviction of the unchanging character of the principles of God's working."[52] K. Snodgrass prefers to describe this phenomenon as "correspondence in history" to distinguish it from abuses of the term typology.[53] The use of typology rests on the belief that God's ways of acting are consistent throughout history. Thus NT writers may, in places, explain phenomena in the new Messianic era in terms of their OT precursors. That is, they believed that many of God's former actions with Israel (or in the OT) were "types" of what he was now doing in Christ. This need not imply that the OT authors actually intended, in a prophetic kind of way, the type that the NT writer later discovered. Typology is more a technique of a later writer who "mines" prior Scripture for similarities to God's present activities.[54]

Moo responsibly puts the subject of typology within the larger "promise-fulfillment" scheme for understanding the relationship between the testaments. Thus, he says,

> New Testament persons, events, and institutions will sometimes 'fill up' Old Testament persons, events, and institutions by repeating at a deeper or more climactic level that which was true in the original situation.[55]

If this is true, then the OT writers were not always, if ever, conscious that what they were writing had typological significance. At the same time, God intended that his actions in behalf of Israel would one day find a kind of analogy or fulfillment in Christ and the Church.[56] Humanly speaking, these typological OT texts only had one level of meaning: the single meaning the human authors intended to convey. Yet God was at work too, and his actions set the stage for what later writers would see as patterns of his working with people.[57]

[52] R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 40. His discussion is very helpful. Also, see L. Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); G. von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," in Essays on *Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann and J. L. Mays (Richmond: John Knox, 1963), 17-39; and E. E. Ellis, "Biblical Interpretation in the New Testament Church," *Mikra*, ed. M. J. Mulder and H. Sysling, 716–20.

[53] K. Snodgrass, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 416.

[54] Snodgrass notes, "Later writers use exodus terminology to describe God's saving his people from Assyria (Isa 11:6) or salvation generally. The suffering of a righteous person (Ps 22) finds correspondence in the crucifixion of Jesus (Mt 22:39–46)" ("Use of the Old Testament," 416).

[55] Moo, "*Sensus Plenior*," 196.

[56] We do not presume, here, to know God's mind or intentions. Rather, we suspect that NT texts do refer back to OT incidents as types. As divine author of the Bible, God permitted the human authors to "see" the correspondences.

[57] T. L. Howard, "The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: An Alternative Solution," *BSac* 143 (1986): 314–28, convincingly defends typology as the best approach to our example. He speaks of "analogical correspondence."

This does not mean that the OT authors intended more than one meaning, nor even that the texts they wrote contained more than one meaning. Rather, it means that the OT as a whole had a forward-looking dimension to it, sometimes unknown to the writers. Because God was at work in Israel and in the lives of his people, their writings reflected what he was doing. The subsequent writers of the NT saw these divine patterns and made the typological connections. Craig Evans confirms this point:

> The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus became for early Christians the hermeneutical key for their interpretation and application of the Jewish Scriptures. Since the Scriptures could be relied on for clarification of eschatological events, and since Jesus was the eschatological agent, there could be no doubt that the Scriptures were fulfilled in him.[58]

This view of typology helps us understand what often occurs when NT writers use the OT in what appear to be strange ways. Certainly they use the OT in ways that we do not recommend to students today! A typological framework recognizes that NT persons consciously considered their experiences to match the patterns of God's redemptive history that began with Israel. As they read the OT they became aware of the correspondences, even though their uses of the OT did not correspond-in such non-straightforward uses-to what the original writers probably intended, nor do they explain the historical-grammatical meanings of the texts themselves.

Do these "Jewish methods" imply that the meaning discovered by the NT writers was *actually in the* OT? Possibly, but only in some limited fashion. If the NT writers appropriated the OT because they observed some correspondences between an OT text and their new experiences in Christ, then perhaps in some narrow sense that meaning was discernible in the OT (though, of course, we have no way to demonstrate this). Yet, such later meaning was not present in the sense that the original OT author saw into the future and intended to refer to later realities. Nor would any contemporary reader of the OT have "seen" that meaning. More probably, the NT writers "brought" their meaning to the OT texts in light of their experiences in Christ. At least we must say that their preunderstanding opened up meanings that were not in the OT text.

Where does this leave us, then? Do biblical texts have one fixed meaning or several levels of meaning? We have covered the options without coming to a firm conclusion. Perhaps a review of the options we have examined would be helpful before we proceed:

- Biblical authors intended *only one sense* (meaning), and this historical sense-what that text would have meant at the time written to its original readers—remains the only legitimate object of exegesis. Whatever NT writers may have done with the OT, we must limit our exegesis to the original historical sense of the text.

[58] Evans, "Function," 193.

- Biblical authors intended to convey ***multiple meanings*** or levels of meanings in at least some of their writings. These texts have several meanings that readers may subsequently discover.

- Biblical authors intended only one sense, but that sense need not limit how later readers understand a text since perception always involves a creative interaction between text and reader. Interpretation is a ***"reader-response"*** enterprise; so later readers-like the writers of the NT-may invent meaning never envisioned in the original context. Interpreters may do the same today.

- Biblical authors intended only one sense, but unknown to them the Holy Spirit encoded in the text additional and hidden meaning(s). When NT writers employed OT texts, in places they were drawing out this fuller sense, the ***sensus plenior.*** Such a process may or may not be repeatable for modern interpreters.

- Biblical authors intended only one sense, though later readers may employ ***creative exegetical techniques*** to discover additional valid senses not intended by the original authors. Such techniques include Jewish methods like **midrash, pesher,** or typology. There probably was some connection between original text and later sense, though the connection may appear arbitrary, if not undecipherable, to others. The process may or may not be repeatable today.

Is one of these the preferred option? The answer is not simple; indeed it is complex!

Textual Meaning

Is Textual Meaning the Singular Goal of Interpretation?

We assume that the writers or editors of the Bible intended to communicate to all people in the same way. Thus, for the most part, they intended their words to have only one sense. They may have encoded their message in metaphor, poetry, allegory, or apocalypse, in addition to more straightforward techniques, but they selected appropriate ways to convey their intended meaning. The historical ***meaning of these texts remains the central objective of hermeneutics.*** If they intended double or hidden meanings in their words, we have no means of discovering these apart from further clues, or perhaps from analogies based upon other examples in **Scripture.**[59] But this remains a problematic task. We must desist from affirming other levels of meaning without objective evidence. At most we may only tentatively suggest other possible meanings.

[59]For example, only with great reluctance do scholars offer possible explanations of John's code number 666 in Rev 13:18. Whatever the author intended to denote remains debatable, at best, to modern readers. Many conjecture it may be some kind of takeoff of the perfect digits 777. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation,* NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 219-21; G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972),186–87; and R. Mounce, The *Book of Revelation,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 263–65.

Clearly, two interpreters may disagree about what a biblical text means, and an author may admit seeing a meaning in a text he or she wrote that was not consciously intended. But we cannot allow these features to cloud the essential task of interpretation. Texts may indeed be polyvalent or **polysemous.**[60] A well-known example is: "Flying planes can be dangerous."[61] Its meaning would differ radically if said by a flying instructor to a new student pilot or by King Kong as he desperately clung to a precarious spot on the Empire State Building. However, in our study of the Bible we presuppose that our objective is to understand God's revelation. In the Bible, God has communicated a message to his people. Though a given passage may be capable of being understood in several ways, our goal is to determine what (of those various possible meanings) the text most likely would have meant to its original readers because that is why people communicate: they intend for what they communicate to be understood as they communicated it. The original biblical text alone was inspired, for only its meaning was encoded in the original historical context. We seek, therefore, the original meaning of that original text. Furthermore, in light of the options of meanings noted above, if we can determine that the original text intended to convey more than one meaning, then those multiple meanings also comprise the goal of **exegesis.**[62]

Definition of Textual Meaning

What do we mean by textual meaning? The meaning of a text is: ***that which the words andgrammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of its author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers.*** It is the meaning those words would have conveyed to the readers at the time they were written by the author or editor.

Of course, we do not know with certainty who wrote many of the biblical books. Furthermore, the composition of some books was probably due to a series of editors or "redactors" who put their own touches on the books until at some point the books acquired their canonical shape.[63] Truly, in some biblical texts we

[60]That is, texts, as well as words, may be capable of more than one meaning or sense. The word "solution" affords a clear example on the lexical level. It can refer either to a liquid substance or the answer to a problem.

[61]Another example of an ambiguous sentence is the sports headline that appeared in the 1970s: "Catfish Hunter Gets Perfect Game." The New *Yorker* (June 8, 1992, page 96) provided a humorous example from a flyer announcing a topic in the Lunch and Learn Series at Auburn University, Alabama: "Disciplining Children: Concrete Helps."

[62]Readers will note that we used "the NT use of the OT" as a kind of litmus test of what the OT can do, and therefore what the Bible does more generally.

[63]The Pentateuch provides a clear example. We do not know who or how many "editors" put these books in the final form we now read. Clearly it was not Moses alone, since Deut 34 records his death. For an enlightening study see D. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). Or, who wrote Ruth, and when was it written? Though the story derives from the period of the judges (1:1), internal references--such

may have several "layers" of authors. And though we encounter sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, in places we must distinguish Jesus' original point from the Evangelists' purposes as evidenced in their editing and placement. Further, where the Evangelists were not eyewitnesses to Jesus' remarks, presumably they obtained their material from other sources.[64]

In spite of these theoretical problems, we may conveniently speak of the person (or even group) who put the biblical book into its final form-the form the canon preserves. We likewise assume that this final form alone possesses the status of inspired revelation. Our goal is to understand the meaning of the book (or texts) the human writer (the shaper of the book's final form) produced, while at the same time asserting that God's intention is also bound up in that inspired text. Can we be certain that a text expresses the intention of the author? On a strictly human level, perhaps we cannot. But for biblical texts, we assume that in the divine/human concursive activity of inspiration, God's influence assured that all biblical texts do indeed express the divine author's intentions.[65] God's purposes were not frustrated.

In establishing the meaning of the biblical texts as our goal, we do not deny that some kinds of literature have meaning(s) beyond the surface level of the text, as in poetry or metaphorical language. In that case an author may still intend a single meaning, but that meaning is conveyed through metaphors or symbols. Thus, a parable might appear to have two levels of meaning-the literal story and the "spiritual lesson"-but the author still intends to convey some specific meaning. Of course, that specific meaning might consist of several points or more than one lesson." The parable's literal story conveys the author's intended meaning-the lesson(s). We seek only this intended meaning, though it could have several components. In other instances (what N. Perrin calls "tensive symbols"), metaphorical discourse may be deliberately open-ended or polyvalent.[67] Still, this results from an author's deliberate intention.

The Challenge of Reader-Oriented Interpretation

Based on their needs and inherent preunderstandings, readers and interpreters can find and create meanings in the text. The interpreter or reader plays a crucial

as the need to explain the "sandal ceremony" (4:7) and the genealogy at the end (4:18–22)—indicate that it was written much later to bolster the Davidic monarchy (see R. L. Hubbard, Jr., ***The Book*** of ***Ruth, NICOT*** [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19881). For the NT, the writers of the Gospels provide examples of editors who wove together the works and words of Jesus into coherent narratives.

[64]On some of these issues that constitute the "synoptic problem," see R. H. Stein, ***The Synoptic Problem*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), esp. 231-72. The method of redaction criticism particularly focuses on the Evangelists as editors of the Gospels.

[65]The classic texts on inspiration-2 Pet 1:20–21 and 2 Tim 3:16–17—do not even begin to exhaust the Bible's testimony to itself and to its divine origin and status as God's word. For a detailed list and discussion of many such biblical texts see W. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," in ***Scripture and Truth,*** ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 19-64.

[66]See Blomberg, ***Interpreting the Parables,*** esp. 162-67.

[67]N. Perrin, ***Jesus*** and ***the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation*** (London: SCM, 1976).

role in determining textual meaning. As we have seen, for some, restricting the goal of interpretation to textual meaning appears excessively and unnecessarily confining. McKnight observes that people have used the biblical writings throughout history to discover and create meaning for themselves.[68] Locating meaning in a reader-oriented process of interpretation requires that attention be paid to the "realities behind the text ... in order to understand the text as a pattern of meaning that continues to have an effect on readers."[69]

Thus, a reader-oriented approach pays more attention to the role of the modern reader in the work of analyzing texts. Exegesis is "in part a creative construction of the reader, a construction of cause, which is a result of the effect of the text in the first place."[70] The original "causes" behind a text are relativized and placed in balance with what modern readers do with the text to create meaning. Instead of simply looking for facts from the Bible with which to create or inform theological systems, the reader-oriented approach attempts to view "biblical texts in the light of their integrity as linguistic and literary creations, by examining the world disclosed in the texts and the world of values and meanings presupposed by the world of the text."[71] The reader can then create a new world in the process of reading the Bible, albeit a world that intersects with the world of the texts he or she is reading. The biblical text has challenged and modified the reader's starting points so that "the reader's self is being redefined in the process."[72]

Though part of this agenda depicts a worthy goal, which is part of the hermeneutical spiral we discussed earlier, we must register a pointed caution. Though a variety of reader-response approaches may find diverse meanings in a text, they may be irrelevant to those who believe the Bible proclaims-and who seek to find in the Bible-God's actual and authentic message. Only the meaning of the text, not a reader's responses, has any legitimate claim to that description. We can apply interpretive controls only if we seek as our primary goal the meaning that would have made sense to the original writer and readers. We face the danger that all other meanings are subjective and susceptible to the whim of the interpreter.

We have no desire to deny a legitimate place for a literary study of the Bible that may transcend historical approaches. We agree that rather than seeking the propositional meaning or content of the text interpreters may want to study and appreciate the literary dimensions of the text.[73] Indeed, various literary theories and methods contribute immensely to our understanding and appreciation of Scripture. Morgan rightly notes, "One mark of great literature is its capacity to illuminate and enlarge the experience of successive readers in new social contexts."[74] We may

[68]E. *v.* McKnight, *Postmodern* Use *of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 170.

[69]McKnight, ***Postmodern Use, 175.***

[70]McKnight, ***Postmodern Use, 175.***

[71]McKnight, ***Postmodern Use,*** 176.

[72]McKnight, ***Postmodern Use,*** 176.

[73]We give considerable space to deciphering the literary dimensions of the biblical texts, and particularly, literary criticism. See Appendix.

[74]Morgan and Barton, ***Biblical Interpretation,*** 10–11.

read the Bible to obtain the information it contains, and we may also read it for other purposes—for enjoyment, inspiration, courage, or solace-that may go beyond the texts' original intentions. However, these remain valid uses of the Bible. Surely we may "use" the Bible beyond its original intentions or meanings.[75]

But we must be aware of what we do. Some "Bible as Literature" studies go well beyond the original meaning of the text and what its author and original readers would have understood. Often, the more critics study the Bible as literature, the more their own modern criteria or perceptions govern the interpretive task. This risks subverting the purposes for Scripture, wresting it from the hands of those who believe it to be God's revelation.

We must study the various genres and parallel forms in the ***literature*** of the ancient world in order to shed light on the original meaning or intention of biblical texts. Indeed, a large part of this book is devoted precisely to that program. So if interpreters seek the historical meaning of the text, they will compare it with Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetoric, ancient near Eastern sagas, law codes, biographies, letters, or plays, et al., to gain insight into what ancient authors-including those of the Bible-developed and produced in their writing.[76] All of this is to say that literary criticism subdivides into three areas: (1) focus on the author's intent in composing the text, (2) the conventions of the text that reflect that intent, and (3) the readers' response to the text.

Thus, we do not view literary approaches to studying the Bible as mutually exclusive with more historical concerns. Rather, we insist they are complementary and equally legitimate. We must inquire about the historical basis of a text and its author's intentions in writing it; ***and we*** may seek to appreciate that author's writing as a literary product and how the writing conveyed the author's intentions.

The Question of Historicity

If in the normal conventions of the time an author tells an account as a historical report, then we accept it as true (assuming the author is a good historian) and interpret it in that light. If the account belongs to a different genre (say a parable) and its message is conveyed via the conventions consistent with that genre, then we interpret it on the terms of that genre. We are still seeking the author's intention as reflected in the resulting text, for we are attempting through literary tactics to discover how the author interacted with his audience.

[75]For additional insight see such works as A. Jefferson and D. Robey, eds., *Modern Literay Theory,* 2d ed. (London: B.T. Bratsford; Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1986); and F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980). L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literay Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, ***1987)*** and *Words of Life: A Literay Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) provides good examples of how literary criticism works. T. Longman III, *Literay Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), furnishes a clear introduction.

[76]An important work in this regard is D. E. Aune, The New *Testament in Its Literay Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987). See also the concluding bibliography.

So as Christians in the evangelical tradition we want to retain the appropriate balance in evaluating the Bible as literature. Literary approaches yield interesting and important insights into the nature of the documents, but, we argue, those documents may also record genuine history.[77] Of course, on the surface level of language, genuine history and historical fiction may appear indistinguishable. For example, did Nathan's story of the ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1–4) really happen? What about the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3–8 par.)? Is the narrative of Job or the story of Jonah literal history or historical fiction that mixes both historical and nonhistorical elements? Are Luke's reports of the speeches of Peter and Paul in Acts verbatim accounts? What criteria help the interpreter decide? We must study the literary conventions as well as the narratives themselves for further clues.

Suppose we envision a continuum whose endpoints are literal historical reports of events as they happened and pure fiction.

We must analyze each biblical account to see where it falls between these endpoints. If a passage purports to record genuine history according to the literary and textual conventions of the day, then we may infer that the story actually happened. If, on the other hand, the textual cues of genre point to inventiveness, then we must place the story toward the endpoint of fiction. The key question is how the original writer intended the account to be read-how he and the first readers would have understood it. Individual narratives may fall somewhere along the continuum involving both factual and creative elements. In all cases the literary dimensions unfold for us important lessons and provide significant learning.[78]

We insist upon this historically plausible meaning because of our presumption that we must tune in to the biblical authors' writings on their terms, not because we want to question their reliability or theological authority. We would be just as misguided to insist that something ***intended*** as fictional (or somewhere in the middle of the continuum above) is historical as it would be to take something intended as

[77]Simply because the Bible is a religious document does not imply that it cannot report events as they really happened. Of course, neither may we merely assert that because they are in the Bible the accounts happened as recorded. Historicity must be established on neutral ground. History and theology need not be mutually exclusive categories. For one OT example, see K. L. Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts,* JSOTSup 98 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990). For a NT example, see the important discussion in I. H. Marshall, ***Luke:*** *Historian and Theologian,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

[78]For insight into the complex issues of how narratives function, see R. After, ***The*** *Art of Biblical Narrative (New* York: Basic Books, 1981); A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); and M. Sternberg, ***The*** *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

historical to be fictional. Both would misconstrue the writer's intentions and impose alien readings on the biblical text, thereby making our modern preunderstanding the authority rather than the biblical text.

This brings us to the decision about what we will do with the biblical texts. We must decide whether we will seek the meaning in the texts or whether we will use, construe, or deconstruct the texts in other ways.[79] We believe that our task is to decode the symbols (language) of the texts in the way language normally functions in order to understand the meaning resident in those symbols. We will employ the usual exegetical procedures of grammar and lexical semantics.[80] We will strive for the interpretation that is most plausible historically, given all the available data.

Legitimate Reader-Response Interpretation

Can We Achieve a Legitimate Reader-Response Interpretation?

We seek the meaning the texts had at the time they were written-the meaning the author/editor and original readers would most likely have perceived. But having stressed this point, our reading of how NT writers employ the OT still leaves us reluctant to say that the historical meaning of a text is the only meaning. In our earlier discussion we noted that in places the NT writers found meanings in texts that the OT authors never intended-meanings that would not have occurred to the original readers of those OT texts. We doubt, however, that these phenomena suggest that the Holy Spirit inspired a ***sensus plenior,*** a fuller sense, which he then guided later writers to uncover. Though this may be a possible explanation of the data (and Moo's position may be the most defensible variety of a ***sensusplenior), we*** have no objective criteria to posit the existence of a ***sensus,*** or to determine where it might exist, or how one might proceed to unravel its significance.[81] In other words,

[79]Deconstruction is a technical term that refers to a program of interpretation often identified with J. Derrida. Though difficult to define succinctly, deconstructionists attack the normal conventions of how language functions and what texts mean. Throwing off all normal constraints and protocols, they hope to free interpreters to construct new understandings. (We will discuss this subject in more detail in the Appendix.) See J. Derrida, On *Deconstruction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982). For interpretive discussions, consult C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, ***1982);*** and J. Culler, On *Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[80]Lexical semantics comprises all the facets of doing responsible studies of words in their various historical and literary contexts to discover their meaning. The best introduction is M. Silva, ***Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). A helpful companion for the NT is J. P. Louw, ***Semantics of New Testament Greek*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[81]See Moo, "*Sensus Plenior,*" 175–211. Moo argues for a multifaceted understanding of the variety of ways NT writers employ the OT. But in addition to the others he finds, he concludes, "it may be that some citations are best explained according to the traditional ***sensusplenior*** model: by direct inspired apprehension, the New Testament authors perceive the meaning in a text put there by God but

if the human author of a text did not intend and was unaware of a deeper level of meaning, how can we be confident today that we cart detect it? We may be able to uncover analogies or types in how God works, and thus suggest additional meaning for a text (as we will explore below), but can we declare we have discovered an additional meaning that the Holy Spirit actually deposited within texts? We remain skeptical. ***Sensus plenior*** must remain an interesting construct, an attempt to make sense out of puzzling issues, but it provides little help for modern interpreters when we come to the actual practice of understanding God's revelation.

So where does this "additional" meaning come from? At the risk of misunderstanding, we posit that in their interaction with the biblical text readers do "create" meaning. The reader-response approach merits thoughtful, though controlled, recognition. Understanding a biblical text is a creative enterprise, much like a conversation between friends. In a conversation each person is involved not only in analyzing (albeit subconsciously) the precise meanings of words and grammatical constructions but in understanding the other person. How each participant "reads" the other will depend upon prior experiences, as well as upon individual situations. In Tate's words, "Individual interpretations . . . are individual conversations with the text and are always situated within some context. Interpretation is relational and involves understanding the text in light of who we are, and understanding ourselves in light of the text."[82]

But interpreters who remain committed to the Bible as divine revelation must limit the range of possibilities for interpretation. The sky is not the limit for possible meanings, and here we must set ourselves clearly apart from other reader-response critics' work. Properly informed, readers may ***not*** discover meaning unrelated to the intention of the author or the historical meaning of the texts to be interpreted. We believe Christians operate under the constraints of Jesus Christ-who he is, what he has done, and the community he has created-and the Holy Spirit, who inspired Scripture. Biblical texts must be understood within the context and confines of the believing community in which each interpreter resides, though, admittedly, these interpretations will differ among communities.

For example, the NT presents the practice of baptism in the Gospels where John the Baptizer requires this rite of those repenting. In Mark's words, "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4). Jesus continued and encouraged the practice (Jn 3:22; 4:1-2; Mt 28:19-20), and it became a central rite in the developing church (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:47f.; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; et al.). Some texts may indicate a certain method of baptism (e.g., often Acts 8:38–39 is cited to defend immersion), though most do not. Nevertheless, various believing communities have come to understand the relevant texts in different ways. They impose their community's practice on to the

unknown to the human author." Moo goes on to argue, "Even in this case, however, it is important to insist that this 'deeper meaning' is based on and compatible with the meaning intended by the human author" (210). Moo is at a loss, then, to find any usefulness for this approach in the exegete's interpretive work, unless the "deeper meanings" are clearly enunciated within Scripture itself. In our judgment, then, it remains a rather slippery and unproductive concept.

[82]Tate, ***Biblical Interpretation,*** 211.

texts and "read" them in that light. Various immersionist groups appeal to the historical precedent of immersion as the rite of cleansing and initiation for the Jews. They insist that, while the spiritual message is of paramount importance, no other method of baptism correctly represents the biblical pattern. Others emphasize the spiritual significance of the rite, or its connection to circumcision, and treat the method-whether immersion, sprinkling, or pouring-as a secondary issue.

Do some texts "clearly" denote immersion, while others "clearly" teach sprinkling or pouring? Or, to complicate the discussion, do some texts teach the baptism of believers while other texts teach the baptism of infants? Proponents of one side or the other often would insist upon affirmative answers, but the issues are not so simple. One matter is certain: various church traditions have decided what the relevant texts will ***mean for them.*** Some Presbyterians decide to baptize infants by sprinkling, while others both sprinkle and immerse adult believers. Baptist groups typically insist upon the immersion of believers, though they must decide what "belief means, especially in instances where children of a rather young age seek baptism.[83]

Does the Bible confirm these groups' practices of baptism? While each group would insist upon an affirmative answer, each one finds different meanings in the same baptismal texts. Those who sprinkle babies may bring into the discussion the analogy of the OT practice of circumcision of infants. They note, of course, that the Church has employed the methods of sprinkling and pouring since the first or second century. Indeed, some paedobaptists may even admit that the pattern for baptism in the NT was immersion; sprinkling of infants is never taught in the Scriptures.[84] But, they are quick to add, that is because the NT writers never had to address the issue of children of believing parents. Infant baptism developed as a legitimate theological inference from other clear biblical teachings. Or, says Bromiley, "The inclusion of the children of adult converts is so much in line with the thought and practice of the OT that it is taken for granted in the New, as the household baptisms of Acts suggest even if they do not prove."[85] He continues,

> **Quite** apart from the external **evidence, the New Testament itself offers plain indications that the children of Christians are regarded as members of the divine community just as the children of Old Testament Israel were. In these circumstances the inference of an accepted practice of infant baptism is undoubtedly legitimate if not absolutely or** bindingly so.[86]

Thus, such people interpret the texts concerning baptism with their preunderstandings. Biblical texts, principles and analogies, and historical tradition weigh heavily in their interpretation.[87]

[83]As **authors we affirm believers' baptism by immersion.**

[84]See **G. W. Bromiley,** ***Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants*** **(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).**

[85]Bromiley, ***Children of Promise, 2.***

[86]Bromiley, ***Children of Promise, 4.***

[87]***On*** some of the historical sources for infant baptism see J. Jeremias, ***Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*** (London: SCM, ***1960).*** For the case against infant baptism from a Reformed theological position see I? K. Jewett, ***Infant Baptism and the*** *Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

Correspondingly, those who teach the immersion of adult believers also rely on biblical texts and their traditions. Opposing the baptism of infants, Beasley-Murray insists,

> **It is not only that the New Testament is silent on the practice of infant baptism, but that the thought and practice of the primitive communities, as reflected in the New Testament documents, appear to be contrary to the ideas and practices that accompany infant baptism in the later** Churches.[88]

Indeed, it is his thesis that "infant baptism originated in a capitulation to pressures exerted upon the Church both from without and from within."[89]

What we are saying boils down to this: neither infant baptizers nor those who insist upon the immersion of believers dismiss the Bible in defending their views. Indeed, both affirm their loyalty to its teaching and want to abide by what it says. Hence equally committed, sincere, and equipped interpreters in these two traditions arrive at different conclusions about the meaning of the biblical texts. Certainly, constraints must apply. For example, Presbyterians in the evangelical tradition insist upon the need for each individual's personal faith in Christ. They do not teach that an infant's baptism secures his or her personal salvation; salvation, they affirm, depends upon each person's trust in Christ. In other words the total Bible's teaching about relevant issues provides the guidelines and restraints within which all legitimate interpretations must lie.

Another pertinent illustration is the theological topic of eschatology, which concerns the future or what are called the "end times." Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have debated the various biblical texts that seem to indicate the intricacies of end-time events. What did the biblical writers say about future events, especially the conclusion of history? While we cannot engage in a thorough study of the issues surrounding eschatology, we can use this topic to illustrate a point about bringing meaning to the process of interpretation.[90]

One aspect of eschatology concerns the "millennium," or thousand-year reign of Christ.[91] Some theologians and Christian believers accept the view that this will involve a literal period of time (whether or not it entails precisely one thousand years). In one view, following his second coming, Christ himself will reign with believers on this present literal earth.[92] Others view the millennium more symbolically: they believe Christ and his followers currently reign in his kingdom, and at his glorious return Christ will bring history to a conclusion and usher in the eternal

[88]G. **R. Beasley-Murray,** *Baptism in the New Testament* **(London: Macmillan,** 1962), **352.**

[89]Beasley-Murray, *Baptism,* **352.**

[90]Here **we must limit our discussion to the views of those conservative Christians who take seriously the biblical prophecies about a future eschatology. For others who dismiss the Bible's teachings about the future this example will be irrelevant.**

[91]For **a helpful introduction to the major competing options among conservative scholars, see R. Clouse, ed.,** ***The Millennium: Four Views*** **(Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1977). For a sane analysis of the options see S.** J. **Grenz,** ***The Millennial*** *Maze* **(Downers Grove: Intervarsity,** 1992).

[92]For obvious reasons **such interpreters are called** *pre*millennialists. **Christ returns to earth prior to his reign during the millennium.**

state or age to come.[93] Proponents of a third but smaller group, adopting a literal view'similar to the first, believe that this Church Age will develop into a final period of time-the millennium-after which Christ will return to begin the eternal state.[94]

As a test of these interpretations, we may scrutinize what two proponents say concerning Rev 20:4d–5, where the writer says of a group of people, "They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection." Premillennialist G. Ladd argues that the phrase "came to life" refers to the literal resurrection of these believers, and that "it is not used of any 'spiritual resurrection' of the souls of the righteous at death."[95] Thus, he continues, "At the beginning of the millennial period, part of the dead come to life; at its conclusion, the rest of the dead come to life."[96] Finally Ladd admits, "This is the only passage in the entire Bible which teaches a temporal ***millennial*** kingdom, and there is only one other passage in the NT which may envisage a temporal reign of Christ between his parousia and the *telos* [end]: 1 Cor 15:23–24."[97]

Yet in his commentary on these same verses amillennialist W. Hendricksen asserts, "In this entire passage there is not a single word about a resurrection of *bodies*."[98] So "the thousand year reign takes place in *heaven*."[99] ***As*** to the binding of Satan during this millennial reign, "This work of ***binding the devil*** was begun when our Lord triumphed ***over*** him in the temptations in the wilderness, Mt. 4:1–1 1; Lk. 4:1–13."[100] For Hendricksen, Satan is now bound in this age, the millennial age in which Christ rules in heaven with his victorious saints.[101]

Meanwhile, R Mounce seems to say something in-between. He distinguishes between the ***form*** of what the text of Revelation says and the ***content*** of meaning the author attempted to convey to his readers. Mounce observes, "In short, John taught a literal millennium, but its essential meaning may be realized in something other than a temporal fulfillment."[102] In other words, the author may well have employed language that seems to indicate a literal period of time, and this probably originated in the dominant religious conceptions of the time of the author. But the

[93]Sometimes such theologians are called umillennialists, though that may be a misnomer. They do not deny a millennium; rather, they prefer to view it as realized in church history following Christ's victory over Satan at the cross. They expect no future millennium. Other amillennialists equate the millennium with the future state-the new heavens and the new earth.

[94]We call these interpreters *post*millennialists. According to this view, Christ returns following a literal millennium.

[95]Ladd, *Revelation, 265.*

[96]Ladd, *Revelation, 266.*

[97]Ladd, *Revelation, 267,* his emphasis. Ladd also discusses this passage in his *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 135-150.

[98]W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), *230,* his emphasis.

[99]Hendriksen, *Conquerors,* 231, his emphasis.

[100]Hendriksen, *Conquerors, 225,* his emphasis.

[101]Hendriksen, *Conquerors, 229.*

[102]Mounce, *Revelation, 359.*

"essential truth of prophecy" could well lead us, says Mounce, to "cease to find in Revelation 20 the prediction of an *eschatological* era."[103]

Such divergent views naturally raise hermeneutical questions. Are the relevant passages of the Bible so unclear that sincere interpreters cannot agree if they teach there will be a future literal, lengthy reign of Christ on this earth or whether Christ will return before or after such a period, if it exists? How do such divergent views as these from baptism and the millennium develop? Is it because of a lack of ***biblical evidence?*** Are ***the*** data so obscure or imprecise or minimal that interpreters can know very little with certainty? Can the data be assembled in several defensible ways? Is there not enough information to overturn any of the differing interpretations with certainty? This may certainly be the case. Or perhaps we should attribute the variety of interpretations to the interpreters. Do interpreters want, perhaps unconsciously, to read the evidence in certain ways? Are they blinded to alternatives, or is it perhaps a bit of ***both?*** These factors may explain some of the debatable issues in biblical studies; still, there may be another alternative at work here.

Perhaps one or more parties are "creatively" interpreting the texts. This does not deny the above possibilities, but rather may legitimize the view that several options are not only possible but also valid in such interpretive stalemates. We are not advocating a position in which interpreters can simply read anything into a text. Certainly the substance and the spirit of the biblical revelation must constrain any meaning discovered within its pages. Patterns of God's working in the past and the significance of Christ in redemption as seen on the Bible's pages, for example, circumscribe allowable meaning. But we stress again that meaning always results from an encounter or "conversation" between two entities, in this case the biblical text and the interpreter. The preunderstanding and presuppositions of the interpreter contribute enormously to the results of the interpretive process. We might even say they determine the results. In this case perhaps both paedobaptists and immersionists can claim to have a correct interpretation. And premillennialists and amillennialists may both profess legitimacy.[104] But how can both be right?

In some ways the process is circular, or as we have preferred to call it, a hermeneutical spiral. Interpreting texts helps us formulate our understandings and "systems." Out of those preunderstandings we continue to work at interpreting texts, and in the process revise our preunderstandings and systems.[105] No interpretation occurs apart from preunderstandings, which inevitably determine the outcomes of the interpretive process. They enable us to see, and yet they color what we see.

[103]Mounce, *Revelation,* 359, his emphasis.

[104]It intrigues us that on some deep level many Christian individuals and groups sense that we cannot allow such squabbles to divide us-almost as if to say that we acknowledge both our own inadequacies in getting at truth and an unwillingness to pass judgment on others by saying they are "wrong," at least about issues such as the ones we have used. How striking that major interdenominational evangelical agencies, including those affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals and those who identify with Lausanne, agree that both of the doctrinal debates we have used as illustrations will not be included in the otherwise detailed list of crucial doctrinal affirmations.

[105]We find it fascinating as we write these chapters in 1992 to find some dispensationalists significantly revising their system. Some are calling them "progressive dispensationalists," although the

Accordingly, we construct meaning when we interpret what we find in the text. Reformed theologians tend to discover that the Bible teaches infant baptism and amillennialism. Given their prior commitments and their historical traditions, they construct that understanding of the relevant texts. Readers in other traditions bring their preunderstandings and commitments to the process of interpreting the Bible, so their interpretation of the texts generates alternate understandings.

Without undue dogmatism we could well argue that one of the positions in any debate provides a better or more likely understanding of the meaning of the relevant biblical texts. Certainly we could make a case that one view more than the other represents the historical meaning of the text, for as we have argued above, ***the*** *historical meaning* ***of the text*** **remains our** ***primary objective in interpretation.*** But as the writers of the NT did not always limit themselves to the literal historical sense of the OT texts they interpreted, we must be open to a possible place for our own "creative" use of biblical texts.

What can we learn from how the writers of the NT approached their reading of the OT? K. Snodgrass provides wise words of counsel on this issue:

> **We have not** completed the interpretive task until we have determined how a **text does or does not** correspond with Jesus' ministry or the ministry of the church. The writers of the New Testament seem **to have looked for patterns of God's working in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the life of Jesus, and in their own experience. Our reading of the Scriptures should do no** less.[106]

Christ and his Church provided structures and trajectories for a new understanding of the events and texts in the OT Scriptures. They reread these texts and saw patterns and significance not apparent to non-Christians. In their Christian experience they perceived similarities to what God did with his covenant people in previous generations as recorded in the OT. So they interpreted those OT texts in light of their new insight.

Have both paedobaptists and believers-only immersionists correctly perceived how God has worked with his people throughout history and how he is working among them today? Can many of the relevant texts be explained as a-, pre-, and post-millenarian depending upon what trajectories a reader chooses to follow? This may proceed along the lines of typology, as advocated above, but to admit that several options may claim validity suggests we have some sort of reader-response interpretation.

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title is not wholly welcome to all. Yet one need only compare, for example, early versions of the *Scofield Reference Bible (New* York: Oxford University Press, 1909); L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948); C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965); and recent sessions of the "Dispensational Theology" group meeting in concert with the Evangelical Theology Society, to see major shifts in how self-avowed members of this "system" have changed their understandings of biblical texts. For a sampling of studies proceeding from the recent developments amongst dispensationalists see D. Bock and C. Blaising, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[106]Snodgrass, "Use of the Old Testament," 427.

If we are open to this, then we ***can*** follow in the footsteps of the biblical writers' exegesis, though the process requires due care and important controls. As we become aware of God's working and purposes, we may read texts in new lights and find meaning plausible for the biblical texts we are studying, even though not strictly intended by the biblical authors.[107] **The fresh meaning must** ***be consistent with the text's*** **meaning** (and with the Bible's total teaching-given our evangelical view of the Bible's unity), ***but it*** *need* ***not be limited to the original sense.*** We believe that in such cases an interpretation that treats the texts less creatively has more claim to accuracy. We do not wish to justify any fanciful interpretations. We might even argue that the optimum interpretation minimizes a creative role wherever possible, though some measure of it appears inevitable. The controls must remain with the believing community, and interpretation must be conducted corporately rather than in isolation.

Validating Our Interpretation

How Can We Validate Our Interpretation?

In light of this discussion of variants within textual meaning, it seems appropriate to ask whether we can ever know if our understanding of a passage is correct? Can we ever be assured that we have perceived a text's meaning, much less an author's intention, accurately? Or where we have dared to follow in the footsteps of the biblical writers in arriving at a creative understanding of a text, how can we know if it lies within the boundaries of acceptability? Indeed, are there such boundaries? We cannot ignore these questions. Even for Christian interpreters who affirm that the Bible is God's revelation, what value is an authoritative text if we cannot know that we have interpreted it correctly?

As stated earlier, in the absence of the author with whom we might consult, we are unable to assert with absolute confidence that we have precisely understood an author's intention in a given text. Nor can we in any way determine the extent to which a text was originally understood. We set as our goal the meaning of the resulting text in view of all we can discover about the original circumstances of its formulation; consequently, we must deal in probabilities. Given all the evidence and all the factors at our disposal, we must ask more appropriately: Which interpretation is **more likely** to represent the text's original meaning? Which interpretations fall within the reasonable limits of a text's current meaning for various faith communities?[108] To verify an interpretation requires weighing two types of evidence: evidence pertaining to the text itself and evidence involving the interpreters.

"'Recall that we have no way of knowing with certainty what they intended; we only possess **the** texts that were preserved.

[108]Of course, a perennial problem faces interpreters: When is it proper to break the interpretive strictures of one's (or another's) faith community? For example, Protestants insist that Luther was correct in rejecting several "texts' current meaning for the Roman Catholic faith community," to paraphrase what we have just written. Or take Jesus' example of labelling some Pharisees' restrictive interpretations

E. D. Hirsch addresses the first concern.[109] He suggests four criteria to establish an interpretation as probable. The most probable reading:

- is possible according to the norms of the language in which it was written;
- must be able to account for each linguistic component in the text;
- must follow the conventions for its type of literature; and
- must be coherent-it must make sense.[110]

In other words, the most probable interpretation of a text is the one that is consistent with language in the ways that people typically write and understand that genre."' We seek to understand a text in the normal and clear sense in which humans ordinarily communicate by that type of literature.[112] Indeed, Vanhoozer rightly affirms, "Scripture is composed of 'ordinary' language and 'ordinary' literature."[113]

Much of what is presented in this book expands and illustrates precisely those elements that enable interpreters to arrive at that "ordinary" meaning. We must address the issues of lexical analysis, historical and cultural background, literary criticism, genre, Hebrew and Greek grammar, and the like. We must consider, as well, the texts' contents, purposes, and force. An interpretation that seems at first to be coherent may turn out to be incorrect because we have misconstrued some evidence. But an incoherent or anachronistic interpretation is most certainly ***not*** correct. The more we know about the ancient world and the Bible itself, the more we increase the probability that from among the various viable alternatives we can

as **old wineskins that were defective (Mt 9:17; par). We argue that both Luther and Jesus were justified on the basis of the historical meanings of the relevant texts. In these instances the "faith communities" had departed from the sense of God's teachings. They needed to be challenged and their erroneous views eliminated.**

[109]Recall **that his book is entitled** *Validity* **in** *Interpretation*. **He discusses "Verification" on pp. 235–44., which he views as a procedure for establishing that a given reading or interpretation is more probable than any competing alternatives.**

[110]**Hirsch,** *Validity,* **236.**

[111]**K. J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature," in** *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon, ed.* **D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) suggests, "Genre thus** enables the reader to interpret meaning and to recognize what kinds of truth claims are being made in and by a text" (80).

[112]**See B. Ramm's clarification in** *Protestant Biblical Interpretation,* **3rd. rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 11927.**

[113]**Vanhoozer, "Semantics," 85. His explanation of how literature "works" to communicate is fresh and provocative. Vanhoozer suggests than any analysis of biblical literature must take into account four crucial factors: (1) what the text is about-facts or issues; (2) why the text was written-its function or intention; (3) the form in which the message is "incarnated"; and (4) the power or force of the text that results from the combination of the first three elements (91-92). So, "As Christian readers, we ought to be interested not only in the propositions themselves but in the manifold ways these propositions are presented for our consideration" (92).**

select the correct interpretation. And if our interpretation is correct, others will be able to replicate the study and come to the same conclusion.

Another locus of validation is the interpreters themselves. First, we must acknowledge the inevitable factors of human prejudice and parochialism-sinfulness and depravity-and our propensity to exonerate ourselves and blame others. Second, we must consider all the social, sexual, racial, political, economic, and religious factors that color our thinking. These indicate that no individual interpreter is in a position to judge rightly all the time, even given the above objective criteria. Is there a way to take into account our prejudices and preunderstandings so they don't skew the evidence? Can we recognize them and take them into consideration in the interpretive process? Can we adopt some hermeneutic of distrust or suspicion that forces us to be aware of our biases and circumvent or account for them, at least as much as possible?

Clearly, one tactic has always been at the disposal of those who seek to understand Scripture or any literature for that matter-consider what others say. No reputable interpreter excludes the wisdom of Christians throughout the centuries. Those who want to understand Scripture must read widely and assess judiciously what others have learned about a text. Students must consider the findings of other reputable interpreters-preachers, teachers, and those who write various articles and other studies-all the while recognizing that not all of them share one's own presuppositions. Interpreters need to learn all they can from others. At the same time, they must be skeptical of any author (or speaker) who exclaims, "No one has ever discovered this truth about this passage before." Equally, interpreters should be cautious even when others ***agree with*** their preferred conclusions-until the evidence leaves no alternative. To paraphrase a proverb, "As iron sharpens iron, so one interpreter sharpens another" (Prov 27: 17).

But considering what others say goes beyond reading only the "experts." Swartley suggests two other processes that can also help validate an interpretation. He proposes, first, that interpretations be validated in the "praxis of faith."[114] This criterion asks whether a proposed understanding of the text is workable in the lives of believers. Swartley suggests that interpreters apply this test "through personal and corporate ***meditation*** upon Scripture, through the witness of ***preaching,*** and through ***living the*** love, righteousness, reconciliation, and peace of the gospel."[115] Of course, this criterion alone cannot guarantee the accuracy of a given interpretation, for the history of the Church demonstrates that erroneous understandings can also be made to "work."[116] But, given the nature of Scripture, correct understandings must work, and so this test can help validate them.

Second, Swartley suggests that interpreters need to secure the discernment of the believing community to check their conclusions. He says,

[114]**Swartley,** *Slavery,* **223. He builds here upon the "hermeneutics of consent" articulated by P. Stuhlmacher,** *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutic of Consent* **(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).**

[115]**Swartley,** *Slavery, 215;* **his emphasis.**

[116]**With striking citations Swartley shows how thoughtful Christians employed the Bible to defend** *both* **sides of the four issues in his book: slavery, sabbath, war, and the role of women. Certainly in these instances both sides were made to "work" in the history of the Church.**

> **The community, whether the local congregation or a churchwide body, assesses an interpretation's coherence with the central tenets of its traditional beliefs, its relationship to wider Christian** belief?, or the way the interpretation accords or conflicts **with** how the community discerns the Spirit to be **moving.**[117]

In other words, maverick or novel interpretations must be subjected to the critique of the corporate body of Christian believers. They must "ring true" in the Church. Here is where theological acceptability informs the **process.**[118] Interpretive communities draw boundaries around what they will admit. Rather than dismissing or denying this phenomenon, interpreters can take advantage of it. They can insist that interpretations be orthodox, that they conform to the community's **preunderstanding.**[119] They will also understand why other communities adopt differing positions, "in spite of the clear evidence." Interpreters validate their understandings of the Bible in keeping with who they **are.**[120]

However, even well-accepted interpretations need to be subjected to the bar of the worldwide Christian community. One way to examine the potentially distorting influence of our own preunderstandings is to listen to the insights of Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere, particularly those who differ from **us.**[121] In the North American (or other so-called First World) contexts, this must include listening to the insights of believers who are poor, disenfranchised, persecuted, and oppressed. Likewise, developing-world interpreters can learn **from** their First-World colleagues. Correspondingly, men and women interpreters-those of different races, those who live in the inner cities, those in the suburbs, the urban and rural, the rich and poor, the white collar and blue collar-all need to listen to each other.

[117]Swartley, *Slavery,* **215.**

[118]Tragically, **the guild of professional biblical scholars often ignores this criterion. It stands accountable to no one, usually in the name of objectivity.**

[119]So, **for example, orthodox Christians reject the heretical view of Jesus that Jehovah's Witnesses teach. Mainstream Christians refuse to admit interpretations of Jn 1:1 that suggest that Jesus was only "a god" (see the Jehovah's Witnesses New** *World Translation*). **In other words, some "creative" interpretations lie outside acceptable bounds; heresy is always intolerable even if some "faith community" accepts it (so Colossians and 1 John were written to champion the truth). Orthodox Christians might admit the possibility of alternative explanations of baptism or eschatology, as we saw above, but they agree that a Jesus who is less than deity is unacceptable. Christians refuse to tolerate heresy. In fact, they seek to persuade Jehovah's Witnesses of the truth about Jesus' deity using the very hermeneutical principles presented in this textbook.**

[120]See J. **Schreiter,** *Constructing Local Theologies* **(Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985) for one study of the role of the community in adopting and shaping theology.**

[121]One **rich value of a recent development such as feminism is the new scrutiny given to previous interpretations which historically were almost exclusively male-generated. Though we do not endorse all its developments or conclusions, the potential for new insight has increased. One challenging feminist critique comes from E. S. Fiorenza, In** *Memory of Her A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New* **York: Crossroads, 1983); and id.,** *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* **(Boston: Beacon, 1984). In our estimation she goes too far in seeking to eradicate what she believes to be the oppressive androcentric and patriarchal structures in the biblical texts themselves. This succumbs to one of the perils of "reader-response" readings, where modem readers judge the Bible's teaching according to their own standards of legitimacy. Of course, neither do we want to perpetuate or affirm oppressive androcentric structures today, and thus her agenda raises important concerns and issues. See our further assessment in the Appendix.**

Christian interpreters can gain insights **from** Jewish interpreters and Jewish interpreters can gain insights from Christian interpreters.

Interpreters can learn much about the meaning of the Bible from a multitude of sources, including non-Christian interpreters. In some instances unbelievers might shed crucial light on the Bible that believers would not be able to see. But significance is another matter. Seeing the Bible's significance belongs to believers. The point is to exert all efforts to minimize our preferences and prejudices lest they blur our vision and obstruct our ability to see the truth in the Scriptures. The history of the interpretation of the Bible will dramatize to any reader just how easily even well-intentioned and pious believers can "squeeze the text into their own molds," to paraphrase translator J. B. Phillips' rendition of Rom **12:2.**[122]

What do we do when interpreters disagree? How do we proceed when **well-**intentioned Christians come to different interpretations about the meaning of a text or passage? First, we should set out precisely the nature of the **difference—**where, specifically, do the views depart from each other. Second, we should itemize the elements in the process of study that led each interpreter to his or her view. That is, returning to our textual criteria above, did either interpreter misconstrue some evidence or engage in shoddy reasoning, or were there other flaws in the process that indicate one of the positions must be relinquished?

Third, as we evaluate the options we must assess which one relies most on the historical meaning of a text as opposed to more creative **extrapolations.**[123] Where one view more readily emerges **from** the historical sense of the text, it must stand. The historically ***defensible interpretation has greatest authority.*** That is, interpreters can have maximum confidence in their understanding of a text when they base that understanding on historically defensible arguments.

Yet we may need to concede that creative interpretation also has validity, though not in the same historically defensible way. Matthew's use of Hos 11: 1 might not have reflected the prophet's intention nor a historical understanding of the text to its original readers, but it "fit" typologically. That is, the **Hosea** text did express God's actions to protect his favored ones and to bring them out of Egypt, and that held true for the Messiah as well as for Jacob and his family. Thus, a creative interpretation may be accepted if:

- it expresses or conforms to orthodox Christian **theology;**[124]

[122]J. **B. Phillips,** *The* **New Testament** *in Modern English,* **2d ed. (London and Glasgow: Bles and Collins, 1960), 332. His translation of Rom 12:2 reads, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould. . . ."**

[123]In **other words, as we argued above, were the historical meaning of a text the only legitimate one,** *we* **might object to Matthew's use of Hos 11:1 in Mt 2:15. We might say to Matthew, "But, Matthew, you did not understand the historical meaning of Hos 11:1. That is not what the prophet's words meant to the original readers." So, the Bible seems to admit of two interpretations of Hos 11:1: the text's original historical meaning and Matthew's creative understanding and application of the text to the Messiah.**

[124]This **excludes the Jehovah's Witnesses' interpretation of Jn 1:1 where they say the Word was "a god." It also excludes medieval Rome's inadequate understanding of justification by faith, against which the Reformers objected.**

- it corresponds to typical paradigms of God's truth or activity as clearly revealed in historically interpreted sections of the Bible;[125]

- it works in the crucible of Christian experience-producing godliness and other valid Christian qualities, and advancing God's kingdom; and

- it finds confirmation along the full spectrum (racially, sexually, socio-economically, et al.) of Christians within an orthodox faith-community.

Where a creative interpretation meets these criteria, it has a claim to validity. Where one occurs in isolated sectors of the Church or derives from individual interpreters, it must remain seriously suspect.

What do we mean by "a claim to validity?" An original reader of Hos 11: 1 would interpret his reminiscence in a valid way if he or she understood it to speak of God's past deliverance of the nation Israel. That was its historically valid meaning. Matthew's interpretation in Mt 2: 15 was, by definition, valid too, but not in the same historically defensible way. His was a creative reader-response interpretation. Presumably it would have met the four criteria we suggested.

Preachers, teachers, and authors of books on biblical theology are all too aware of their attackers and detractors. Where interpreters have committed errors of methodology or judgment, they must be willing to learn and change their interpretations. As we have said already, and will continue to echo throughout this volume, determination and sincerity are no substitutes for accuracy. Nor are determination and sincerity rendered acceptable when mixed with large doses of piety! Many of us have rolled our eyes in a small group Bible study when a new or immature (or less excusably, an older) Christian has said, "What this verse says to me is ...," followed by a truly extraordinary interpretation that could not possibly be correct. Correct interpretation must always be our goal.

But once we have eliminated erroneous interpretations, what do we do when sincere believers adopt different or, in some cases, opposite explanations of the meaning of the same text? Here Christian grace must prevail. We must listen to each other and appreciate why others have arrived at alternative explanations. Consider again the millennial example. One of the views may be more historically defensible; it may better express the historical sense of the relevant texts. But all views are certainly acceptable within their respective interpretive communities. The communities could make their claims that their views meet the four criteria for valid interpretation. That being the case, and given our mandate to maintain and promote the unity of the body of Christ, when alternative interpretations meet the requisite criteria, Christians should agree to avoid using such texts to divide fellowship. Beyond simple arrogance, as the history of interpretation shows, separating

[125]Here we have "blended" typology and reader-response understandings. An acceptable reader-response must "fit" with how God works with his people, how the Church operates, and how Jesus exercises his Lordship.

from other members of Christ's Church over these kinds of disputed texts causes great damage. Amillennialist and premillennialist Christians need to embrace each other and their postmillennialist fellow-believers. One may say, "I don't agree with your conclusions, but in light of who you are and your community of faith, in light of how these biblical texts have been interpreted throughout history, and in light of the diligence and care with which you attempt to understand and live in conformity to the Bible's teachings, I concede your interpretation. You have responded to the Bible in a valid manner." Certainly this is preferable to accusing our brothers and sisters of shoddy work (at best) or dishonesty or heresy (at worst), and separating from them as if they were enemies. We ought to exert every effort to keep in line with Jesus' words: "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk 9:39), not to mention his prayer: "May [those who believe in me] be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23).

We should not immediately assume that the brother or sister with the opposing view is misguided, either too liberal on one side or too conservative on the other, or dishonest with the evidence. If the cliche "Blood is thicker than water" has any validity, then even more valid is the truth that "Faith is thicker than either blood or water!" The landscape of Christian history exhibits tragic evidence of Christian brothers and sisters damaging each other and the cause of Christ over their preferred interpretations of the Bible. Hear us well: our plea is not to condone heresy, error, or harmful teaching in the guise of Christian toleration; rather, we plead for humility and the grace to treat other Christians as siblings and fellow-seekers for God's truth. Where sincere Christians come to two different interpretations, we must allow that both options are possible (as outlined above), "agree to disagree," and support each other as brothers and sisters.

PART III

UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE

CHAPTER SIX

General Rules of Hermeneutics-Prose

If the fundamental goal of interpretation is to discover the meaning of the biblical text, then the main objective of our task is to distinguish the principles and procedures that are necessary to accurately discern that meaning. These include the principles that are necessary to understand language communication. The writers of Scripture expressed their divine message in human language. To know what they meant by the words used, we have to understand their message consistent with the way people ordinarily use language to communicate ideas.

It seems logical to surmise that the biblical writers intended for their original audiences to understand them. They did not convey their thoughts through secret codes. Though they occasionally used a riddle, parable, or apocalyptic symbol that might puzzle and challenge the reader, they intended to communicate clearly even through these. Like most writers, the authors wrote in a straightforward and direct manner so that readers would understand their message and live consistently with it.

Confident that the message was adequately communicated by the biblical authors, we have the obligation to interpret it correctly by following the conventions of language communication. In normal conversation we immediately understand what we hear with hardly a conscious thought. Our mental computer, the mind, automatically processes the information we hear. A lifetime of experience has programmed our memory bank to understand the meanings of words and sentences almost unconsciously. **But, alas, this does not necessarily hold true when we read the Bible. For the Bible was originally written in a foreign language to people who lived a long time ago in a different part of the world with a different way of life. Statements that were quite clear to the initial readers may not communicate clearly**

to us at all. What was almost automatic comprehension for them takes considerably more effort for us.

For whenever we confront a statement we do not automatically understand, we have to stop and think about it. Hence, intentional interpretation requires that we raise the routine patterns of subconscious communication to the level of conscious analysis. We must deliberately analyze the unclear message according to the principles of language communication that normally function unconsciously. This basic premise underlies most of the principles of biblical interpretation that will be presented in this book. Each hermeneutical guideline arises from and addresses some essential facet of overcoming these barriers to understanding the Bible.

How do we understand the written messages in the Bible? For effective communication to occur, the recipient (or later, the modern reader) must understand the message consistent with the meaning indicators the writer used to express his or her thought. The process of accurate understanding and correct interpretation involves five essential items: (1) literary context, (2) historical-cultural background, (3) word meanings, (4) grammatical relationships, and (5) literary genre.

Writers normally communicate their thoughts through a contextually-coherent statement that uses words according to their natural meaning in such a context consistent with the historical-cultural setting. Each word's impact on the total thought of the sentence arises from its grammatical relationship to the other words. Therefore, to discover what a writer meant, one must concentrate on four things: literary context, historical-cultural background, words, and grammar. Regardless of the literary genre, for any interpretation to be true it must be consistent with:

- the obvious sense of the literary context
- the facts of the historical-cultural background
- the normal meaning of the words in such a context
- the proper grammatical relationship between the words.

A meaning that does not fit all four principles is unlikely to be the meaning the writer intended.

Literary Context

A basic principle of biblical hermeneutics is that ***the intended meaning of any passage is the meaning that is consistent with the sense of the literary context in which it occurs.*** Hence, the first test that all proposed interpretations must pass is this: Is it consistent with the literary context? In literature, the context of any passage is the material that comes immediately before and after it. The context of a sentence is its paragraph, the context of a paragraph is the series of paragraphs that precede and follow it, and the context of a chapter is the surrounding chapters. Ultimately, the whole **book in which a passage appears is its controlling context. In a further sense,**

the canon of all sixty-six books of the Bible provides the largest context in which every passage must be understood.

The Importance of the Literary Context

Most of us know from personal experience the frustration of having something we have said "taken out of context." Political leaders and public officials frequently complain that their views have been misrepresented by the news media. While acknowledging that the reporter's direct quote was technically accurate, they protest that their statement was given a totally different slant or emphasis because the context was omitted. While in a politician's case the excuse that a statement was taken out of context may be a vain attempt to cover up an embarrassing slip of the tongue, the principle involved remains valid. Misunderstandings can certainly arise when people hear only part of what was said and base their understanding on it. The same is true of the Bible.

In fact, were the biblical writers alive they would undoubtedly protest loudly that they are "taken out of context" frequently when Christians quote individual Bible verses and apply them to their lives in violation of the biblical context. Misconstruing the context of a biblical passage has serious implications. Every passage must be interpreted consistent with its context for three main reasons.

Context Provides Flow-of-Thought

First, taking a passage out of context violates the writer's "flow-of-thought." A flow-of-thought is a series of related ideas strung together to communicate a specific concept. Most meaningful communication involves some type of logical thought-flow in which one thought leads naturally to the next in keeping with the genre of literature employed.' A preceding statement prepares for the one that comes after it. The words that follow grow out of what precedes. People communicate, not with a series of randomly selected ideas, but with related ideas linked together in a logical pattern. For example, consider this confusing account:

> I heard an interesting story on the news the other night. The quarterback faded back to pass. Carbon buildup was keeping the carburetor from functioning properly. The two-inch-thick steaks were burned on the outside but raw on the inside. Ten-feet-high snow drifts blocked the road. The grass needed mowing. The elevator raced to the top of the one-hundred-story building in less than a minute. The audience booed the poor performance.

Grammatically, the sentences can be presented together, but there is no logical continuity to link them; they are totally unrelated. People do not usually communicate ideas

'Of course, the kind of literature will determine the nature of the progression of thoughts. Certainly the lines of poetry are "connected" differently than those of carefully-reasoned prose or a parable.

like this. Normally all sentences in a paragraph strive to develop a common theme. Each sentence carries or builds on the thought expressed in the previous sentence. Taken together, the sentences provide a continuity of subject matter that unities the whole.

Since we normally communicate by a series of related statements, each sentence must be understood in light of the other ideas expressed in the context-in terms of the writer's train of thought. Any interpretation of a text that violates the point of its overall context is not likely to be the true one. It contradicts and ignores the normal way people use language to communicate.

Context Provides Accurate Meaning of Words

The second reason why an interpretation must agree with the general message of the context derives from the nature of words. Most words have more than one meaning.[2] The literary context presents the most reliable guide for determining the most likely meaning in that setting. In normal circumstances our minds automatically adopt the one meaning that best fits the subject at hand. Confusion or misunderstanding occurs when the literary context is vague or when several meanings fit equally well. Then a person must deliberately stop and think about the words' various possible meanings or analyze the context more carefully. Then he or she must select the one most likely intended by the writer.

For example, if we only hear the exclamation, "That was the largest trunk I ever saw!" we do not possess enough "literary context" (in fact we have none) to know what kind of "trunk" is meant. Does it refer to a type of luggage, the main stem of a tree, the rear storage area of a car (in American English), or the long nose of an elephant? Suppose, however, we read the statement in a book about animals at the zoo. Then we automatically picture an elephant's trunk. Given an article about the virtues of various automobiles, the image of a car's storage compartment would emerge. Yet neither of these meanings will come to mind if we are reading about the largest "trunk" seen in a California redwood forest. The literary context defines the precise meaning of the word.

Interpreters are not free to pick whichever meaning they choose for multiple-meaning words. Each term must be understood according to the meaning that is consistent with the other ideas expressed in the literary context. This is how successful language communication works.

Context Delineates Correct Relationships Among Units

The third reason why correct interpretation must be consistent with context is because most biblical **books were written and preserved as complete documents intended to be read as a unit. Biblical writers composed and edited individual sentences and paragraphs as parts of a larger document. Biblical verses do not exist as isolated, independent entities. They comprise individual units of larger literary works,**

[2]Actually, semanticists say that words cover a "field" of meaning, or they have a semantic range of meaning.

and interpreters must understand them according to their relationship to the whole argument of the book.

A book like Proverbs may appear to be an exception in that it groups many different sayings that originated independently; apart from a few sections, we may see little connection between the proverbs that occur in sequence. But even here, where the immediate literary context before and after a given proverb may give little help in understanding the meaning, the context of the whole book becomes particularly important because the writer scattered many proverbs on the same topic throughout the book. Thus the combined teaching of the book on each theme becomes the key to understanding the individual wisdom saying.

Unfortunately, the usually helpful chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles constitute one of the biggest hurdles to the process of Bible interpretation. We must remember that they were not in the original documents. Some verse divisions were in place in the early centuries A.D., though they fluctuated widely in various places. By the ninth and tenth century A.D. verse divisions began to appear in the Hebrew Bible of the Jewish Masoretes. F. F. Bruce says, "The standard division of the Old Testament into verses which has come down to our own day and is found in most translations as well as in the Hebrew original was fixed by the Masoretic family of Ben Asher about AD 900."[3] He adds, "The division into chapters, on the other hand, is much later, and was first carried through by Cardinal Hugo de Sancto Caro in 1244."[4] Others attribute the division into chapters to Stephen Langton, professor at the University of Paris and later Archbishop of Canterbury, in A.D. 1228. Three centuries later, in 1560, Robert Estienne (Stephanus), a Parisian printer and publisher, added the current verse numbering in his fourth edition of the Greek NT (which also contained two Latin versions).[5] His edition of the Latin Vulgate of 1555 was the first Bible to use both the chapter and verse divisions of the modern era. The Geneva Bible (1560) was the first English version to incorporate both the modern chapter and verse divisions. Although these divisions were meant to be helpful, even a casual reading of the Bible reveals that verse and chapter divisions are frequently poorly placed; new verses often begin in the middle of sentences,6 and chapter changes occasionally interrupt the thought in a paragraph.'

[3]F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1950), 118.

[4]Bruce, *Books*, 118.

[5]Cf. B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2d ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 103–04; and N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, A *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 229–33.

[6]Metzger cites the no-doubt apocryphal story that "Stephanus marked the verse divisions while journeying 'on horseback,' and that some of the infelicitous divisions arose from the jogging of the horse that bumped his pen into the wrong places" (*Text*, 104).

'For example, in light of the Servant Song that begins at Isa 52:13, dividing a new chapter at 53:1 is completely unwarranted. If a new chapter is required, it should occur at 52:13. Second Corinthians 2:1 falls in the middle of a paragraph explaining why Paul has not already made a return trip to Corinth. In modern versions that supply paragraphs, one notes how often the paragraphs do not correspond with either chapter or verse divisions. See how the beginnings of new chapters in Jeremiah come in the middle of paragraphs (e.g., 41, 42, 43). Or see the NIV paragraph divisions at I Cor 11:2 (not 1), 12:31b (not 13:1), 2 Cor 7:2 (not 1), and Phil 4:2 (not 1) for other examples.

The chapter and verse references do help us identify and locate passages quickly, but unfortunately they have also contributed to the widespread practice of elevating individual verses to the status of independent units of thought. Each verse is treated like a complete expression of truth that, like a number in a phone book, has no connection to what precedes or follows-each is a "quote for the day" considered in isolation from its biblical context. This constitutes a grave danger. There is simply no justification for routinely treating individual verses as independent thought units that contain autonomous expressions of truth. As written communication, biblical statements must be understood as integral parts of the larger units where they occur. Detached from their contexts, individual verses may take on meanings never intended by their writers. To qualify as the text's intended meaning, an interpretation must be compatible with the total thought of the immediate context and the book context. The meaning should be consistent with the point the text is making in that section of the writing.

Principles of Hermeneutics Relating to Context

Three important principles must guide our practice of interpretation. The first principle is: ***Each statement must be understood according to its natural meaning in the literary context in which it occurs.*** This is probably the single most important principle of hermeneutics since literary context is at the heart of all language communication. It affects the reader's understanding of both the meaning of individual words and the meaning of the complete statement. This guideline requires an interpreter not just to focus on the words of a passage but also to consider carefully the contribution of the passage to the literary work as a whole. It seeks to preserve the integrity of the line of thought being developed throughout the text.

The second principle is: A ***text without a context may be a pretext.*** Although an extension of the previous guideline, this principle focuses on a serious abuse of Scripture. Here we define a "pretext" as an alleged interpretation that only appears valid; in reality it obscures the real state of affairs. This principle serves as a warning against the popular tendency to engage in invalid proof-texting: quoting biblical passages to prove a doctrine or standard for Christian living without regard for the literary context. As a ridiculous example one could string along three verses to "prove" that one ought to commit suicide: "Then he [Judas] went away and hanged himself (Mt 27:5); "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise"' (Lk 10:37b); and "What you are about to do, do quickly" (Jn 13:27b). The disregard for context is evident! Unfortunately, other proof-texting does not appear so ridiculous but is equally invalid. Such proof-texts are merely "pretexts" when the interpretation fails the principle of literary context. There is nothing wrong with quoting verses to prove a point provided we understand them according to their contextual meaning (under the correct circumstances proof-texting can be valid). Before listing any verse in support of a position, we should first check the literary context to insure that the passage is about

[8]They enable us to avoid vague references like these found in Hebrews: "there is a place where someone testifies," introducing Psa 8:4–6; "as the Holy Spirit says," quoting Psa 95:7–11; or "and he [God] says in another place," indicating Psa 110:4.

the same subject and really does have the meaning that proves the point. Otherwise the text is only a pretext, a passage that seems on the surface to prove some belief but in actuality does not. Such a pretext carries no divine authority.

The third principle is: ***The smaller the passage being studied, the greater the chance of error.*** Short texts usually contain very little information about the general theme of the larger passage. They give us less evidence about their meaning. Indeed, a phrase or a single sentence by itself could well convey several different meanings. Paul's words in Rom 8:28 provide a ready example: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God . . . " (KJV). If the verse was considered apart from its context in Rom 8 and the entire book, one might incorrectly use it to convince a parent whose child has just died that the death was a good thing, since Paul promises good results from all circumstances. The surrounding context, however, provides many more definitive details about the subject that enable the reader to discard erroneous meanings. For Paul, all things are not good, but God will accomplish his salvific purposes for his people (which are good), even though and when they suffer greatly. (A more accurate translation such as the NIV also helps: "And we know that ***in*** all ***things God*** works for the good of those who love him, ...") Larger passages provide more facts about the topic and thus give the interpreter a clearer perspective for understanding each statement within it.

Simply stated, large passages have a built-in literary context; short passages do not. Normally speaking, the paragraph constitutes the basic unit of thought in prose.[9] Focusing on the meaning of a paragraph rather than a verse, phrase, or single word (which unfortunately is the emphasis of some Bible teachers) increases the odds of discovering the accurate meaning. Only by concentrating on the theme of a paragraph and noting how each sentence contributes to the development of that theme can one discern the real meaning and significance of the individual sentences.

Circles of Contextual Study

To interpret a passage in its literary context one must examine different domains or circles of context:

- the immediate context
- the book context
- the author's corpus of writings context (where available)
- the pertinent testament context
- the Bible context.

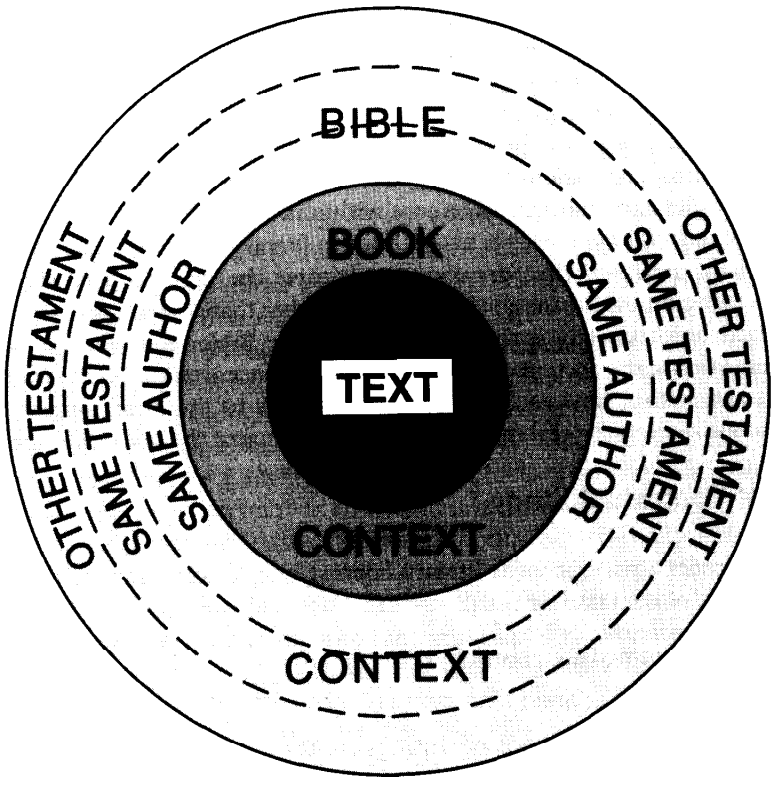
While these contextual domains interact, they need to be applied in a definite order of priority. Each provides significant insight into the intended meaning of the passage,

[9]Of course, for poetry we must adopt other ways to distinguish complete thought units. Those might be, for example, couplets, stanzas, or the entire poem. It other genres we would think of entire oracles, epics, parables, or ballads, to name a few.

but a decreasing relative importance exists as one moves from immediate context to the context of the rest of the Bible.

Figure 1: Circles of Context

1. Immediate Context
2. Entire Book Context
3. Context of the Bible



Immediate Context

The immediate context exerts the most important control over the meaning **of a** specific passage. **We define the immediate context as the material presented immediately before and after the passage under study. In some** instances this will be

the preceding and succeeding paragraphs; in others it may be a subsection in the author's presentation, or possibly a major division of a book. The tactic of outlining a book helps the interpreter to discern its natural divisions and to establish the specific immediate context in which a passage occurs. A sequence of ideas links the ideas. The proximity of the materials to each other and the correlation of the materials with each other make the immediate context a more critical indicator of meaning than either the whole book or the whole Bible.

The investigation of the immediate context focuses on two things : ***theme*** and ***structure.*** To discover the ***theme*** or central idea of the entire section of the book where the passage under study occurs, the student must first determine the theme of the preceding section, the passage itself, and the following passage. Of course, this assumes that the passage for study does not occur at the beginning or end of a unit of thought. If it does, one can evaluate only what follows or precedes, respectively. Then the student must analyze these subjects to find the common theme that holds them together. This theme of the immediate context regulates the meaning of the individual words, phrases, clauses, and sentences within the specific passage being studied.

Like any skill, learning how to recognize the main theme of a passage takes practice. The following steps illustrate the process. First, carefully read the preceding passage to determine the dominant subject. That is, find the topic to which everything in that paragraph or section refers. Second, write a topic sentence in your own words. A good topic sentence is both precise and concise. It is not enough to say that the theme of a passage is "love." Obviously, one passage does not tell everything there is to know about love. A precise topic sentence contains a brief summary of what the passage says about love. For example: Love is more than a feeling; it must be demonstrated by actions. In the interest of precision and brevity, the theme should be restricted to one sentence. Repeat this process for each part of the immediate context and then for the combined book context.

The second focus **of the** immediate context is ***structure.*** Passages are not only linked by a common theme but also by structure. A thorough interpreter not only investigates what a text says but also how the writer organized the material. First, determine how the specific passage grows out of the preceding section and prepares for the following one. How does each paragraph contribute to the development of thought in the immediate context? These insights enable the interpreter to explain the relationship between the passage being studied and the surrounding paragraphs or sections. Just as one must understand each sentence in the given passage consistent with the general theme of the immediate context so also one must interpret that sentence according to the paragraph's structural relationship with the adjoining material.

To arrange passages in sequential order writers employ many different structural relationships. In some sections paragraphs are arranged *chronologically*. Historical narratives typically proceed in this way, reporting events in the order in which they occurred. For example, note the beginning words in these paragraphs: "After they came down from ..."; "Then Samuel took a flask ..."; "Then you will go on ..."; **"After** that you will go to ..." (**1 Sam** 9:25; 10:1, 3, 5). Writers

normally indicate such successions of events by adverbs and conjunctions that indicate continuation: now, then, later, and afterwards.

Other texts group materials together in a context based on ***thematic continuity.*** For example, the Gospel writers sometimes clustered events or teachings that were of a similar nature even though they did not happen at the same time. The writer of Matthew probably gathered the parables in chapter thirteen to exemplify Jesus' teaching ministry.[10]

Logical order, another organizing principle, accounts for most of the sequential arrangement in the OT prophets, NT epistles, and Bible speeches. The logical arrangement of material takes many forms. Some of the more important structural patterns authors use in developing a logical line of thought are:

1. Introduction	preparing for what follows
2. Explanation	clarifying the meaning
3. Illustration	citing an example or instance
4. Causation	showing cause and effect
5. Instrumentation	demonstrating the means to an end
6. Interrogation	giving a question and answer
7. Evidence	proving the stated point
8. Particularization	stating the details
9. Generalization	drawing a general principle from details
10. Interchange	alternating sequence
11. Cruciality	pivot marking change of direction
12. Climax	indicating progression from lesser to greater
13. Continuation	extending an idea
14. Continuity	restating the same idea
15. Repetition	restating the same words for emphasis
16. Comparison	showing similarity to something else
17. Contrast	showing difference from something else
18. Summarization	reviewing main points briefly
19. Conclusion	drawing inferences or bringing to an end

Occasionally conjunctions at the beginning of a paragraph indicate these logical connections. The writer's use of a specific logical connective between paragraphs simplifies the identification of the structural relationship, but, unfortunately, a writer does not always use these logical connectives. In that case the interpreter has to

[10]The parallel reports of some of these parables in the other Gospels show that they probably were not all taught during one phase of Jesus' ministry or necessarily in the order in which Matthew arranged them. The "Sermon on the Mount" in Mt 5–7 may indicate a similar thematic arrangement.

infer the type of logical relationship from the nature of the contents. By determining how each paragraph functions in the logical flow of thought in the context, the interpreter gains perspective for appreciating the true significance of the passage.

Literary genre provides another clue to the organizational pattern of biblical materials. Biblical writers employed a wide variety of distinct types of literature that were well established in biblical times. In recent years scholars have become increasingly aware of how much each different literary genre influences the meaning of the message it communicates.[11] The features of these specific literary formats and their significance for meaning are presented in the subsequent chapters on literary genres.

In some instances the relationship between adjoining paragraphs may seem totally confusing. The student may discern no reason for the sequence of ideas—whether chronological, thematic, logical, or relative to the literary genre. Such apparent "jumps" in thought between passages that the writer obviously presents as related may be explained by a phenomenon called ***psychological transfer.*** This occurs when one subject triggers a psychological switch to a different subject. In the mind of the writer there is a connection between the thoughts but it is more psychological than logical. The relationship was clear to the writer but is not immediately apparent to the reader. Before accusing the writer of a mental lapse in writing, the student should attempt to discover the writer's frame of reference.

An example of this may occur at 2 Cor 6: 13. Following the paragraph of w. 11-13, which ends with Paul's appeal that the readers "open wide your hearts also," Paul appears to interject a seemingly unrelated section, 6:14–7:1, which begins, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." Then at 7:2 he resumes where he left off at 6:13, repeating, "Make room for us in your hearts." The connection between sections may be more psychological than anything. If you are to make room for me, Paul tells the Corinthians, you cannot "make room" for unrighteous associations with unbelievers. Paul believes their current unholy associations will subvert a genuine reunion between himself and the Corinthians.[12]

Finally, we may simply find an ***abrupt transition*** from one paragraph to another. When a writer introduces a new topic, a break in the thought flow will occur. Sometimes the writer prepares the reader for the transition;[13] at other times there is no warning.[14] In interpreting a passage consistent with its context, interpreters must

"Though we have much to say about this later, we direct the reader here to such works as L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible As Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); J. L. Bailey and L. E. Vander Broek, *Literary* Forms *in* the *New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); and G. W. Coats, "Genres: Why Should They Be Important for Exegesis?" in G. W. Coats, ed., *Saga,* Legend, *Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in the Old Testament,* JSOTSup, 35 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

[12]On this see C. K. Barrett, *The* Second *Epistle to the Corinthians,* BNTC (London: Black, 1973), 193-95; cf. 11-12.

[13]Such an announced transition occurs at 1 Cor 7:1 where Paul moves specifically to answer questions his readers had raised. In the OT, editors may announce to readers their intentions as sections develop, e.g., 1 Sam 23:1, 8.

[14]To return to 1 Cor for examples, no transition normally occurs between the various topics Paul sequentially considers (see e.g., 5:1; 6:1; and 6:12). To come back to the OT, after listing David's final words (1 Sam 23:1–7) and David's mighty men (23:8–39), the writer resumes the narrative with a simple, "Again the anger of the LORD" (24:1).

recognize the possibility of an abrupt transition either before or after the text. This protects the interpreter ii-om creating forced contextual insights where the writer intended none.

Literary Context of the Entire Book

The book in which the Bible passage occurs is the second most important literary context in determining the author's intended meaning. To understand a passage correctly means to understand it in terms of the whole **book in which it occurs. Read shorter** books carefully and repeatedly. Try to read through longer books in one sitting, more than once if possible. Work out a tentative outline of the book's structure and then make use of reference works that summarize or outline their message.[15] Three kinds of information about the entire book are significant for proper understanding of any given passage within that book:

1. The book's purpose(s) or controlling theme(s)
2. The basic outline of the book
3. Parallel passages within the book that deal with the same subject

It is helpful, first, to understand the ***book's purpose(s) or controlling theme(s)***. Knowing why the writer composed the book sets limits on the meaning for its individual parts. We assume that individual statements or sections contribute in some way to the writer's goal. Sometimes the writer makes it easier for interpreters by explicitly stating the purpose for the book. For example, at the beginning of his Gospel, Luke precisely states his aim:

> **Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Lk 1:1–4).**

Luke lived in a day when multiple written records and oral reports were creating confusion about the details of Jesus' life. Thus, he purposed to confirm for Theophilus the credibility of the information about Jesus' life by providing a carefully investigated and orderly record. In contrast to Luke, the author of the Fourth Gospel waited until near the end of his book to indicate that his purpose was to promote eternal life by generating and sustaining belief in Jesus (Jn 20:30–31). Other books like Romans and 1 Corinthians have multiple purpose statements at various places in the **book.**

[15]The **chief helps on this score come from so-called introductions. See the bibliography for** suggestions **for both testaments.**

For OT books, explicit purpose statements are more difficult to discover (if we can discover them at all). The first two verses of Joshua probably encapsulate the subject matter of the book: the crossing of the Jordan ***River*** and the conquest of "the land I **am** about to give to them-to the Israelites" (Josh **1**: l-2). But if we inquire ***why*** the writer composed the book, that is more difficult to answer. Perhaps the answer is found in the book's conclusion with all its warnings and reminders to be faithful in serving the Lord-to follow the example of Joshua and Israel during his life. That is, the writer's purpose could well be to encourage a later generation of Israelites to "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right ***or*** to the **left" (23:6)**. They needed to **affirm** along with Joshua's contemporaries, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him" **(24:24)**.

So when books lack formal purpose statements, interpreters must infer them **from** the contents. They must observe what the author or editor does in a book and then deduce the purpose **from** that information. While this approach may prove fairly accurate in finding the writer's goal, it remains basically conjectural. Bather than speculate about questionable, inferred purposes, we suggest that in such cases interpreters **identify** the dominant themes of the books. The end product will not differ much on either approach. Interpreters can discover the controlling themes by noting those topics the author emphasizes in the book. For example, in a short book like Obadiah, the dominant theme of God's judgment against Edom and his vindication and blessing of the house of Jacob is readily discernible. For the longer book of Galatians, Paul clearly seeks to champion the principle of justification by faith in Christ alone, against the teachings of some **"Judaizers"** who insisted upon the requirement of following the Law to attain salvation. Then each passage is interpreted according to its contribution to one or more of those subjects.

The ***basic plan*** of the book is another important part of the literary context of the book. The contribution an individual passage makes to the total message of a book depends primarily on its location. For longer books this involves two main elements: **the *general*** train-of-thought of the entire book and the specific **train-of-**thought of the section of the book where the passage occurs. By discovering the theme of each of the main divisions of the book the interpreter can determine whether or not there is any significance in their order. Once an interpreter understands how the theme of each major division fits into the book's overall flow of thought, the focus narrows to a closer look at the specific section containing the passage for study. To summarize: an interpretation is more likely to be the correct one when it explains the passage in a way that is consistent with the theme of the section in which the passage occurs. Then the likely interpretation shows how that section contributes to the overall progress of the book itself.

The final item considered in studying the literary context of the whole book concerns ***parallel passages*** **in** the book that deal with the same subject as the specific passage under study. When a writer refers to a subject more than once in a book, one or more of the passages may clarify vague aspects in another. The procedure for this study is straightforward. Skim or quickly read the book to locate other passages

that deal with the same subject and then study them to discover what they contribute to the understanding of the passage.[16]

So, for example, to understand "the Day of the LORD" in Joel 2:31 (part of the section that Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:20), the student must investigate what else Joel says about the Day of the LORD in his prophecy (e.g., 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:14). Or for insight into what James means by "saving faith" in the section that starts with 2:14, the student must gain insight from other references in the letter to faith (1:3, 5-8; 2:1; 5:15).

But a word of caution is in order. We must always make sure that the passages are truly parallel. Sometimes passages use identical words but with different meanings for those words. This would be only an ***apparent*** parallel. Such passages should not be used to interpret each other directly. Even when both passages are true parallels, one cannot simply read the ideas of one passage into the other without proper justification. We must keep ever before us the goal of interpretation: the intention of the text. We become liable to serious errors when we interpret a passage in light of another while ignoring the immediate context of each passage. As a precaution, always interpret each parallel passage according to its own immediate context and the entire book context before comparing the passages. Once we know the contextually valid meaning for each parallel passage, we can compare the passages to see if any of them sheds light on specific details in the passage under study.

So for both the examples cited above-from Joel and James-the interpreter would need to be sure that the authors were using the concepts in truly parallel ways before simply imposing the other texts' features onto the passages under study. Do Joel's other references to the "Day of the LORD" have historical (for Joel's time) or eschatological (some time in the future) significance? We need to be sure of the answer before simply forcing their meanings on his use at 2:31. Does James use "faith" uniformly in his letter? Each passage must be investigated individually to determine whether the definition of faith in 2:14–26 is the sense that is employed elsewhere.

Context of the Entire Bible

This final element is more controversial and more difficult to control. As we presupposed, the Bible possesses a unity in its parts in spite of its diversity of human authors. Scripture's divine inspiration gives continuity of thought to books written over a 1500-year period. Furthermore, the Bible's human authors participated in the same ongoing Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. Some later writers knew books written previously and drew heavily upon them. In 2 Pet 3:15–16 the author refers to letters written by Paul, even implying their status on a par with other Scriptures (i.e., the OT). The OT books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles probably

[16]Often a concordance helps in this task, though students must be careful not to trust merely the co-occurrence of common words to locate parallel passages. This would be a grave error as we will discover later in the discussion of words. A concordance may suggest some parallels, but students cannot rely solely on it. See the bibliography chapter for suggestions on concordances.

drew upon each other to some extent. Psalms 105-106 appear to depend upon sections from the Pentateuch. The most popular theories of Gospel composition suggest that one or more depended upon others. Luke's prologue (1:1–4) implies that very fact.

Because of this unity, the entire Bible provides a literary context for all passages in it. But here comes the controversy and the difficulty. How do we allow individual authors their unique perspectives-the Bible's diversity-and yet affirm the Bible's unity?

We do not expect that all biblical writers on an issue will have the same perspective or present their views in the same ways. They will have different slants and distinct emphases, depending upon their purposes for writing. But due to the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the entire Bible, we posit that the correct meaning of every portion of Scripture will be ***consistent with the*** rest of the teaching of the Bible on that subject. One passage will not contradict the clear teaching of the rest of the Bible on that subject.

Three groupings of biblical books should be consulted in interpreting a passage according to the context of the entire Bible: (1) parallel passages in other books by the same author (for Paul's view of the Law in Romans, also consult other Pauline books); (2) passages in books by other authors in the same testament (see what other writers in the NT say about the Law); and finally, (3) passages in books by authors in the other testament (study the Law in the OT).

First, we study parallels in other books attributed to the ***same author.*** These writings come from the same mind energized by the Holy Spirit, thus promising the highest level of linguistic and conceptual continuity. There is the highest degree of probability that the same person talking about the same subject in a similar way means the same thing. Furthermore, each biblical writer has a personal understanding of and fairly consistent pattern for articulating an aspect of God's truth. Thus, to comprehend Paul's understanding of faith in Rom 3:22 the interpreter is wiser to consult passages in Galatians (e.g. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24) than passages in James. This applies not merely to the words used but even more to the ideas they represent.[17]

Parallels in books by different writers in the ***same testament*** rank second in significance. Writers from the same testament have the most in common with others writing from or about the same phase of God's redemptive program. OT writers used the Hebrew (or Aramaic) language and reflected a Semitic culture in a primarily Israelite setting. They shared a focus on the nation of Israel as God's special people, on exclusive loyalty to Yahweh as an expression of that relationship, and on the prophetic promises of future blessings. That gave them, diverse as they were, a unique camaraderie.[18] NT writers, by contrast, employed the Greek language and

[17]Of course, we must employ the same guidelines and cautions about using parallel passages we noted above. While we are dealing with the same author, we are now in different books. We must assure ourselves that the passages are truly parallel before simply imposing meaning from one place to another.

[18]On the harmony of OT theology see W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

resided in the predominantly Hellenistic culture of the Roman empire. They lived in the age of messianic fulfillment and proclaimed the good news of God's grace made available through the death and resurrection of Jesus.[19]

Since the writing of the OT covers at least a thousand years, interpersonal relationships were rare among its writers. So the help that other writers or books can provide for interpreting individual passages might appear to be considerably diminished from what we can discover in the NT. Yet a common religious legacy, shared convictions, and a reverence for the Mosaic tradition or the Davidic monarchy on the one hand and the writings of earlier prophets on the other, provided some unity and sense of continuity. Studying OT parallels requires paying close attention to the time when the writers lived and when the OT books became complete. For example, since the ministries of Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah overlapped (eighth century B.C.), the interpreter can learn about the religious apostasy of Israel and Judah at the time by comparing parallel passages. They provide helpful commentaries on each other at certain points.

The writers of the NT experienced a different situation. Joining as members of the church that included believers from many nationalities, they composed the NT books over a brief period of fifty or so years. The authors, a select group of apostles and their close associates, often had contact with each other. Of course, this does not mean they always agreed with each other, as Gal 2: 1 1–14 shows. However, even allowing for diverse expressions of Christianity within the NT, interpreters can expect a high degree of continuity in the way these early Christians communicated their faith.

The final type of parallel passages are those from the ***other testament.*** OT parallels for NT studies prove highly valuable. Because most NT writers knew the OT well, they borrowed theological language and categories from it. After all, the Bible of the early church was the OT, most often its Greek translation (LXX). Just as the English language shows the influence of the Bible,[20] so the NT language reflects Greek Septuagintal expressions.[21] In fact, some of the arguments in the book of Hebrews depend upon the formulation of the OT in the LXX version (e.g., 1:6 cf. Deut 32:43; 10:5–7 cf. Psa 40:6–8). Furthermore, their entire thought-world, especially the religious concepts in which they formulated their belief system—monotheism, covenant, election, people of God, atonement, and sin, to name a few-derived from OT theological convictions.

[19]On the unity of NT theology see esp. G. E. Ladd, ***A Theology of the New Testament*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ***1974);*** and D. Guthrie, New ***Testament Theology*** (Leicester and Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981).

[20]For example, even completely secular people refer to their "thorn in the flesh," "going the extra mile," or being a "good Samaritan."

*'Carson, Moo, and Morris say of the author of the third Gospel, "He starts with a paragraph in classical style (1:1–4). The remainder of his first two chapters has a strongly Hebraic strain, while the remainder of the book is in a good Hellenistic Greek that constantly reminds the reader of the Septuagint" ***(An Introduction to the New Testament*** [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992],115). In various places readers will encounter the term "Semitisms" to describe these alleged Semitic influences or elements in the NT. Semitisms may come from the Hebrew OT, the LXX, or the infusion of Aramaic and possibly Hebrew terms or constructions, say from everyday life in first-century Palestine.

Obviously, in the other direction the NT did not influence the writing of the OT, but NT parallels to OT texts help readers find the total teaching of the Bible on a subject and may draw out further implications.[22] This demonstrates the relevance of the OT teaching as it unfolds, for example, in Jesus' ministry where he fulfills OT texts.[23] In Lk 4:18–21 Jesus explicitly identifies his ministry as the fulfillment of Isa 61: l-2. In Mt 11:4–5, however, when Jesus says, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor," his answer more implicitly expands Isa 35:4–6 and 61:1.

At the same time, interpreters must exercise extreme caution to avoid an undue Christianizing of the OT. Parallel NT passages should not be used to make OT passages teach NT truth. The early church had the tendency-one continued by Protestants after the Reformation-to read NT theological concepts into OT passages. We must avoid this error; our first task is always to understand each text on its own terms-as its writer and readers would have understood it.

Early in our careers one of the authors became embarrassingly aware of how prevalent this practice continues to be among Christians. After preaching a sermon on Jeremiah's call, in which he stressed insights for responding to God's leading today, a parishioner bluntly admonished him at the door, "Young man (a clear sign of trouble), preach Christ!" The confident, "But I did, sir!" did not reassure the indignant parishioner who felt that every OT passage had to serve as a springboard for a Christ-centered gospel message. Unfortunately, he, and many others like him, have failed to realize that God's message in the OT for the Church today must grow out of the intended meaning of the text itself. Its significance for our lives may differ greatly from its significance to its original readers, but not its essential meaning. Many people miss the great truths about God's character and His relationship with His people to be discovered in the OT because of their well-intentioned but misguided belief that every part of the Bible must convey NT truth. First and foremost, the OT must stand on its own merits. We must interpret its passages in keeping with the intention of its texts; that constitutes the essential goal of OT interpretation.[24]

Interpreting passages in light of the context of the entire Bible has a limited scope. Check parallels to see if they contribute to the understanding of the meaning of the passage. The careful use of parallels gives the Bible student an ability to appreciate the contribution that the text under consideration makes to the total teaching of the entire Bible on a given theme.

[22]As noted above, when one interprets Joel 2:28–32 it helps to read Acts 2:14ff. to see what Peter does with the Joel text.

[23]To repeat the illustration used above, like the modern "colorizing" of old black and white movies, fulfillment in this messianic age adds depth and new perspectives to OT passages. Christians cannot read OT messianic passages apart from their understanding of the texts' fuller revelation in Christ.

[24]W. C. Kaiser, Jr., ***Toward An Exegetical Theology*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) rightly propounds the principle that he calls the "analogy of [antecedent] Scripture"-that one may interpret a Passage only on the basis of what it says or on the basis of texts that ***preceded it*** in time (136–37).

Historical-Cultural Background

Biblical passages not only express a writer's train of thought but also reflect a way of life-one that in most ways differs radically from that of present-day readers. The literature and events recorded in the Bible originated thousands of years ago. Beyond reflecting ancient languages, cultures, and lifestyles, the biblical writers wrote their messages for people different from ourselves. Consequently, every time we study a Scripture text, we must be aware of these cross-cultural and epoch-spanning dimensions. Each passage was God's Word to other people before it became God's Word to us. In a sense, the Bible always comes to us secondhand, through others who lived at different times and in different places. This is the basis of an important principle of hermeneutics: The ***correct interpretation of a biblical passage will be consistent with the historical-cultural background of the passage.*** There are three reasons why this principle is important: perspective, mindset, and contextualization.

The Significance of the Historical-Cultural Background

Perspective

First, the circumstances in which communication occurs substantially affect, if not determine, meaning. We need to comprehend the ***perspective*** of the original communicators-initiator and receptor—to understand the correct meaning. Because both the writer and the recipients typically share the same cultural background and information and live at the same time in history, perspectives are not mentioned. This tendency is true even today. If someone shows us a personal letter, even if the letter comes from a mutual friend, some things may need explanation because they refer to an experience known only by the writer and recipient. Lacking this information, another reader has difficulty making sense out of these references.[25]

Such "over-the-shoulder" reading describes the requirement for present-day readers of the NT epistles. Apostles or others sent these first-century letters to specific people living in certain places concerning particular circumstances in their lives. In most instances the writer and recipients had shared familiar experiences; they spoke the same Greek language and possessed common information about each other and their world. To correctly interpret these books today, the reader needs to understand as much as possible about the details of this historical and cultural background.

The same applies equally to the majority of biblical books that are not letters. Many of the psalms of ancient Israel reflected experiences of worshipers living in a monarchy in a world replete with kingdoms and empires. The writer of Judges characterizes the days prior to the monarchy in a closing statement: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg 21:25). They were "wild and woolly" times to be sure-unquestionably and literally worlds apart from the mod-

[25]Or read a political cartoon in a newspaper or magazine from another city or, better, a different country. Unless one comprehends the issues or persons in view, the cartoon remains a mystery.

ern era. Likewise, the apocalyptic prophecies grow out of a world-view and use literary techniques largely foreign to our experience.[26]

Our life setting differs so radically from virtually every biblical situation it is no wonder that at first glance many Bible statements make a different impact on us than that intended by the original writer. Present-day Bible interpreters need to put themselves in the shoes of the writer and initial recipients, that is, they need to understand a passage from their perspective. Biblical writers did not have our situation in mind. They wrote fi-om the perspective of their own circumstances, and we must understand their writings from that vantage point.

Mindset

The second reason why a passage must be interpreted consistent with its historical-cultural setting grows out of the possibly subtle factor of ***mindset.*** Statements not only communicate ideas; they also cause emotional impact. Each culture manifests a system of values that regulates this affective or feeling dimension of discourse. The effect of a statement may vary from culture to culture, depending on each culture's standards of right and wrong or scale of values. When Jesus called Herod Antipas a fox (Lk 13:32), his hearers understood "fox" to represent a certain value.[27] To call someone a fox today would have different meanings or values, depending upon the culture (or subculture) involved.[28] If a reader simply imposed a current value for "fox," the original intent would be obscured or even lost. In some cultures, fox might have no connotative value, and the meaning would simply be opaque. Biblical revelation was communicated within cultures. It could not be otherwise, for all human language is culturally conditioned.

To develop an awareness of the mindset of people in biblical times, we need to study the historical-cultural background of their world, because an interpretation must make sense for the people "back then," even if it remains strange to us. We have to resist the temptation to "sanitize" the Bible so it conforms to our values and mindset. Once we understand what a passage ***meant, we can*** apply that meaning in light of today's cultural values so that it can have the appropriate impact and emotional effect on us.

Contextualization

The third reason why a passage must be interpreted consistent with its historical-cultural background goes to the very heart of the interpretive task. While the first two reasons, perspective and mindset, stress the importance of knowing the

[26]Of course, we provide specific help in understanding these and other various genres in following sections.

"According to I, H, Marshall in rabbinic literature a fox typified low cunning, but it was also an insignificant creature in comparison to a lion *(Commentary on Luke,* NIGTC [Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19781, 571). Most commentaries on Luke point to either cunning or insignificance as the point of the "fox" reference.

[28]Connotations today might include clever, crafty, sly, and sexually attractive.

historical-cultural background for discovering the meaning intended for the original recipients, this reason focuses on expressing that message accurately in today's world. The word ***contextualization*** captures this perspective.[29] Contextualizing biblical truth requires interpretive bifocals. First, we need a lens to look back into the background of the biblical world to learn the intended meaning. Then, we need another lens to see the foreground to determine how to best express—contextualize-that truth for today's world.

The astute interpreter lives in two worlds: the ancient biblical world and modern society.[30] The Bible was formed within specific ancient cultures; moreover, we are the products of our extremely modern cultures. These two horizons comprise the alternating foci of the perceptive interpreter.[31] Effective exegesis not only perceives what the message meant originally but also determines how best to express that meaning to one's contemporaries. The process of contextualization reexpresses the ideas presented in a biblical passage in the language of today so that they convey the same impact to modern hearers.

The interpreter must be conscious of the nature of the task. We have to know both the biblical and the modern worlds in order to bridge their differences. Because our present culture has molded how we understand things (our preunderstanding), we risk fashioning our perception of the biblical message in terms of our way of life without first understanding it according to its own historical-cultural setting. If we succumb, the message we hear from Scripture may not correspond to what the text in fact means; it may simply be recast according to ***our*** meanings.

Principles for Historical-Cultural Interpretation

The Original Historical-Cultural Background

Several principles guide the interpreter in taking proper account of the historical-cultural backgrounds of the biblical worlds. First, we must ***understand each passage consistent with its historical and cultural background.*** For any interpretation to qualify as the intended meaning of a text, it must be the most likely meaning given the

[29]Arising in missiological circles, the term *contextualization* describes the process of "packaging" the gospel (and other biblical truth) in ways that are relevant to the diversity of modern cultures. Missiologists, in general, welcome the insights of anthropology and sociology in their quest to impact cultures with the gospel. For further insight and analyses see B. J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1979); B. C. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1980); and H. M. Conn, "Contextualization: Where Do We Begin?" in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, ed. C. E. Armerding (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 90–119.

[30]From the preacher's perspective this concept is foundational. See J. R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the 20th Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); H. W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*; and S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

[31]Recall A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

circumstances of the original writing and reading of the passage. Any suggested explanation of a passage that would have been inconsistent with or inconceivable in the historical or cultural setting of the author and recipients cannot be valid. One must ask, given the original circumstances, what meaning fits most naturally? This principle means that an interpreter must understand the historical and cultural setting as accurately as possible and must interpret the biblical message consistent with that picture.

Fortunately, archaeological findings, historical research, and sociological and cultural studies have provided a vast reservoir of information for this task.[32] So impressive is the material available that Russell Spittler boasted, "Advances in lexicography and archaeology have put us in a place to know more about the ancient world than it knew about itself."[33] While there is much truth in this statement, we must take care not to overestimate our knowledge of the biblical world. Most ancient people certainly lived with a limited knowledge of the world around them. What to them were the routine experiences of daily existence, we now analyze and classify by such highly developed academic disciplines as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, and psychology. But in spite of all the detailed insights gained by these studies, our knowledge of the details of the interrelated components of each Bible story remains extremely limited.[34] What we don't know and can't find out far exceeds the valuable information available to us; consequently, we must always make modest and realistic claims for any of our historical-cultural reconstructions.

Understanding each passage according to its background involves determining how the biblical setting was like ours and how it differed from ours. There will always be some similarity between our lives and theirs. These common elements provide reference points that help present-day audiences understand the meaning. Differences, on the other hand, must be studied carefully to provide the interpreter with information that can remove historical-cultural ambiguities.

The letter to the church at Laodicea (Rev 3: 14-22) provides an intriguing example. In the Lord's description of this church, he condemns it for being "neither cold nor hot." He goes on to state, "I wish you were either one or the other!" (v. 15). He finds no reason to commend the people of this church; they are completely useless-neither like hot water (as in a comfortable bath) nor like cold water (as in a refreshing drink). Apart from insight growing out of archaeological studies, interpreters might seriously misconstrue the point. That is, we must interpret "hot" and "cold" in light of the historical context of Laodicea, which was located close to both hot springs (by Hierapolis) and a cold stream (by Colossae). Now both hot and cold water are desirable; both are useful for distinct purposes. But the spiritual state of this church more closely resembled

[32]The bibliography provides a list of helpful resources.

[33]R. Spittler, "Scripture and the Theological Enterprise: View from a Big Canoe," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology / Evangelical Options*, ed. R. K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 56-77, 75.

[34]See E. M. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures (New* York: Lippincott, 1972) for a good discussion of how limited this knowledge can be.

the tepid lukewarm water that eventually flowed into Laodicean pipes. Neither hot nor cold, it was putrid and emetic. Jesus is ***not*** saying that active opposition to him (an incorrect interpretation of "cold") is better than being a lukewarm Christian.[35]

The Original Impact

The second principle moves from the factual information about the biblical setting to the emotional dimension: *We* must ***determine the impact that the biblical message would have had in its original setting*** This principle involves the factor of mindset. Interpreters should seek to know, where possible, how the original recipients would have reacted to what was written. Clearly, we are not always in a position to know this with any degree of certainty, nevertheless, to the extent that we are able (through our historical research), we seek to discover if a text would conflict or agree with the readers' value systems and to identify whether their feelings about it would resemble or differ from ours.

The book of Amos serves to illustrate this point. As "The LORD roars fi-om Zion" (1:2) he pronounces judgment against Israel's (the Northern Kingdom) neighbors (1:3–2:5). One can sense the people of Israel gloating in self-satisfaction and complacency. No doubt those other nations deserved God's judgment, they thought. But then the ax falls and Amos pronounces God's final judgment-against Israel! Israel will not escape and the book proceeds to detail God's case against her. Equally, modern readers can sense the emotional impact of 4:1 where Amos calls the self-indulgent women of Israel "cows of Bashan." Modern readers who live in urban areas must strain to feel the urgency of a prophecy that pronounces plagues and blights upon fields and gardens in that agrarian culture, which was totally dependent upon what the people could produce in their fields (5 :16–1 7). Can we feel with the original readers what it would be like to hear God's assessment: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies" (5:21)? Imagine how would we feel if the Lord pronounced these words on our church worship.

This emotive angle of interpretation fosters a fuller appreciation of a passage's intended meaning. It supplies insight into the effect of the message as well as a comprehension of its concepts or ideas. It gives us a "feel" for the ideas and an "understanding" of them.

The Correct Expression

The third principle relates to the contextualization aspect of historical-cultural interpretation: ***We must express biblical truth in our language in ways that most closely correspond to the ideas in the biblical culture.*** The challenge for the interpreter is to

[35]A succinct analysis of the latest evidence occurs in C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting,* JSNTSup 11 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT,1986), 186-91. Cf. M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green. "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," *ExpT* 69 (1957-58): 176–78.

find adequate contemporary idioms to articulate the intention of the passage so that people today will sense the meaning and impact that the original readers sensed. Certainly the NIV does a commendable job of capturing the thought of Rom 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world." But readers have continued to appreciate J. B. Phillips' rendition: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould. ..."[36] These words express Paul's concept in a memorable idiom that a contemporary English speaker can easily understand. This principle naturally applies to the work of translators, but no less to interpreters who desire to understand and communicate the Bible's meaning to contemporary audiences or readers.

Those wishing to interface the biblical message with our contemporary culture face significant challenges and risks. One perennial danger concerns syncretism. Generally, "the combination of different forms of belief or practice,"[37] it comes to have a subjective and more pejorative sense: "The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved."[38] So, for Christians it denotes the union of biblical and nonbiblical beliefs to form a hybrid, and thus unacceptable, religion. Most Christians view syncretism negatively, for the mixing of Christian beliefs with tenets of other belief systems results in an amalgam that is non-Christian.

In I Kgs 13-14, we find that Jeroboam committed this error. He served as the first monarch of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the ten tribes seceded from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Fearing that his subjects' religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices would cause their loyalty to revert to King Rehoboam of Judah, Jeroboam established an alternate religion with worship centers within his own country. While preserving many of the features of the Mosaic beliefs and worship, his new religion, which focused worship on two golden calves, also embraced idolatrous elements from neighboring religions. The Lord forcefully condemned this syncretistic religion by sending a prophet to denounce it on the very day the king attempted to offer sacrifices at the new shrine at Bethel.

Like Jeroboam of old, many today would blend together their understanding of the Christian faith with the best elements of the "religions" in their contemporary culture. Describing this approach W. Larkin says: "Though the Bible still has a role to play, it is now placed in dialectical relationship with the contemporary context."[39] Evangelicals reject this approach to contextualization because it contradicts

[36]J. B. Phillips, *The* New *Testament in Modern English,* 2d ed. (London and Glasgow: Bles and Collins, 1960), 332.

[37] ***Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*** (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1983), 1193.

[38]A. Droogers, "Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem," in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach,* ed. J. Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), 7. For further insight into this issue see H. G. Coward, ***Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., ***Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981); and L. Newbigin, ***Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*** (Geneva: WCC, 1986).

[39]W. J. Larkin, ***Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 140.

the gospel's claim to be the one and only saving faith.[40] We believe that proper contextualization uses concepts from the contemporary culture to communicate the ***Bible's own message*** effectively in a way that avoids syncretism. When seeking to convey the Bible's message, interpreters must take care not to choose words or other features from the culture that would involve the assimilation of elements incompatible to the Christian faith. Indeed, they may need to apply the biblical message in a cogent way to correct the thought-forms of a culture.

Proper contextualization requires that the interpreter be sensitive to both the biblical and the current cultures. The ultimate goal of good interpretation is a clear, accurate, and relevant explanation of the text's intended meaning in language that is meaningful to one's contemporaries. Bridging the gap between the biblical culture and modern culture requires knowing the language, values, and significant symbols of modern society. While all translation involves interpretation, interpretation goes beyond good translation. Traditionally, biblical interpreters have been better trained and skilled in exegeting Scripture than in exegeting contemporary culture. Since the agenda of hermeneutics includes developing principles for discovering the meaning and relevance of the Bible for today's world, that must include guidelines for exegeting culture.

The ever-present need for balance and perspective alerts us to the "cart-before-the-horse" syndrome. A final word of counsel for historical-cultural exegesis is: Keep ***historical-cultural background details auxiliary to content.*** Sometimes interpreters become so preoccupied with the historical-cultural insights that they identify the main point of a passage as something that is inconsistent with the textual wording. A good case in point is the interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–13). This passage has troubled many Christians because Jesus appears to compliment a dishonest action. Some interpreters interpret the historical situation to suggest that the businessman for whom the steward worked probably charged his creditors exorbitant and illegal interest rates. The manager's reducing the creditors' bills simply eliminated the unethical padding of the original bills.[41] So when this boss commends his fired employee for cutting in half all his creditors' debts, he admits the justice of this action. For such interpreters, the lesson of the parable becomes one of justice, the righting of wrongs when that is in one's power. While this explanation has the advantage of reversing the troublesome impression of Jesus' compliment-he's commending justice, not dishonesty-is this correct?

Actually, the owner compliments his former manager for his shrewdness, not his justice. Nothing in the context or in Jesus' application of the parable suggests the theme of justice. Nowhere does the passage state or imply that the owner had charged excessive interest. Whether he did or not is not part of Jesus' story, and we cannot be sure the original readers or audience would have understood that background. Yet the

[40]Indeed, the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 states, "We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies" ("The Lausanne Covenant," in *Let The Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas [Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975]), 4.

"Defenders of this basic explanation include J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1–13)," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 23–42; and K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 86–110.

circumstances surrounding the parable and the lessons Jesus drew from it are two of the main clues to the meaning of parables. Furthermore, the surprise element, now recognized as a major characteristic and indicator of meaning in many of the parables of Jesus,[42] supports a focus on shrewdness, not justice. Receiving notice of his impending termination, the steward used the occasion to prepare for his long-range needs.[43]

Jesus' first application to the disciples underscores this point. Like the clever, dismissed bookkeeper, they too should act shrewdly in using present financial resources to make fiiends for eternity. The historical information about ancient loan practices proves valuable for understanding the parable. Indeed, it may explain one facet of the fired employee's shrewdness. He may have known that the boss did not dare take him to court for canceling half of the debts owed him because he had given tacit agreement to the unethical charges.

While knowledge of the historical-cultural setting is most important for discovering the intended meaning, it should always serve the supportive role of aiding one's understanding of the text itself. It must never supplant the meaning of the text. Authors communicate messages through the words of the text. Background material should help us understand the meaning of the text; it must not become an additional message that contravenes that meaning.

Retrieving the Historical-Cultural Background

Exploring the world of the biblical setting involves two distinct studies: (1) studying the background of a biblical book and (2) studying the background of specific passages in the book. Background information learned about the entire book gives insight into its overall setting and provides a general perspective for each passage. It becomes a historical-cultural "backdrop" for understanding the individual sections within the book. But each individual passage also requires special analysis to explain the historical-cultural factors that are pertinent to it.

Exploring the General Background of the Book

Before studying a particular biblical passage, the student should become familiar with the historical-cultural background of the book in which it occurs. This

[42]F. H. Borsch, ***Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) uses the terms "exaggeration" and "extravagance," 14-15. Cf. B. B. Scott, ***Hear Then The Parable*** (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and J. D. Crossan, ***In Parables*** (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973). E. Linnemann puts it in terms of ***unusual features*** "which do not result from a natural context in the representation in the parable narrative, [but] take their origin from the reality of which the narrator wishes to speak" ***(Parables of Jesus*** [London: SPCK, 1966], ***28).*** Though Linnemann has subsequently repudiated the form critical ideology that undergirded this work (see ***Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*** [Grand Rapids: Baker, 199011, her point here is unquestionably valid.

[43]The definitive defense of this view appears in D. V. Ireland, ***Stewardship and the*** *Kingdom* ***of God:*** *An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study* ***of*** *the Parable* ***of the Unjust Steward in*** *Luke 16:1–13* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

includes pertinent facts about the writer/editor, recipients, date, and purpose of the book. Detailed personal research will probably not be necessary every time the student begins analyzing passages in a given book. Undoubtedly the student will already be familiar with much of the historical-cultural background through information received at church, college, or seminary. The student may need to review (or perhaps, supplement) only what he or she already knows about the book. Those students who have not had the opportunity of prior studies should consult sources such as Bible-survey and introduction books, commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and encyclopedias.[44] At times even the brief introductions in many recent study Bibles can provide a helpful start.

When relying on these secondary sources, students should look up the biblical references to acquaint themselves with the specific evidence in the book itself and in other parts of the Bible, both for better understanding and to confirm the validity of others' claims. Besides insight about its authorship, destination, date, and purpose, good reference works also include valuable facts drawn from ancient, nonbiblical literary sources and archaeology.

When time permits, a supplemental strategy to studying a book's background will pay rich dividends. Students should read through the book at one sitting (perhaps several times) and record everything they find about the writer, recipients, date, and purpose of the book on separate sheets of paper. After they analyze and review this material (preferably prior to consulting other sources), the articles in the reference works will become more meaningful.

Concerning the ***author, editor,*** or ***writer, the*** student will want to research matters of identity, characteristics, position among God's people, relationship with the recipients, and circumstances at the time of writing. This information will help the student understand the book from the perspective of the writer. Of course, such material may be more accessible for some books than for others. We cannot obtain information about who wrote many books of the Bible for they are anonymous; for others the authorship is uncertain. In such cases the inductive insight we gain from reading the book itself may be all we can say about the writer.

Where possible, knowing about the recipients--their characteristics, circumstances, and community-sheds light on a passage, in particular on how and why the writer develops specific subjects. For many books in both testaments we have little information available about the recipients. In some prophetic books the situation is complex in that the audience addressed by the prophet may differ from the city or nation about whom the prophecy is made. For example, Obadiah prophesied about God's judgment against Edom though the book is addressed to Israel to provide encouragement.

Date is another key historical-cultural factor. Knowing when a book was written enables the student to include in the analysis historical information from other sources for that period. For some biblical books there is not enough evidence to determine a precise date. The historical facts included in the book may fit several time periods equally well. Or we may be able to set a book only within a given

[44]For a list and description of the best resources for this study, see the bibliography.

century at best. In such situations the main emphasis should be on the general circumstances in that period of time in that part of the world. For example, Jonah's prophecy is set in the eighth century B.C. during the reign of the mighty Assyrians. Thus, the brutal militarism of these hated pagans explains Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh to prophesy. For interpretive purposes, knowing the characteristics of a given period of time provides more insight than knowing a specific date.

For many NT books we can be fairly confident about locating their time of composition, at least within five to ten years. So, knowing that Paul exhorted the Romans to submit to the governing authorities during the early part of Nero's reign sheds light on his words (Rom 13:1–5). When Paul wrote (ca. A.D. 56), that infamous emperor had not yet exhibited the cruelty he demonstrated in later years. We might even speculate that Paul would have framed his instructions differently were he writing during Nero's atrocious pogroms against Christians. In historical books, Psalms, Proverbs, and some prophecies, interpreters may need to distinguish between the time when the material was composed and the time when a writer or final editor organized the book into its final shape.

*Examining the Historical-Cultural Factors of a **Specific** Passage*

Discovering the historical-cultural background of a biblical book provides the initial framework for understanding specific passages within that book. Determining the meaning of a passage requires interpreting each paragraph consistent with its natural meaning in its specific, original situation, that is, what the writer most likely meant by these words to these recipients in this set of circumstances. To understand correctly each literary unit within the book, one must first determine whether historical information learned about the book as a whole applies in a particular way to the specific passage under scrutiny. A proposed interpretation of a passage must fit the historical-cultural background of the whole book.

Beyond this, individual passages within the book may contain special historical-cultural features that are pertinent to the meaning of that passage. While this background information may not be included in the description of the setting of the whole book, it is absolutely essential for the meaning of this text. Though a student may learn much about the background to the book of Amos, all that insight will not help interpret the meaning of "Kaiwan your star-god" (Amos 5:26, RSV).[45] The student may understand the background for the writing of Matthew's Gospel without having a clue about the wide phylacteries worn by the Pharisees (Mt 23:5).[46] Thus, the student of Scripture also must research the specific historical

[45]All standard commentaries wrestle with the meaning of this reference. The NIV translates it as "the star of your god." For further help consult S. Paul, *Amos*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Amos*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1989); and J. L. Mays, *Amos, OTL* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

[46]For further insight on this issue consult J. Bowman, "Phylacteries," *Studia Evangelica* 1, ed. F. L. Cross, TU 73 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959): 523–38. Wearing phylacteries, Hebrew *tefillin*, began at least by the first century (Josephus, *Ant.* IV. viii. 13 mentions them). Black boxes containing ***Scripture*** texts, they are fastened to the left arm and forehead during prayer (Deut 6:4–9).

and cultural details mentioned in the passage. On the cultural side, the student should identify and seek to understand features reflected in the text. These include such things as:

- worldview: values, or outlook of the writer/editor, recipients, other people mentioned in the text, or in society at large
- societal structures: marriage and family patterns, roles of men and women, or racial issues
- physical features: climate and weather, or ease and means of transportation
- economic structures: means of making a living, issues of wealth and poverty, slavery, or economic mobility
- political climate: structures, or loyalties, including actual personnel
- behavior patterns, dress, or customs
- religious practices, power centers, convictions, rituals, or affiliations.

After identifying these items in the text, the student must attempt to discover additional information that could shed light on them. The first resource to consult is the Bible itself. It contains valuable data concerning many historical-cultural phenomena. Materials in other parts of the specific Bible book, in other writings by the same author or to the same audience, in other parts of the Bible in general, or in specific parallel accounts of the same event often help to reconstruct the original situation. Beyond the Bible, other sources provide the principal and necessary means to secure background information. Many specialized works, not to mention introductions, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and commentaries contain helpful material for clarifying historical or cultural references.[47]

The goal of historical-cultural research is to ***reconstruct,*** or at least to comprehend, the historical setting and cultural features of the specific passage as clearly as possible. Unfortunately, we are not always in a position to discover all we would like to know about certain features. But where feasible, this task involves explaining:

1. the situation of the writer, especially anything that helps explain why he or she wrote this passage;
2. the situation of the people involved in the text and/or the recipients of the book that can help explain why the writer penned this material to them;

[47]See the bibliography-especially the sections "History of the Ancient World" and "Customs, Culture, Society"-for further help in locating useful sources. Other sections list dictionaries, encyclopedias, and commentaries.

3. the relationship between the writer and audience or the people involved in the text;
4. the cultural or historical features mentioned in the text.

Then we seek to explain the meaning and importance of the text in light of this historical-cultural reconstruction of the original setting. To the extent that we enter the world of the biblical setting, we can grasp the meaning of the passage. An interpretation that accurately corresponds to the original setting best represents the text's intended meaning.

Word Meanings

By its very nature language communication employs words. People transmit ideas by combining words together into larger units of thought. Without words people would be limited in their ability to express their thoughts precisely. They would be restricted to nonverbal sounds, symbols, and pictures. The centrality of words in language communication underscores the importance of the lexical principle of hermeneutics: The ***correct interpretation of Scripture is the meaning required by the normal meaning of the words*** in ***the context in which they occur.***

On the surface words seem so simple. They make up such a routine part of our lives that we seldom stop to think about their complexity. To fully appreciate what is involved in the "normal" meaning of words, we must first understand several characteristics of words: nature, range of meaning, semantic fields, change of meaning, and nuances of meaning.

Crucial Issues about the Nature of Words

Words are Arbitrary Signs

To study words we must understand their characteristics. First, words are usually ***arbitrary signs.***[48] Simple stated, a word is the smallest combination of letters that is meaningful by itself in a language. A more precise definition is that a word is a semantic sign—a combination of symbols or sounds that represents an idea.[49] Spoken

[48]M. Silva puts it this way, "Little genuine progress can be made in language study unless we recognize that, as a rule, the association of a particular word with a particular meaning is largely a matter of convention" *(Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19831, 103–4; emphasis his). We say that words are usually arbitrary signs because in some instances where words sound like sounds (a dog's bark, "woof, woof'), the association between word and meaning is not simply arbitrary.

[49]The reader who wishes more detailed help into the intricacies of the modem study of words, especially in light of linguistic studies, should consult: P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1989); Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning;* J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); J. F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research: New Methods of Defining Hebrew Words For Salvation* (London: SCM, 1972); and E. A. Nida and J. P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

words are a combination of sounds that stand for a specific idea; written words combine letters representing those sounds to symbolize a concept. The idea designated by any given word can be communicated either orally or visually. But why a word means what it does is mostly a matter of convention. That's just the way it is!

How do words become signs indicating a specific idea? Suppose someone were to ask the question, "How is your 'kebof'?" Probably all English speakers would be puzzled. "What on earth is my **'kebof'?" they** would ask. Why? Is there something wrong with the word "kebof"? It sounds like a perfectly good word. It combines consonants and vowels in proper syllables. It is even pronounceable. It has all the attributes of a good word, except for one-it conveys no meaning, at least not in English! On the other hand, another five letter word, "maple," immediately brings to mind a type of tree. While several English-speaking people may envision different shapes of trees, depending upon their experience with maples, if any, they all acknowledge that "maple" refers to a type of tree, or to the wood that comes from a maple tree.[50]

What makes "maple" different from "kebof"? By common practice English speakers associate "maple" with a certain meaning. Throughout the development of a language, users of that language arbitrarily assign meanings to the words they use. When English speakers hear the word "maple," their minds automatically identify one member of the kind of plants commonly known as trees. But since English speakers have not assigned a meaning to "kebof," it represents nothing and thus calls nothing to mind.

This illustrates the most foundational fact about words: each word comes to represent a given idea (or ideas) only by its repeated use within a common language group. Thus, if two people wish to communicate, they both must use words in a similar way. From the standpoint of hermeneutics, accurate interpretation requires that we understand a word in the same way the writer used it. To illustrate, American English makes only a minor distinction between "pants" and "trousers." However, in British English these two words refer to two entirely different garments. Trousers indicate their American counterpart while pants denote "underpants."[51] To secure a "two-legged outer garment that extends from waist to ankle" in Aberdeen, Scotland, a wise American purchaser would ask the clerk for trousers, not pants. Understanding and using words the way other speakers of the language use them is critical for effective communication.

Needless to say, this complicates the task for Bible students. Since the original writers wrote in ancient languages that are foreign to us, we do not know intrinsically the meanings of the terms they used. We need translators to render the meaning of the biblical texts into English. Fortunately, scholars carefully study the biblical languages and do their best to convey the precise meaning of the biblical words in English. A hermeneutical point clearly emerges from this information. ***Interpreters must deliberately pursue what the original words of a passage meant at the time they were written in the context in which they occur.*** The meaning of the original words, not what ideas may occur to us when we read the passage, is the objective for word studies. We must always remember that the biblical writer selected certain words to express specific thoughts. Our aim is to recover the ideas that the writer sought to communicate by means of those words.

[50]For the sake of simplicity we will avoid other senses of "maple" such as someone's last name or a flavor of syrup or ice cream.

[51]British friends tell us this distinction is now breaking down due to the pervasive influence of television and American tourists.

Words Have a Range of Meanings

To further complicate matters, a word may have more than one meaning. In fact, most words have a ***range of meanings.***[52] The very same word, spelled identically, may have several totally different meanings.[53] Take for example the English word "hand." The "hand" that is a part of the human body is not at all like the "hand" on a clock, the "hand" held by a card player, a unit of measurement for horses, a worker as in "All 'hands' on deck," or the idea expressed by the request to "Give them a 'hand'!"[54] In each case the word remains the same, but the meaning changes. These different meanings constitute at least part of the range of meanings of the word "hand." Normally such multiple meanings of a word do not cause any confusion or misunderstanding. Aided by the context, native speakers usually pick the right meaning without any trouble. The ideas expressed in the larger message of the literary context almost always clarify the intended meaning.

These facts also hold true for the ancient biblical languages. Both the Hebrew word ***shālôm*** and the Greek ***eirēnē,*** translated **"peace"** in English, have several meanings. For the Hebrew ***shālôm*** the range includes **"absence** of strife" in the sense of prosperity, completeness, wholeness, harmony, and fulfillment. So it denotes a sense of well-being where relationships are unimpaired. In addition, it means the state of fulfillment that results from God's presence and righteousness; its source is God and comes as his gift. Finally, ***shālôm*** **can** mean the eschatological state of eternal peace.[55] The range of meaning for the Greek ***eirēnē*** includes an external absence of hostility, an internal tranquility, and the first Hebrew sense of well-being.[56] To understand what a biblical author means by "peace" in a specific text in a given testament, one must determine which of these potential meanings best fits the context.

[52]We saw that the range of meaning of "pants" is broader in American English (able to denote trousers and underpants) than in British English (only denotes underpants). Consider English words like "run" or "ball" to get a feel for how wide a range some words can have. Some dictionaries have dozens of meanings for "run."

[53]Recall our previous example of the word "trunk."

[54]Interestingly, note how even this sentence is ambiguous. It could mean "Give them applause" or "Help them." Also, in using "hand" we introduce only instances where it functions as a noun. "Hand" also occurs as a verb ("*Hand* me a book.").

[55]See *TWOT,* 2:931 and G. von Rad, "*shālôm* in the OT," *TDNT,* 2:402–406.

[56]While these three meaning categories are not all listed as such in any one of the major Greek lexicons, a comparison of W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. Danker, A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 2d English edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 226-7, with J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Bused on Semantic Domains, 2* vols. (New York, et al.: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1: 22.42, 25.248, suggests this range of meanings.

Several times during the "Upper Room Discourse" (Jn 13–17), Jesus promised "peace" to the apostles. Certainly Jesus did not mean "absence of hostility." He was not promising them trouble-free lives, for he ended this discourse with the statement, "I have told you these things, so that in me you have peace. ***In the world you will have trouble.*** But take heart.! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). In fact, though they would encounter considerable hostility, Jesus' command to "take heart" makes it clear that he was promising the apostles inward tranquility or an ultimate sense of their own well-being. So, the fact that many words have a range of meaning complicates language communication. To know the message intended by a speaker or writer, interpreters must discern which meaning makes the best sense in its context.

Word Meanings Overlap

The third factor to know about the nature of words is that each ***meaning of a word forms part of a distinct semantic field or domain.***[57] One meaning of "hand," we will call it "hand$_1$," resides in the **domain of "parts of the human body."** Another meaning, "hand$_2$," fits in the domain of "ways to show appreciation in a public setting" (along with "applause," "cheers," "clapping," and "ovation"). Put simply, a number of words in the same language include meanings similar to or closely related to other words. Often we call these words synonyms. Clearly, "hand$_2$" is closer in meaning to "ovation" than it is to "hand$_1$."

Words are synonyms when, out of their total range of meaning, at least one of their meanings overlaps with each other. "Run" is synonymous with "unravel" in the sentence, "These stockings are guaranteed not to _____" but not (usually) in "She is ready to the race."[58] Note, only one meaning of "hand" overlaps with "ovation." They are synonyms in only a portion of their ranges of meaning. Consider these two sentences: "The audience gave her a hand$_2$," and "The audience gave her an ovation." Though the two words are synonymous in these uses, they do not convey exactly the same meaning.[59] "Hand$_2$" is probably less formal than "ovation." The comedian gets a rousing hand from the audience while the soprano merits a standing ovation. Most English speakers probably use "ovation" less frequently and usually only with "standing." They reserve it for specific occasions. By seeing which part of a semantic field a specific word occupies, one is able to define the meaning of each term used within that field more precisely. This helps

[57]Silva, *Biblical Words*, has a brief treatment of the basic concepts (161-63). For more technical introductions see J. Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1:250ff; and W. W. Klein, "A Semantic Analysis of Paul's Election Vocabulary" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1977), 127-147. In Klein's words, "A language divides up the total conceptual sphere at a given synchronous state into .. fields, as a kind of mosaic. Within each field, each word has meaning in terms of its relationships with the other words in that field" (129).

[58]We say usually here, because one could always envision a setting when even an "odd" word could be made to fit. We are discussing normal usage.

[59]We will take up this element of connotation later.

the interpreter to recognize the specific nuances of a word that distinguish it from other terms.

In studying the Greek word for "peace" (*eirēnē*), Louw and Nida say that it belongs to two different semantic fields: first, domain 22 containing words used to express trouble, hardship, relief, or favorable circumstances;[60] and second, domain 25 listing terms for attitudes and emotions.[61] These two fields of meaning differ greatly. In the first category "peace" is one of six words in the subdomain indicating "favorable circumstances or state" (22:42–22:47), whereas the other uses of the word belong to the subdomain including "worry, anxiety, distress, peace" (25:223–25:250). The same word may refer to external circumstances free from hostility or to a psychological state of inward tranquility. Knowing this distinction enables the interpreter to watch for clues in the context to decide between the two.[62]

Word Meanings Change Over Time

Word meanings do not remain fixed: they change over time. New meanings develop through usage, and old ones become obsolete.[63] The KJV readily illustrates this phenomenon. Revered for numerous qualities, including its poetic beauty and its familiarity, the venerable translation frequently shows how English words no **longer mean** what they did in 1611. In some places the wording merely causes confusion; in others, the present meaning differs drastically from that of the original **Elizabethan** English. Look at the KJV's uses of the word "conversation" (2 Cor 1:12; **Gal** 1:13; Eph 2:3; 4:22; Phil 1:27). These texts have little to do with what we think of when we use the word "conversation"; so modern versions use "conduct" or "way of life" to convey the texts' original intent.

Or consider the passage promising the rapture of saints to meet Christ at his second coming. The KJV renders 1 Thes 4: 15, "We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not ***prevent those*** who have fallen asleep." In 1611 "prevent" more closely followed its Latin derivation and conveyed the idea "to go before." Today it means "to stop" or "to hinder." Because the meaning of the English word has changed, what served as a good translation in the seventeenth century no longer communicates Paul's original meaning. Hence, most modern versions substitute **the word "precede" for the** KJV's "prevent."

The same principle holds true for the biblical languages. Words have changed their meanings over the centuries. The original meaning of a word or the meaning derived from **a word's etymology or root may be of no more than historical interest**

[60]Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:242–248.

[61]Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:288–320.

[62]"Interestingly, the student who only used the Bauer lexicon would not be aware of the use of *eirēnē* meaning freedom from worry and anxiety, because this meaning is not listed.

[63]E. Weiner and J. Simpson, eds., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) is the standard and monumental tool for tracing the changes of the meaning of English words over time.

to the interpreter.[64] Past meanings may be interesting and even colorful, but we must always resist the temptation to believe that past meanings exert some residual influence on current usage. One may not simply discover a meaning for a word that existed in classical Greek, for example, and assume that meaning could occur at the time of the NT.[65] Many would argue that Classical Greek made a distinction between two words for knowing: ***oida*** and ***ginōskō***.[66] The first denoted an acquired knowledge of facts or people; it had a kind of certainty about it. The second referred to the procurement of knowledge, an experiential knowledge often with the sense of "come to know." However, in the Hellenistic period during which the NT came into existence, Greek speakers did not always comply with the classical distinctions. Indeed, in their lexicon, Moulton and Milligan confidently assert: "The distinction between *oida*, "to know" absolutely, and *ginōskō*, "come to know" cannot be pressed in Hellenistic Greek."[67] Burdick believes that Paul normally followed the classical distinctions, though not always. But, he wisely observes, "Each occurrence must be evaluated on its own merits."[68] Silva's analysis is considerably more linguistically nuanced.[69] He rightly concludes that Paul's uses of these verbs may be heavily influenced by stylistic, not only semantic, factors.

That is, not only were the meaning distinctions from the classical period in the process of breaking down, but certain constructions sounded or worked better than others. For example, the phrase "standing ovation" works better in English than "standing hand." If we want to indicate that an audience demonstrated its approval while standing on its feet, we are virtually locked into. using "ovation" rather than "hand," semantic considerations aside. In the same way Bible students must determine the range of meanings that was in common use ***at the time a book was written.*** Interpreters err in attempting to retain the distinctions of classical Greek as if the NT writers were obligated to observe them. They must scrupulously avoid both archaic meanings of an earlier phase of the language and anachronistic meanings of later periods. The fallacy of anachronism occurs when we read later meanings into

[64]This point has been repeated in recent years by an array of scholars. The earliest voice was probably J. Barr, ***Semantics of Biblical Language*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107, 109.

[65]This would be as inappropriate as for a modern male to call a woman a "hussy" with the defense that its original meaning was positive-a diminutive for "housewife." Today it conveys a lewd and derogatory message. Original meanings may have no significance for current usage. The same applies to biblical studies.

"See H. Seesemann, "*oida*," *TDNT* 5: 116-19; and R. Bultrnann, "*ginōskō* et al." *TDNT* 1: 689–719, especially 689–92. The former, *oida*, had more the sense of: to have experienced, learned to know. On the second, Bultmann stresses that in Greek usage the sense was the intelligent comprehension of an object or matter: to experience,'to perceive (689). This sense of the act of comprehension may fade into the background so the sense is merely: to know or understand. Both authors recognize that these distinctions were not hard and fast, and that often the words appear to be used synonymously.

[67]J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, ***The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 439. See the careful, sober analysis in D. W. Burdick, ***"Oidu*** and *Ginōskō* in the Pauline Epistles," in New ***Directions in New Testament Study,*** ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 344-56.

[68]Burdick, "*Oida*," 354.

[69]Silva, ***Biblical Words,*** 164-69.

an earlier use of a word. A serious example of this abuse occurs when a preacher defines the first century Greek word for power, ***dynamic,*** using a commodity invented in the nineteenth century, namely dynamite, simply because the words look and sound similar and because the English word derived from the Greek![70]

Words Have Connotative and Denotative Meanings

A fifth characteristic of words is that they may convey a significance in addition to their explicit denotative reference.[71] This may include a ***connotative*** or a figurative meaning. While the word "dog" ***denotes*** a four-legged, hairy animal, when used of a person in the statement, "You dog!" it communicates an emotive sense of disapproval. In this specific use, "dog" figuratively stands for a person and it has a connotation it does not have in the use, "Harley is our family dog." When Paul warns the Christians at Philippi, "Watch out for those ***dogs, those*** men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (Phil 3:2), the word carries a noticeable derogatory force. First-century Jews considered dogs despicable creatures. Thus they expressed their dislike of the Gentiles by calling them "dogs." Paul criticizes certain Jewish troublemakers by throwing back at them their own contemptuous use of the term "dog." This connotation is not necessarily present in other uses of "dog" in the NT. A good example occurs in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman in which "dog" has its more common and neutral meaning (Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30). Interpreters, therefore, must study words carefully to discern not only their denotative meaning but also any connotative subtlety that the original recipients would have sensed.

Steps for Performing Word Studies

Determining the meaning of any given biblical word is a multifaceted task. Because of the complex nature of words we must examine several types of information to discover a word's contextually-appropriate meaning. The steps outlined below are a useful guide to follow in this process.

1. Select Words that Require Detailed Analysis

We cannot understand a passage without knowing what the words in it mean. Now not all of the words in a passage are going to require intricate study, for the meanings of most terms will be clear when the student compares a good sample of

[70]D A Carson, ***Exegetical Fallacies*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 32-33, cites this fallacy in addition to a number of others interpreters commit in their well-intentioned attempts to interpret Scripture. We highly commend Carson's little volume. Every interpreter needs to heed his cautions.

[71]D. A Black observes, "Linguists distinguish between ***denotation,*** or the meaning a word has for all who hear it, and ***connotation,*** or the special meaning the same word may have for a limited group of speakers" (***Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*** [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 131). To illustrate he contrasts the denotation of "children," persons between infancy and adulthood, and its connotation which might range from awkward, immature, obstinate, to impulsive.

modern translations. Those students who have facility in the biblical languages will have even more insight into the meanings of the words. However, some words do require more careful analysis.

How does the student choose words for further study? One category includes words the student does not understand in English. If the student does not have a church background, many words may fit this category. Even for the majority of readers, some words will be puzzling at first. So these words, like covenant, Jubilee, ephod, redeemer, justify, or yokefellow, need to be studied in more detail. And all interpreters must be careful not to neglect pivotal terms simply because they assume they know their meaning. Words that are crucial for a passage, or that are theologically significant, or upon whose meaning the entire sense of a passage rests warrant careful study. It is better to do a preliminary study of a term and then rule out more exhaustive study than to overlook a term whose meaning makes a crucial impact upon a passage. Study rare words-particularly those that occur only once[72] -especially if they might have a major impact on the meaning of a passage. Then, too, a word that a writer repeats in a passage is usually significant and worth further study, especially to clarify its function in the passage.[73] The student should take particular care to investigate terms that are figures of speech in order to understand the sense implied. If English translations diverge on the meaning of a word, the interpreter should investigate to discover the most accurate sense of the word.

2. *Determine the Range of Meaning for the Word*

The first part of this step involves research in **lexicons** to determine the range of meaning the word had at the time when it was used by the author.[74] Weighing these possible meanings of the word in light of the train of thought in the immediate context and the historical background enables the interpreter to make a preliminary selection of the best English translation. While many lexicons assist in making this choice by listing biblical references under the various meanings of a specific word, the interpreter should always weigh the contextual evidence for him/herself rather than simply accept this opinion.

Simply put, the interpreter seeks to get into the shoes of the original readers to sense how they would hear the words of the passage. This involves securing as much information as possible about the words and concepts of the time. Lexicons serve students well at this point, for they provide information about the possible meanings of words throughout the history of time the lexicon covers.

But where do lexicons get their information? Various kinds of lexicons research one or more fields of study and catalog their findings. Typically, they investigate

[72]Technically, a word that occurs only once in the Bible is called a *hapax legomenon,* from the Greek meaning "being said once."

[73]The use of "head" in 1 Cor 11:2–16 is an example.

[74]In semantics this is called "synchronic analysis." Though words may have an interesting array of meanings over their history (thus "diachronic analysis"), interpreters must discover what words mean at the time in question.

various ancient literary sources-documents, published works, and letters, for example. Beyond that, some lexicons include nonliterary materials like epitaphs on tombs, receipts, or inscriptions on papyri and other places. Often parallel or cognate languages are compared, as well as findings in those languages where parallels to biblical languages may occur. Of course, previous Scripture provides a prime source for discovering meanings of words, so lexicons may survey the Septuagint (LXX-the OT translated into Greek in the second century B.C.). This provides help, at times, since it shows how the Jews at that time rendered the Hebrew into Greek.[75] Certainly lexicons do not neglect current Scripture. That is, they also seek to understand the meanings of words by evaluating the uses they discover elsewhere, either in the OT or the NT. Searching the lexicons is a fact-finding mission. What options exist for the crucial words in a passage? We only know the options by surveying actual uses.

At this juncture we must allow for two kinds of students: those who do not or cannot have facility in the biblical languages and those who do-at least to some degree. For the first group of interpreters several works provide access to the meanings of words: J. D. Douglas, ed., The ***Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 3*** vols.;[76] M. C. Tenney, ed., ***Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*** *of the* ***Bible, 5*** vols.;[77] I? J. Achtemeier, ed., ***Harper's Bible Dictionary;***[78] ***G.*** W. Bromiley, ed., ***International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 4*** vols., revised edition;[79] D. N. Freedman, ed., ***The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6*** vols.;[80] T. C. Butler, ed., ***Holman Bible Dictionary;***[81] and G. A. Buttrick, ed., ***The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 4*** vols.[82] These comprise a fine range of sources in which students who do not work in Hebrew and/or Greek can learn valuable insights into words in both testaments.[83]

Students who know the biblical languages to some degree have the distinct advantage of access to further important resources. At the same time, even students with limited knowledge of Hebrew or Greek might want to make use of these more "advanced" resources from time to time. Particularly with the use of interlinear Bibles, and other "helps," many fine insights are accessible to those willing to do some hunting. How would this work in practice? The following examples will illustrate the procedure and clarify the types of information we are seeking.

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[75]This does not mean, however, that if we seek to know what a Greek word meant, we can simply see what Hebrew word it translated in the LXX and then find the meaning of the Hebrew word. As we have seen, the specific Hebrew and Greek words could have more than one meaning. Which translated which? In addition, there never is a one-to-one overlap between languages; often the LXX paraphrases rather than translates, and frequently the LXX is motivated by theological or practical concerns in how it renders the OT.

[76](Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980).

[77](Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

[78](San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

[79](Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–86).

[80](Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992).

[81](Nashville: Broadman, 1991).

[82](Nashville; New York: Abingdon: 1962).

[83]See the bibliography for further discussion and information about these sources.

For OT studies *The* New ***Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*** [abbreviated BDB] provides help for studying the range of meanings for words, though one must be able to find the appropriate Hebrew term.[84] Another source, certainly more convenient to use, provides a compact discussion of key Hebrew words: R L. Harris, et al., eds., Theological ***Wordbook of the Old Testament, 2*** vols. [*TWOT*].[85]

As a beginning, these sources help students discover the basic range of meaning for a word through its history. This often includes a word's etymology, but students must recall that a word's history may offer little or no clues to its current meanings. For example, in Gen 9 or 12 the word "covenant" figures prominently. A quick check in Einspahr's ***Index*** shows that "covenant" is the translation of the Hebrew word ***bᶜrîth*** and that BDB discusses the word on p. 136.[86] Turning to BDB we find the basic meaning for ***bᶜrîth:*** pact, compact, covenant. The lexicon subdivides this basic meaning into three categories: I. between men; II. between God and man; and III. phrases (as in covenant making, covenant keeping, and covenant violation). If we further scrutinize the first category, we find a variety of nuances of covenants between people: (1) treaty or alliance, as in Abram's alliance with the Amorites (Gen 14:13); (2) a constitution or ordinance between a monarch and subjects (2 Sam 5:3); (3) a pledge (2 Kgs 11:4); (4) alliance of friendship, as between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:3; 23:18); and (5) a marriage alliance (Prov 2: 17; Ma12: 14). BDB delineates the other two categories with equal thoroughness.

It appears that ***bᶜrîth can*** have the sense of a bilateral arrangement in which two parties draw up a mutually agreeable pact or relationship. But it also can mean a more unilateral arrangement that God (or a victorious monarch) determines and imposes. For example, God unilaterally established a covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:3–10; Exod 6:4), though Israel was required to keep its terms to enjoy God's promised blessings.

Surveying *TWOT,*[87] students will find definitions similar to those in BDB but also a more elaborate discussion of the various uses and extensive bibliographic helps for further insight or study. The author assesses the possible etymology of ***bᶜrîth*** along with possible connections to Akkadian words. He adds a crucial element to the discussion: uses of ***bᶜrîth*** need to be understood on the basis ofwhether the two parties to the covenant are equals or whether one is superior to the other. So the

[84](Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979). Words are coded to Strong's ***Exhaustive Concordance (New*** York: Hunt Eaton; Cincinnati: Cranston Curts, **1894;** and by Hendrickson and Nelson recently), which lists the English words of the KJV. Also, B. Einspahr compiled an ***Index to Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*** (Chicago: Moody, 1976), employing the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1972) in its references. Using this ***Index*** one can locate where a Hebrew word occurs in the OT, discover its meaning, and locate the page and section in BDB where it is discussed. The older BDBs remain serviceable; they merely lack the correlation to Strong's,

[85](Chicago: Moody, 1980).

[86]Alternatively, one would discover ***bᶜrîth*** from reading a tool such as *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament,* ed. J. R. Kohlenberger, III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

[87]E. B. Smick, *TWOT,* 1:128–30.

covenant between Abram and the Amorites is between equals (Gen 14: 13), but not so between Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh 9).[88]

At this point the student has a good grasp of the range of meaning for ***bᶜrîth.*** In places it may overlap with the meaning of the modern word "contract," into which two parties enter and agree to certain obligations and benefits. But it also may mean a "treaty" that a victorious king imposes on a vanquished foe. It refers, too, to a pact or arrangement that God decides upon in order to provide for and bless people. In this instance he requires their obedience and trust in response or he may cancel the covenant.

Students who know Greek will find two lexicons most valuable for studying NT words: ***A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,*** 2d English edition, by W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. Danker, [abbreviated **BAGD**][89] and ***A Greek-En&h Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2*** vols., by J. I?. Louw and E. A. Nida.[90] While both provide excellent help in finding the range of meaning for Greek words, the Bauer lexicon provides the more extensive references for each entry, often including every NT occurrence of a word. Louw and Nida, on the other hand, provide essential definitions and insight about a word's field of meaning that is lacking in other lexicons.

The Greek word ***kyrios*** (lord) can serve as a comparative example of the two lexicons. In surveying the uses of this word during the Hellenistic period, the Bauer lexicon divides the range of meaning into two main categories. The general designation includes: (1) "Owner" of impersonal possessions or of a slave, "master," or "lord"; and (2) Designation of person of high position—"Lord,"—or as title of respect—"sir." Religious usage indicated Lord used of God, of deified kings, Jesus, and other supernatural beings like angels.[91]

Louw and Nida conveniently list the range of meaning in the index volume (II) under the entry of ***kyrios:*** Lord, owner, ruler, and sir.[92] The domain reference numbers listed indicate that each meaning comes from a different domain. "Lord" belongs to the domain of words indicating supernatural beings and powers (12.9). The definition in Vol. 1 identifies this as a title for God or Christ, indicating "one who exercises supernatural authority over mankind."[93] The second meaning, "owner," occurs in the domain of words that express ownership or possession (57.12). Here the definition of ***kyrios*** is "one who owns and controls property, including especially servants and slaves, with important supplementary semantic

[88]More thorough still is the discussion in *TDOT,* 2:253–78, which supplies the fullest discussion in English. The main entries for this 25 page essay include: I. etymology; II. meaning; III. semantic range; IV. covenantal ceremony; V. covenant and law; et al. The bibliography is more extensive, yet heavily leaning to German scholarship.

[89](Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). See more extensive comments about these excellent sources in the bibliography. We also provide additional help in utilizing the wealth of information they provide.

[90](New York, et al.: United Bible Societies, 1988).

"BAGD, 459–461.

[92]Louw and Nida, ***A Greek-English Lexicon, 2:*** 149.

[93]Louw and Nida, ***A Greek-English Lexicon,*** 1: 139.

components of high status and respect"; "owner", "master," and "lord" serve as good glosses.[94] *Kyrios* meaning "ruler," occurs in the group of words used to indicate control or rule and in the subdomain focusing on ruling or governing other people (37.51). The proposed translations, "ruler," "master," "lord," communicate its meaning as "one who rules or exercises authority over others."[95] When *kyrios* means "sir" (87.53), it belongs to the domain of words indicating status and the subdomain of words expressing high status or rank. Thus, it was "a title of respect used in addressing or speaking of a man-sir, mister."[96] Looking these up in Vol. 1 discloses both the specific domain to which each of these meanings belongs and a precise definition of each meaning.

Having this canvass of the lexicons, the student next attempts to identify the semantic domain to which a specific use of the word most likely belongs. In the case of a "covenant," does the occurrence of *bᵉrîth* fall into the domain of "imposed, unilateral arrangements" or "mutually negotiated treaties"-if we may describe them in such stark terms? How are we to understand the use in Job 31 :1, "I made a *covenant with* my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl"? Though the use is figurative, did not the speaker impose, by means of personal discipline, a restriction on his eyes?

Or what does the following text imply in speaking about the Servant of the Lord: "I will keep you and will make you to be a *covenant* for *the* people and a light for the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6)? Is this the "new covenant" that God promises to provide (see Jer 31:31–34; cf. Heb 8:8–12)? Is it an imposed arrangement? Must it still be accompanied by faith lest God cancel its benefits as he did with Israel and the first covenant? These may be difficult decisions but these questions demonstrate the issues the interpreter must investigate.

In the NT example of *kyrios,* when one studies Acts 9:5 where Paul addresses the voice he hears with the question, "Who are you, *ford?' the* interpreter must decide whether this use is a title of respect (i.e., "sir" indicating high status); whether Paul (or the writer) intends a higher ("Lord," perhaps even with a supernatural) sense; or whether the writer means a double entendre.

In addition to understanding a word's range of meaning, the interpreter needs to know how the specific meaning of the word in the passage relates to the other words in its field of meaning. By discovering the particular meaning of a word within its field of meaning, the interpreter learns the general sphere of ideas to which this meaning of the word belongs; the relationship that exists between this word and the other words used in this semantic field; and perhaps what distinguishes this word from the others in its semantic field.

One aspect of word studies brings the two testaments together. Due to the demise of Hebrew as a spoken language, in the second century B.C. the Jewish community in Alexandria produced the Septuagint.[97] Thereafter, the Jews living in the

[94]Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* 1:559.

[95]Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* 1:478.

[96]Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon* 1:739.

[97]The title Septuagint (from the Latin for seventy), thus abbreviated LXX, originates in the legend that seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish scholars produced the translation. For accounts see Philo, *Vita Mosis* II.v.-vii.25–44; Josephus, *Ant.* XII.ii.l-15; Justin, *Apology I,* 31; and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.xxi.2.

Roman world used the LXX translation. In fact, it became the Bible of most of the early Christians during the writing of the NT. As a result of their experience of the OT through this Greek translation, the NT writers used many Greek words with meanings not normally found in the everyday use of the same terms, much like Christians today might use terms like "fellowship" or "redemption" with meanings not normally understood by secular people.[98] Religious and theological ideas developed in the OT had become attached to the words, adding new nuances to their meanings.

The Septuagint use of *kyrios* (lord) is one of many examples of this Septuagintal influence on NT words. This word appears over 9000 times in the LXX with the majority—6,156 to be exact-translating the divine name "Yahweh."[99] The use of *kyrios* to translate the Hebrew term for LORD, *ʾᵃdōnāi,* which the OT sometimes used as a title for God, was quite natural. However, the translation of God's sacred name "Yahweh" by this word reflects the Jewish aversion to uttering the divine name lest they be guilty of desecrating it. Given how consistently the Hebrew "Yahweh" was translated as LORD in the Septuagint, many scholars affirm the high probability that references to Jesus as "Lord" in the NT carry strong connotations of deity.[100]

Another example of the insights gained from a study of the Septuagint influence can be seen in the NT use of the word "firstborn." When the title "firstborn" is used concerning Jesus, it may carry merely the literal meaning of the first child born by its mother as in Lk 2:7, "She gave birth to her firstborn, a son." But this literal sense does not fit the two theological uses of the word in the titles for Christ in Colossians, "the firstborn of all creation" (1:15) and "the firstborn from the dead" (1:18). While some have suggested that "firstborn of all creation" means

[98]E. Ferguson gives other common examples when he writes, "The distinctive religious meaning of many New Testament words (e.g., *ekklēsia, baptisma, presbyteros, psallō, cheirotonia*) is to be found not from etymology or classical usage but from the adaptations already made by Greek-speaking Jews" (*Backgrounds of Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 346f.). The Greek words he cites are translated, respectively, church (assembly), baptism (immersion), elder, sing psalms, and lifting up of one's hand.

[99]The KJV rendered this Hebrew word "Jehovah."

[100]C. E. B. Cranfield says concerning Paul's use of *kyrios* at Rom 10:9, "Paul applies to Christ, without-apparently&e least sense of inappropriateness, the *kyrios* of LXX passages in which it is perfectly clear that the *kyrios* referred to is God Himself." He goes on, "We take it that, for Paul, the confession that Jesus is Lord meant the acknowledgment that Jesus shares the name and the nature, the holiness, the authority, power, majesty and eternity of the one and only true God" (*The Epistle to the Romans,* 2 vols. ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 19791, 2:529). Confirming this conclusion in commenting on the use of *kyrios* at Acts 2:36, F. F. Bruce notes, "To a Jew, there was only one name 'above every name'-the Ineffable Name of the God of Israel, represented in synagogue reading and in the LXX text by the Title 'Lord.' And that the apostles meant to give Jesus the title 'Lord' in this highest sense of all is indicated by the way in which they do not hesitate on occasion to apply to Him passages of OT scripture referring to Jehovah" (The *Book of Acts,* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19541, 74). Finally, speaking of Paul's use'of "Lord" in 1 Cor 12:1–3, G. D. Fee observes, "The use of 'Lord' in such a context meant absolute allegiance to Jesus as one's deity and set believers apart from both Jews, for whom such a confession was blasphemy, and pagans, especially those in the cults, whose deities were called 'lords'" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19871, 581–2).

that Jesus was the first created being and, therefore, is not God,[101] strong evidence from Septuagint usage suggests an entirely different meaning that fits the context more naturally. In their discussion of the word *prōtotokos* (firstborn) Louw and Nida argue,

> **In Jewish society the rights and responsibilities of being a firstborn son resulted in considerable prestige and status. The firstborn son, for example, received twice as much in inheritance as any other** offspring.[102]

This prestige associated with being the firstborn in the Jewish culture gave rise to a figurative meaning for firstborn indicating superiority or higher status. This meaning of the Greek "firstborn" belongs to the semantic domain indicating status and to the subcategory of words expressing high status or rank. Thus, Louw and Nida translate Col 1:15 "existing superior to all creation."[103] The NIV seeks to capture this connotation by the phrase "firstborn *over* all creation." This finding gains further support from the LXX use of "firstborn" as a messianic title in Psa 89:27, defined by Hebrew parallelism in precise superiority language,

> **I will appoint him my firstborn,**
> **the most exalted of the kings of the earth.**

Contextual information in Col 1 confirms that Paul used firstborn as a title to stress Jesus' superiority over all creation. The references to his kingdom and the purpose statement in verse 18, "so that he might have the supremacy" corroborate that the superiority of Christ over creation is the meaning of firstborn in this passage. These contextual factors make it clear that the phrase "firstborn from among the dead" (Col. 1:18), the second occurrence of firstborn in this passage, also communicates this idea of superiority. Clearly, the Septuagint usage of the word "firstborn" has influenced Paul's choice of this messianic title to show Christ's primacy over both creation and those who will experience resurrection from the dead.

Thus, the serious student of the NT must ask whether or not a given word's meaning reflects Septuagint influence that shifted its meaning beyond what was current among Greek speakers at the time. To discover any such influences, note the main meanings of the Hebrew words that the Greek word used to translate in the Septuagint. The final step always requires studying the specific NT context to test any potential Septuagint influence. The best help for evaluating Septuagintal

[101] This is a standard explanation propounded today by the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example. They say, "Being God's first creation, he was with the Father in heaven from the beginning of all creation. Jehovah God used him in the creating of all other things that have been created" (*From Paradise Lost to Pumdise Regained* [Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, 19581, 126-7). " . . . The Bible shows that there is only one God . . 'greater than His son,' . . And that the Son, as the First-born, Only-begotten and 'the creation by God,' had a beginning" (164). Among many refutations of their use of "firstborn" see B. M. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* 10 (1953). Reprinted in pamphlet form (Princeton: Theological Book Agency), Metzger's article evaluates the Witnesses' doctrine of Christ and their New *World Translation.*

[102] Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* 1: 117.

[103] Louw and Nida, *A Greek-English* Lexicon, 1: 117, *738.*

usage and potential influence on the NT comes primarily from two sources: C. Brown, ed., New ***International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 4*** volumes [***NIDNTT***], and G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, ***Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,*** 10 volumes [***TDNT***].[104]

The final area that needs to be explored to determine the potential meaning of a word is its ***nonbiblical*** use **in the everyday speech, literature, and inscriptions at the time the biblical** book was written. Knowing the popular meaning of a word in the daily life of the people often gives insight into the frame of reference by which both writer and recipients understood the term.

For such insights into the language of the OT one should consult R. L. Harris, et al., eds., ***TWOT*** and G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., Theological ***Dictionary of the Old Testament [TDOT].***[105] ***Returning*** to our discussion of *b'rîth,* both ***TWOT*** and ***TDOT*** mention that the appearance of G. Mendenhall's article, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," led to a rash of further studies on treaties in the ancient Near East.[106] These show the close relationship between the treaties of fourteenth and thirteenth century B.C. Hittite kings with their vassal rulers and the covenants enacted by Joshua during the conquest and settlement of Israel (and especially Josh 24: 1 ff.). These findings, reported in ***TWOT*** 1: 129 and ***TDOT 2: 266-69,*** shed great light on the biblical records and may help us understand both the religious and political ramifications of the covenantal idea in the OT. The elements of the Hittite treaties also seem to be reflected in the organization of Exod 19-24 and perhaps the book of Deuteronomy."'

While specific examples of everyday use of Hellenistic Greek for NT studies can be found in J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, The ***Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament,***[108] the work is dated and sketchy, and now most valuable insights are incorporated into ***NIDNTT*** and ***TDNT.***[109] As an example, from ***NIDNTT*** one learns that the Greek word for "lord" (***kyrios***) was not a title Greeks used for their gods in the early classical period of their language. The servile relation of the slave to his or her master [***doulos*** (slave) to ***kyrios*** (master)] was so repulsive to the early Greeks that they did not consider "lord" a suitable divine title. However, by NT times the oriental practice of calling both gods and kings "Lord" (because kings were viewed as representatives of the gods) began to penetrate the Mediterranean world.

[104] Again, see the bibliography for further insight on these and other tools.

[105] So far 6 vols. to date out of 12 expected have appeared (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–).

'"*Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954):50–76.

[107] Beyond that Weinfeld notes, "Deuteronomy abounds with terms originating in the diplomatic vocabulary of the ancient Near East. Such expressions as 'hearken to the voice of,' 'be perfect with,' 'go after,' 'serve,' 'fear' (revere), 'put the words on one's heart,' 'not turn to the right hand or to the left,' etc., are found in the diplomatic letters and state treaties of the second and first millenniums B.C., and are especially prominent in the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon, which are contemporaneous with Deuteronomy" (*TDOT,* 2:268f.). Smick adds insight about the complexity of the background to covenant in the OT citing influences from religious practices, family structures, and the marriage relationship (*TWOT,* 1:129).

[108] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930).

[109] Also consult H. Balz and G. Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* [*EDNT*], 2vols. to date (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–).

While early emperors like Augustus ***(31 B.C.-A.D. 14)*** and Tiberius **(A.D.** 14-37) discouraged the practice of attributing deity to them by the title "Lord," their successors Caligula **(A.D.** 3741) and Nero **(A.D.** 54-68) promoted it and encouraged the imperial title "Lord and God." With Domitian **(A.D.** 81-96) claiming divine imperial status by the title "Lord and God" reached a climax.[110] At the same time, the prevailing first-century Christians' attitude of submission expressed by calling themselves "slaves" of the "Lord" Jesus Christ conflicted with the traditional Greek religious mindset and put these believers on a direct collision course with the growing trend toward emperor worship.

An intriguing development for NT studies appears in the use of the Greek word for covenant (***diathēkē***). In Rom 11:27 Paul uses covenant of God's unilateral commitment to establish a relation with people (cf. Heb 8:10; Acts 3:25). ***Diathēkē also*** means the agreement or pact between people that carries benefits and obligations (Gal 3:15). But the range of the Greek ***diathēkē*** **went** beyond the Hebrew ***bᵉrîth*** and included the sense of "to make a will or testament.""' The writer of Hebrews employs ***diathēkē*** in this sense of "will" in 9:16–17, creating a fascinating play on the same word used to mean "covenant" in the immediate context of 9:15 and 18.

In addition to lexicons the student should consult ***concordances.*** These alter the focus from word meanings and definitions in a range of sources to actual usage in the Bible, and from the range of possibilities to specific biblical contexts.[112] This may seem repetitious of the work of the lexicographers, but a brief review in a concordance will provide the student with an important firsthand sense of the range of meaning and uses. Having said this, students may decide to consult concordances even prior to their investigations of the dictionaries and lexicons. Such a search will provide an inductive appreciation of the apparent alternatives. Since we can determine the intended meaning only from assessing the related ideas within the text, we need to check an author's use of a given word in other places in the same writing and in other works. We can obtain further meaning by reviewing how other authors use a word in the Bible. One author may use a word in a distinctive way that sets his use apart from that of other authors. Sometimes a distinct pattern of usage is discernible that gives the interpreter evidence that clarifies the meaning in the passage under consideration. At other times one discovers wide variety in an author's usage. But even this has value because it helps to inform the interpreter concerning the types of contexts in which certain meanings of the word occur.

Interpreters must remember that the concept of contextual circles of meaning applies here, too. That is, word-uses closer to the passage under study have greater weight than word-uses at the periphery. So how the author uses words in the same book has more relevance than how that author uses the same words in other books. From there we would consider how other authors in the same testament use the words,

[110]H. **Bietenhard,** *NIDNTT,* 2:510–11.

"'This appears to be its primary sense in classical Greek. See Liddell **and Scott,** *Abridged Greek-English Lexicon* **(Oxford: Clarendon,** 1982), 161.

[112]**We will forbear here to illustrate with our examples** *bᵉrîth* **and** *kyrios.* **See the bibliography for helps in selecting appropriate concordances.**

then how another author uses these words elsewhere in the Bible, and finally how nonbiblical writers use the words.

3. Select the Meaning that Best Fits the Context

Once students have a good feel for the possible meanings of a word, the must select the one that fits best in the passage under study. They must exercis care to avoid simply, but illegitimately, imposing any of the possible senses onto specific use. This temptation is especially great where one meaning fits th interpreter's theology or pet position. At the same time, students should feel free t question the lexicons. That is, students will not always agree with the category c meaning in which the "experts" have located a specific text. Because of the corn plexity of word meanings, the interpreter should seek to discover all the informa tion about a word that may help in determining its meaning in a specific passage.

Once the potential meanings of the word are known, ***contextual factors*** be come the supreme arbitrator for selecting the most probable meaning. Often th general subject of the passage will strongly favor one semantic domain of the word This marks the key principle: The use ***of a word in a specific context constitutes th*** **sin&e most** ***crucial criterion for the meaning of a word.*** Thus the interpreter mus scrupulously evaluate the total context to decide which of the possible meanings fit best in the **passage under study. The elements we have** discussed up to this poin become crucial determiners. Which meaning fits best given the historical-cultura background of the passage? Which best fits the literary context? Which fits the ar gument of the narrative or the poetic structure, et al., in the most appropriate man ner? Remember, though words have a range of possible meanings through thei history, individual speakers or writers decide how they will use words in specifi contexts. Conceivably, writers modify meanings or employ words in unique ways In fact, writers may deliberately use words ambiguously or with double meanings **as occurs with the Greek word** ***anōthen*** ("again" and/or "from above") in Jn 3:3 7. Did Jesus mean that people needed to be born again, born from above, or both To repeat, ***context is the single most significant determiner of the meaning*** *of* **a** ***wor*** **or** ***phrase.***

Grammatical-Structural Relationships

As important as it is to know the meanings of words, our task is not yet corn plete. Indeed, as we just asserted, apart from larger contexts we cannot even b certain about what words mean. People communicate by combining words togethe in larger units. The final component of language communication we must assess t understand a writer's meaning encompasses the grammatical and structural rela tionships of words and word-groups. How are words combined so that people ca communicate? Before we proceed to explain how the various genres of literatur function, we must explore the topics of grammar and structure.

Technically speaking, grammar consists of two elements: morphology and syntax.[113] Morphology concerns the forms of individual words-typically how words are inflected (manipulated) to indicate their function in a language. To take only one simple example, in English we may put an **-s** on the end of some nouns to indicate "more than one." The **-s** is a morpheme indicating more than one in English. So, we say, "She ate one apple, but I ate two apples."[114] Functioning like the English **-s,** Hebrew employs ***îm, ê,*** or ***ôt*** at the end of its words to make plurals. Greek is more complex yet, with different plural morphemes (these formal indicators) often associated with each case (nominative, genitive, etc.). To take another example, we put -ed at the end of some verbs to mark past time: "Today I will pick a red apple, though I picked a green one yesterday."

S'tax describes the system each language has for combining its various constituents in order to communicate. Word order is a crucial element of syntax for the English language. "John hit the ball" says something quite different from "The ball hit John." Because the words "John" and "ball" are not marked in any way, English indicates their functions in this example by word order.[115] Word order is less fixed for languages like Hebrew and Greek. Some conventions apply, but the languages exhibit more variety than English permits. For some languages like Greek, case markings on nouns, pronouns, adjectives, etc., indicate functions to show whether a word serves as the agent or the recipient of an action. Students who have studied German know the importance of word endings to indicate whether a noun functions as subject, object, or indirect object. Thus, syntax expresses the way a language arranges words to form a meaningful phrase, sentence, or larger unit.

Most guides to exegesis and analysis tend to work on the level of the sentence, and that remains an essential task for all interpreters. More recently, however, linguists have stressed the need for analysis of larger units-paragraphs and entire discourses. Communication rarely occurs simply in isolated sentences. Often called discourse analysis or text linguistics, this program is beginning to bear fruit.[116] In

[113]A fine introduction to a modem understanding of language, especially in its application to biblical studies, is Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics.* A seminal article on the topic is E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL 91 (1972): 73-89.* For more general introductions to grammar as understood by modem linguistics, see J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and id. *Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Perhaps this is the place to remind readers that grammar only describes how languages function. That is, the modem study of grammar is descriptive, not prescriptive.

[114]English is so difficult! While we put an -s on apple to indicate plural, it takes -es for box, -en for ox, -ies and the removal of y for sky, -i after removing -us for cactus, -a in place of -um for stadium, a change of the final -i- to -e- for crisis, but not a thing for deer. We sympathize with our friends who have learned English as a second language.

[115]Of course, in poetry some of these "rules" for word order may change, showing they are not really rules at all-only conventions. Thus, when one enters a different genre one expects new criteria for combining elements. We discuss poetry in the next chapter.

[116]See W. Pickering, A *Framework for Discourse Analysis,* SIL Publications in Linguistics 64 (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington, 1980); E. A. Nida, et al., *Style* and *Discourse* (Capetown: Bible Society, *1983);* A. B. de Toit, "The Significance of Discourse Analysis for

one sense language consists of combining various elements, as building blocks, to construct meaningful communication. In simple terms, combining morphemes (minimal elements of meaning, like the plural marker **-s** in English) produces words; putting words together produces phrases, clauses, and sentences; and combining sentences results in texts, passages, or discourses.

This process of putting words together to communicate successfully involves many factors. The relationship that exists between the multiple words that make up a sentence and the sentences that constitute an entire passage may be indicated by word order, the forms of words, and the use of connecting words (conjunctions, prepositions, etc.). This underscores the absolute necessity of interpreting every biblical passage consistent with its grammar. Since grammar is a basic component in how writers organize words to express their thoughts and how audiences decipher the meaning from the words, grammatical analysis is an essential aspect of correct interpretation.

The Importance of Grammatical Relationships

To understand the meaning of any statement one must understand how words, phrases, sentences, and larger units interact (or are interrelated). Each word's impact on the thought expressed stems from its relationship with the rest of the words in the sentence. Returning to the simple statement, "John hit the ball," its impact differs greatly from the similar sentence, "The ball hit John." Both sentences use identical words, but they communicate different meanings depending upon whether "John" or "ball" functions as the subject or object.[117] If these two short sentences involved a fastball thrown by a major league baseball pitcher, the consequences for the batter would differ radically! In other words-grammar matters.

Grammatical study is strategic for correct interpretation because the biblical languages sometimes convey nuances that are hard to capture in an English translation. The First Epistle of John begins with an explicit assertion of the reality of Christ's physical body. Attempting to counteract a docetic Gnostic teaching that claimed Jesus only appeared to have a physical body, the author affirms that his message about Jesus is based upon that "which we have ***heard,*** which we have ***seen with our eyes."*** Both verbs occur in the Greek perfect tense, which expresses a resulting state of affairs that is ongoing. Blass, DeBrunner, and Funk [BDF] call it "the continuance of completed action."[118] By using the perfect tenses, the author

New Testament Interpretation and Translation," *Neofesfatnentica 8 (1974): 54-79;* and E. Talstra, "Text Grammar and Hebrew Bible. I. Elements of a Theory," *Bibliotheca Orientalis 35 (1978): 169-74.*

"'Obviously other combinations prove unacceptable in English. "Hit John ball the" conveys no message despite clear meanings for the individual words. With some flexibility English grammar prescribes acceptable word order.

[118]F. Blass and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* trans. and rev. by R. W. Funk (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 175. On the "stative" aspect, which describes the meaning of the perfect tense, S. E. Porter says, "the action is conceived of by the language user as reflecting a given (often complex) state of affairs" *(Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 19921, 21-22).

relates that his experience of Jesus was vivid and personal. What he had heard and seen produced a new state of affairs in which he now lives. This is no mere historical reporting of past events.

In similar fashion the command in 1 Jn 4: 1, "Dear friends, ***do not believe*** every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God," uses a present imperative of prohibition, a grammatical construction often employed to forbid the continuation of something already happening.[119] In this context, "Stop believing every spirit" might well express the grammar more precisely. The grammatical construction used here may suggest that the Christians gullibly accepted some so-called spirit-induced utterances.[120] The negative command in 1 Jn 3:13, "Do ***not be surprised,*** my brothers, if the world hates you" might well carry the same force, suggesting that confusion troubled some believers and needed to stop. Taking another matter, the following "if' clause does not mean, "maybe the world hates you and maybe it doesn't." In using this type of conditional Greek clause the writer does not question that the believers were experiencing hatred; for the sake of his argument he assumes the existence of hatred.[121] On the other hand, an "if' whose premise is uncertain (as in "If it rains, we will get wet") occurs in Mt 5:13. Jesus tells his followers, "You are the salt of the earth. But ***if*** the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" Jesus does not assume salt (the disciples) will lose its saltiness nor that it will not. This remains an open issue. These differences in the significance of the conditional conjunction "if" go back to different Greek conjunctions or adverbs (***ei, ean),*** but will not be readily apparent in translations.

If we consider Hebrew we encounter a language whose verbs function quite differently: in certain contexts imperfect (incompleted action) and perfect (completed action) may indicate past, present, or future actions. Hebrew does not use a negative particle with the imperative as we just saw in Greek; however, it does

[119]BDF § 336 (3), p. 172. Cf. H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927, 1955), 301–2; and N. Turner, *Syntax,* Vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek,* by J. H. Moulton, *4* vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 74–76. On the other hand we must be alert to the fact that this grammatical construction does not always forbid an action in progress; it may do so in less than half of its occurrences in the NT if J. L Boyer, "A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study," *GTJ* 8 (1987): 40–45, is correct. He found that in only *74* of the 174 instances of the negated present imperative in the NT did the writer call for the termination of ongoing activity. This conclusion is affirmed by Porter, *Idioms, 224-26.*

[120]At the same time, grammatical analysis must always take care not to "overexegete" such fine points. It would be inappropriate apart from further contextual evidence to posit too confidently its existence or how pervasive was the problem to be stopped. Clearly, the prohibition seeks to prevent and, if necessary, stop false beliefs. Again, the grammar allows for or opens up the potential for this nuance. Context determines its presence or absence.

[121]At the risk of oversimplification, we must insist that some older grammarians of Greek mistook the meaning of the "first class condition." That is, this Greek usage does not necessarily mean that the premise (if-clause) is actually true. It merely indicates that the writer/speaker assumes its truth for the sake of the argument. It may or may not be factually true; the context rules again. In his research Boyer discovered that the "if" in such first class conditions can be accurately translated "since" (indicating its obvious truthfulness) in only 37 percent of its NT uses. Another 12 percent are false premises, while the remaining 51 percent are indeterminate. See J. L. Boyer, "First Class Conditions: What do they Mean?" *GTJ* 2 (1981): 75-114. Cf. Porter, *Idioms,* 255–59.

employ features that appear similar to those we find in Greek ***or*** English-nouns, adjectives, participles, prepositions, and infinitives, to name a few. One feature of Hebrew employs an infinitive before a finite verb. For example, "hear (infinitive) and hear (finite verb)" and "see and see" literally render the words in Isa 6:9, as in the RSV: "Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive." However, this feature of Hebrew grammar is a way to indicate "surely, indeed, certainly." Thus, "hear and hear" may be literal, but this feature obscures the meaning. Better is the NIV: "Be ever hearing ... be ever seeing."

As with Greek, Hebrew also has the capacity to use different kinds of conditions whose nuances must be studied carefully. Conditions may be assumed fulfilled, contrary to fact, or more or less probable.[122] Another common Hebrew grammatical feature, the "construct state," consists of one word-noun or adjective—occurring with another noun, adjective, pronoun, or clause. The result appears as "X of Y." The relation between the two is a matter of the interpreter's understanding of the context since the construction may indicate various ideas. The English reader may not always realize that the translator made the decision how to render the construct. For example, in the phrase "wisdom of Solomon" (1 Kgs 4:30) the idea is the wisdom that Solomon displays.[123] On the other hand, "mourning of an only son" (Amos 8:10) in context clearly means ***not the*** mourning that the son does, but that others mourn ***for*** an only son.[124] Or the construct state may be descriptive: "scales of righteousness" (Lev 19:36) must mean "honest scales" as the NIV translates.[125] Psalm 23:2 literally reads, "He makes me lie down in pastures of grass." "Grass" or "grassiness" somehow characterizes the pastures. Most English versions translate this as "green pastures." At other times the relationship is one of apposition, as in "the land of Canaan" (Num 34:2) or "daughter of Zion" (Isa 1:8).

These limited examples illustrate that English translations do not always make clear certain nuances in the biblical languages. They illustrate, as well, that when translations differ, an English reader may be at a loss to understand why. One may be more literal; one may better capture an original nuance. And as we saw, "literal" may or may not be more accurate. Therefore, reliable biblical interpretation requires careful evaluation of the grammatical nuances of the biblical languages. It follows also that accurate interpretation must be based on the original language texts of the Hebrew and Aramaic OT and the Greek NT. Ideally, every interpreter should know these biblical languages. Many grammatical features are apparent only in the original languages. Even the best of translations do not and probably should not bring them out. Where good modern translations do express clearly some grammatical nuances, they involve a greater or lesser degree of interpretation, for scholars do not always agree on the significance of certain grammatical constructions in a given passage. Knowing the biblical languages equips the interpreter to weigh the

[122]For a more complete discussion see B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, An *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 636–38.

[123]This is analogous to the Greek subjective genitive.

[124]"Like a Greek objective genitive.

[125]Similar to the Greek descriptive genitive.

contextual evidence to identify the grammatical explanation that fits the text best. People who do not know Hebrew or Greet must always remember that they work at a disadvantage. Every reader who aspires to become a biblical scholar must become competent in the biblical languages.

However, we are realistic enough to admit that it is impractical to expect all interpreters to know the biblical languages. Stage of life, the pressures and responsibilities of living, language aptitude, access to a program of instruction-all these and more make this ideal impossible for many Bible students. Yet we sincerely believe that ***all believers are competent to study the Bible.*** They must compensate for their limitation of not knowing the biblical languages by having a good grasp of English grammar, by using the best literal English translations of the Bible, and by using reliable commentaries and other resources written by scholars who can explain the grammar. On the last point, by comparing several sources on a specific passage, one can see whether or not an alleged grammatical analysis has general consensus. Further, the contextual evidence cited in support of a suggested grammatical point will enable the reader to understand the issues involved better.[126]

Accurately understanding a passage requires analyzing its structure and the significance of important grammatical constructions. While some grammatical insights cannot be discovered apart from thr original language texts, the willing student can uncover a surprising amount of important grammatical information by carefully analyzing the English text. This is especially true of the structure. Analyzing the structure for meaningful grammatical insights requires an English translation that preserves the original language sentence pattern fairly closely. Many find the New American Standard Bible,[127] the Revised Standard Version, or, now, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)[128] most valuable for this type of study. While many modern translations break up longer, complex sentences in the original languages into several brief sentences in English, the NASB and RSV often keep the long involved sentences with their many subordinate clauses.

Obviously, the modern trend to shorter sentences contributes to smoother reading and higher comprehension. We highly recommend the versions that seek better ways to communicate the Bible's message. For example, a dynamic equivalent translation seeks to convey in English what a biblical writer would have said were he speaking English in his ***own time.*** The ***Good News Bible*** is a prime example of this tactic.[129] For the NT, J. B. Phillips takes another approach.[130] He seeks to say

[126]Again we draw our readers' attention to Carson, ***Exegetical Fallacies,*** which contains a short but helpful section on "Grammatical Fallacies" (67–90). Though focusing on the Greek NT, Carson raises numerous cautions that could well apply to the OT. For example, his warning about reading more into tenses than is there should be heeded by all interpreters.

[127]NASB (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1972).

[128]NRSV, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. This is the revision of the previous RSV, 1946–52, whose language was more in the KJV tradition. The NRSV, however, does seek to use the modern idiom and to be more inclusive in its use of language.

[129](New York: American Bible Society, 1976); also called *Today's English Version*.

[130]*The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Bles, 1960).

in modern (British) English what the biblical writer would say were he writing ***today. So*** looking at Lk 13:11, where the GNB has "a woman who had an evil spirit" (how a modern English-speaker would have phrased this idea in Jesus' time), Phillips has "a woman who . . . had been ill from some psychological cause" (how Phillips imagines a speaker from Jesus' time would express the idea today). Both seek to recast the literal words and structures of the Hebrew and Greek languages into modern idioms and ways of expression, though their translation theory governs how they do it.[131]

But the gain in readability in some modern translations may come with a price tag: the failure to appreciate the text's original structural relationships. Most often and for most people, modern versions are worth the price. But for serious study, more literal versions have their value. Studying biblical passages in the original languages forces the interpreter to interact with the text's own sentence structure to determine how subordinate clauses and phrases relate to the main statement of the sentence and/or to each other. For this dimension of study, the more literal the English translation, the better. Different kinds of translations have their place in other phases of one's study.[132]

Steps for Discovering Structural Relationships

Structural analysis involves several simple steps-simple, that is, if one understands basic English grammar. Unfortunately, we cannot make that assumption. We often do things in our own language without understanding why or what we have done. We can also unknowingly commit grammatical errors. People express ideas in language in the ways they learned. So even studying an English text requires conscious effort. It may require that the student increase his or her proficiency in English in order to describe accurately what is discovered.[133] To explain the thought flow of a given passage often requires paying attention to and thinking carefully about the significance of the obvious. Sometimes the relationships that exist in a passage are so obvious that we ignore their contribution to its total meaning.

[131]For superb introductions to these issues consult J. Beekman and J. Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); and E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974). The journal *Bible Translator* consistently addresses issues of interest to those involved in this task. Apropos our discussion see J. Beekman, "'Literalism' a hindrance to understanding," BT17 (1966): 178-89.

[132]This is a brief summary of what we said about these issues in our section on texts and translations in chapter 3.

[133]One fine source of help is M. Kolln, *Understanding English Grammar,* 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan and London: Collier Macmillan, 1986). Not designed for English majors or specialists, the book seeks to explain standard English grammar to speakers, writers, and readers (v.). A briefer summary of basic English grammatical categories---preparing students to undertake Greek, though it would help anyone review grammar-is J. Wenham, *Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1–15.

Natural Divisions

First the interpreter must ***discover the natural divisions*** of the section for study. The direction this takes will depend upon the kind of literature, and we provide specific help for various genres in the chapters that follow. But to illustrate, for historical narratives major sections may encompass many chapters in our current Bibles (for example, the story of Joseph encompasses Gen 37–50), and the interpreter needs to divide the section into its smaller elements. The same holds true for NT gospels or epistles. Each section will require analysis to discern the writer's flow of thought. In poetry, of course, the individual poem constitutes the unit for analysis-some shorter, others longer. Wisdom literature requires more care, for the units may be more difficult to classify. A segment may consist of one proverb, an isolated psalm (e.g., Psa 37), a speech (e.g., Job 23:1–24:25), an entire book, or our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Apocalyptic is the most troublesome; it puts modern readers in the most unfamiliar territory. But the dream of Dan 7:1-14 is one unit; its interpretation in 7:15–28 is another that joins the two.

Flow of Thought

Usually the interpreter seeks to understand one passage, at least one at a time. So the next step involves tracing the flow of thought in the passage for study.[134] How does the writer's logic develop in the passage?[135] First, one must isolate, where appropriate, the individual paragraphs.[136] Paragraphs typically develop a unit of thought, often incorporating a topic sentence that the paragraph develops. Then the interpreter proceeds to analyze the building blocks of paragraphs—sentences—and how their assertions or propositions develop the writer's argument.[137] Placing proper proportionate weight on each element in a sentence involves distinguishing the main statement (independent clause) or statements from any subordinate (dependent) clause or clauses that qualify it.

"Many books present methods of structural analysis to represent visually the configuration of a passage. W. C. Kaiser calls his approach a syntactical display or block diagram and illustrates his method using English, Hebrew, and Greek (*Toward An Exegetical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 19811, 99–104;166–81). See also G. **D. Fee,** *New Testament Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), *60-76;* and Osborne, The *Hermeneutical Spiral,* 96–98. For more traditional diagramming see J. D. Grassmick, *Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis: A Classroom Manual* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, *1976).* Students must determine which method **suits their individual needs. The objective is to understand the argument of a passage, however one can attain it.**

[135]**This is an overview of steps that are developed later specifically for individual genres. Hence, each step will not necessarily be applicable for each genre. Clearly, what we next say about paragraphs does not apply to a proverb.**

[136]**For specific help on locating paragraphs see Beekman and Callow,** *Translating,* 279–81. In his discussion of discourse analysis, Porter lists several features that signal the boundaries between individual units of a discourse: shifts in grammatical person (e.g., first to third) and shifts in verb tenses *(Idioms, 301-Z).*

[137]A guide to understanding Hebrew sentences is F. I. Andersen, *The* Sentence ***in Biblical Hebrew*** (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974).

One helpful approach to understanding the basic structure of a passage involves a method for identifying the main statement(s) in each sentence, then identifying the subordinate clause or clauses in each sentence, and determining how each modifies or qualifies the ideas expressed in the main statement(s). The following limited analysis of a paragraph of Jas 1 illustrates this procedure. We underline each main clause with a solid line. Those not underlined are subordinate clauses or phrases. The functions of some clauses or phrases are given in italics above each.

command *addressees* *temporal clause*
(2) Consider it pure joy, my brothers,[138] whenever you face trials of many kinds,

reason clause
(3) because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

command *purpose clause*
(4)Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete,

description *conditional clause* *command*
not lacking anything. (5) If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God,

description *assertion*
who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

temporal clause *command* *reason clause*
(6) But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like

command
a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. (7) That man should not

assertion
think he will receive anything from the Lord; (8) he is a double-minded man. unstable in all he does.[139]

The main clause of the first sentence is "Consider it pure joy." Three subordinate elements then qualify this statement. For each subordinate (dependent) clause or phrase the student must determine: (1) what word it modifies, (2) what type of clause or phrase it is (a chart showing possible types follows below), and (3) how this affects the meaning of the sentence. Most clause types answer one of the six well-known journalistic questions: *who, what, why, when, where,* or bow. In the first sentence the first subordinate phrase "my brothers" qualifies the understood subject "you" of the verb "consider," while the remaining two clauses modify the verb. The first subordinate element, the phrase "my brothers," indicates *who* is to count it all joy; the second, the clause "whenever you face trials of many kinds," shows

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[138]"Brothers" literally renders the Greek word *adelphoi,* which, of course, refers to all the Christian readers of the letter, not males exclusively. Some recent versions are now accounting for this kind of language throughout the Bible. The NCV translates *adelphoi* in **Jas 1:2 as "brothers and sisters."**

[139]Ja 1:2–8; NIV.

when this is to be done; and the final one answers why, giving the reason for "considering it all joy."

To discover how each element influences the meaning of the sentence the student should ask, "What would this statement mean without each subordinate clause or phrase?" Without the phrase "my brothers," in Jas 1:2 the recipient might not know who were to respond to trials with an attitude of joy. The second clause identifies the specific occasion when joy must be exhibited. Without the final clause a reader would be thoroughly perplexed since joy is not an attitude normally associated with trials. This clause argues for a genuine reason for joy even in experiences of adversity that do not automatically stimulate that response.[140] The knowledge that difficult experiences contribute to the development of perseverance provides legitimate grounds for joy. This passage does not advocate some sadistic enjoyment of hardship.

In the second sentence of this passage, verse 4, two subordinate clauses follow the main statement, "Perseverance must finish its work." The first clause, introduced with "so that ... " modifies the verb, "must finish," and expresses the purpose (why) for allowing perseverance to finish its work. The sentence ends with the phrase, "not lacking anything," which modifies the words "mature and complete" at the end of the subordinate clause. Answering the question, "What?", this phrase further explains the meaning of being mature and complete by describing it negatively.

The third sentence in v. 5 presents a more complicated structure. It begins with a subordinate clause followed by a compound main clause that is broken up by another subordinate clause. The compound main clause reads, "he should ask God ... and it will be given to him." The opening subordinate clause, "If any of you lacks wisdom," is a conditional clause that qualifies the verb "should ask." It indicates the specific condition in which one should offer this prayer. The subordinate clause that divides the main clause, "who gives generously to all without finding fault," is a descriptive (adjectival in the chart below) clause that modifies "God." This reminder of God's benevolent character encourages the reader to pray for wisdom in times of trial.

While an analysis of the structure of the remaining sentences in this paragraph would further illustrate the process and value of this approach, we leave that for the reader. The chart below provides a full list of the types of subordinate clauses that may occur. They indicate the kinds of logical relations possible in the structures of sentences.[141]

[140] In Greek, joy (*chara*) expresses a positive subjective feeling, a sense of well-being that normally comes from a positive objective cause (E. Beyreuther, "Joy, Rejoice," *NIDNTT* 2:352–4).

[141] Here we provide classifications mainly in relationship to English. Were students to conduct their analyses in the original language texts, certain of these categories would look different in places, as each language has unique ways to communicate. A worthy analysis of Hebrew grammar is Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction*. Unfortunately no comparable work of such substance currently exists for Greek. The standard Greek grammars remain: Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Grammar*; N. Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; S. E. Porter, *Idioms*; and Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*

TYPE	JOURNALISTIC QUESTION	SAMPLE CONSTRUCTIONS
Adverbial[142]		
temporal	when?	when, after, before
local	where?	beside, above, below
causal	why?	because, for, since
purpose	why?	that, so that, in order that
result	why?	so, so that, hence
conditional	when?	if, provided, unless
concessive	how?	although, in spite of the fact
comparative	how?	as, just as, likewise
Noun[143]		
subject	who or what?	who, which, that
object	who or what?	whom, what, that
apposition	who or what?	
direct address	who?	(identifies persons, objects)
Adjectival'*		
modifier	who or what?	who, which, that

Is all this analysis worth the trouble? We sincerely believe so, for asking such structural questions enables the interpreter to identify the flow of the text's argument, the associations, and the inter-relationships not otherwise evident. The interpreter is able to perceive the logic of a writer's argument, breaks in thought, unusual features, and directions that are easily missed without the time and effort spent to analyze the structure in these ways.

Verbs

The next step in the grammatical study of a passage concentrates on the ***impact of the verbs.*** The complex verb systems of the biblical languages influence the meaning of sentences in several different ways. Understood in conjunction with their contexts, verbs designate the mood, aspect, time, kind, and voice of the action

[142] Adverbial clauses modify or qualify verbs, or occasionally adjectives, in the ways listed. For example, the first shows *when* the action of the verb occurs, the second where, the seventh shows the circumstances despite which the action occurs, etc.

[143] Noun clauses, as the name suggests, function as nouns. In the sentence, "Professors who love to ski seek teaching posts in Colorado," the entire clause "professors who love to ski" functions as the subject of the verb "seek." It operates like a noun in the sentence structure.

[144] In similar fashion adjectival clauses or phrases modify or describe nouns or pronouns.

expressed.[145] The ***mood*** of the verb in each main clause indicates whether the writer was making a statement, asking a question, giving a command, expressing a possibility, or making a wish. The interpreter must understand each sentence consistent with the mood expressed. It makes a big difference whether a sentence asserts a fact, merely expresses a possibility, or asks a question.[146] Interestingly, in James' paragraph above the predominant mood is the imperative. Each of the five sentences contains a command. The only assertions come in verses 5 and 8. After commanding the person who lacks wisdom to pray, James asserts in 1:5, "and it will be given to him"-a statement that carries the force of a promise. Verse 8 certifies the nature of the person who doubts God. While a careful reading of the English text makes most of these mood-uses clear, students should verify their observations with good commentaries.

Influenced by the field of linguistics, an increasing number of biblical interpreters recognize the need to classify verbs according to their aspect.[147] Although tense in English mainly concerns *time, in* other languages-Hebrew and Greek are examples—the tense of a verb primarily indicates "kind of action"[148] and ***aspect.***[149] That is, in the biblical languages tense specifies the kind of action from the ***perspective of the writer.*** It indicates whether the writer or speaker conceives of the action of the verb as a completed state (stative), still in process (imperfective), or an unspecified whole (perfective). English typically employs perfect or simple past tenses to convey stative action: She ***has read*** that book; or She ***read*** that book. English marks a continuous action with present progressive forms: She ***is reading*** that book. An unspecified kind of action might be expressed by: She ***reads*** a book. The action in reality (***Aktionsart***) may or not conform to the writer's conception, but that is not the issue. Aspect (tense) specifies how the writer presents the nature of the action.[150] For example, note John's

[145]Waltke and O'Connor (*Introduction*, 344) provide an illuminating look at the Hebrew verbal system in their analysis of the form ***wayakûhā***, conventionally translated "And they smote it" (Judg 1:8). They note this one form, the combination of a conjunction and a verb, expresses: (1) the action of smiting; (2) the subject of the action; (3) the object; (4) active voice; (5) case frame (verb is transitive); (6) type of action (Hebrew ***hiphil***)—causative rather than simple action; (7) time of action—smiting already past; (8) quality of action-it has an endpoint; and (9) mood-action is an independent assertion.

[146]Compare: "This dog bites;" "This dog may bite;" and "Will this dog bite?"

[147]For elaborate assessments of aspect in the Greek language of the NT see S. E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with **Reference** to Tense and Mood (New* York: Peter Lang, *1989);* and B. M. Fanning, Verbal *Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990). A briefer analysis occurs in Porter, *Idioms*, 20–45, the first grammar that attempts to incorporate verbal aspect as a major ingredient in its analysis of NT Greek.

[148]The technical term grammarians give to this is the German word ***Aktionsart***. It refers to the objective nature of the action.

[149]Strictly speaking, Hebrew does not have tenses in the English language sense of categories for specifying the time of the action of a verb. But the language does employ forms for perfect and imperfect action. In specific contexts both may denote past, present, or future time. See Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction*, 347–350, 461-66, 481–95.

[150]For example, we may say, "It has been raining all day." We specify an imperfective kind of action (continuous), even though in reality it has only rained off and on during the day-with long spells of no rain at all.

words in Jn 1:29: "On the next day, he sees Jesus coming to him, and he says. ..." This is our literal translation where the italicized words highlight what grammarians call the "historical present." For his desired effect of creating a sense of vividness for his readers, John presents past actions as now happening (continuous action).[151]

Hebrew verbal systems also allow for another phenomenon under the category of aspect: causative constructions. At times a writer depicts an agent not simply as performing an action; the agent actually causes the action to occur. In English we employ additional verbal forms to convey causation: "They make me eat spinach." Or we may add a prefix to a verb. Compare "They closed the door" to "They enclosed the yard" (They caused the yard to be closed in). The Hebrew language has special adjustments to the verb form to alter "They eat spinach" to "They cause to eat spinach." In Greenberg's words, "The ***hif'il*** is commonly causative: the subject makes the object do the action or be in the state expressed by the ***qal*** verb; ***qal*** 'he remembered,' ***hif'il*** 'he reminded' (lit., 'made remember')."[152]

Besides aspect and kind of action, verb forms indicate other details that contribute to correct interpretation. In places, verbs (or various other syntactical techniques) mark the ***time*** of action (past, present, or future). And a verb's ***voice*** shows whether its subject performs the action (active voice: "Mary cut the pie"), is acted upon (passive voice: "The pie was cut by Mary"), or acts in reference to itself (middle voice in Greek often indicated by reflexive pronouns in English: "Mary cut herself a piece of pie").[153] Or the verb may have no voice but merely specify a state of being, as in, "That cat ***is*** very large." Because verbs communicate all of these types of information, the careful interpreter must evaluate each one closely in light of the context and weigh all the nuances the verbal form indicates. For those who do not know the biblical languages, there is no substitute, again, for literal translations and reliable commentaries that evaluate the verbal elements.

Connectives

The discussion of important grammatical elements must include ***connectives.*** Connectives (usually conjunctions, but also relative pronouns) occur at the beginning of sentences to link them with what precedes and within sentences to indicate the relationship between the words, phrases, and clauses through which ideas are communicated.[154] The previous discussion of the relationship between main and

[151]Most English versions obscure this effect. The NIV has, "... John *saw* Jesus coming toward him and *said*. ..." To conform to modern English the NASB has a similar translation, but it indicates such instances of the historical present by appending an asterisk to the verb.

[152]M. Greenberg, *Introduction to Hebrew* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 43. *Qal* and ***hif'il*** refer to different Hebrew verbal stems. Their meaning need not detain us at this point.

[153]The Greek language has "voices" similar to English. Hebrew employs "binyans," similar to conjugations, which also indicate voice. The three voices in Hebrew could be noted as active, passive, and reflexive. See Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction*, 354f.

[154]English, Hebrew, and Greek use a variety of connectives to indicate subordination. Hebrew often coordinates items by using waws. (Readers without Hebrew can ignore that comment.) For those wanting further insight see R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1967), 482, 484; and Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction*, 632–55.

subordinate clauses already underscored the significance of connectives as indicators of how the different parts of a sentence fit together. Although connectives are often small and seemingly insignificant, they exert an influence on meaning that far exceeds their size. Like joints and junctions in a plumbing system of pipes, they regulate the flow of a text's argument. The following chart presents the vast scope of connectives that the interpreter must note in order to understand precisely the meaning of a passage.[155]

TYPES		SAMPLE CONNECTIVES
Temporal or Chronological	Time:	after, as long as, before, now, meanwhile, since, then, until, when, whenever, while
Local or Geographical	Place:	where, beside, upon, above, under, below, on, over, at
	Direction:	to, toward, from
Logical	Continuative:	and, also, besides, both ... and, furthermore, moreover, likewise, not only ... but also, whereupon
	Contrast:	although, but, however, much more, nevertheless, not only ... but also, yet, otherwise, still, whereas
	Purpose:	in order that, that, so that
	Result:	so that, as a result, hence, consequently, so, then
	Inference:	therefore, thus, then, wherefore
	Reason:	as, because, for, inasmuch as, since, whereas, why
	Condition:	as if, as though, if, lest, provided, providing, unless
	Concession:	although, yet, in spite of, though, unless, while
Modal	Agency/Means:	by, through, by means of
	Manner:	as
	Comparison:	also, as, as . . . so, just as . . . so, indeed, in fact, likewise, so also, so as, moreover, than
	Example:	for, for example, indeed, in fact, namely
Emphatic	Emphasis:	indeed, only, finally

[155]For particles and conjunctions in Greek see BDF §§438–57 and Porter, Idioms, 204-17 Andersen, Sentence, surveys the various ways Hebrew accomplishes connections.

Adjectives and Adverbs

Several other grammatical items require the attention of the careful interpreter, namely ***adjectives and adverbs.*** These modifiers adjust the sense of a noun or verb in some significant way. Waltke and O'Connor cite Hos 1:6 to display a wide use of adverbs in Hebrew.[156] They translate: "Call her name Not-Pitied, ***for indeed*** I will ***not*** continue ***any longer*** to have pity on the House of Israel." Each italicized word represents a Hebrew adverb, one giving time, several negating, and one providing emphasis. That is, "any longer" suggests that God had shown compassion on Israel, but would "not" do so "any longer." Thus one may now characterize the nation as those "Not-pitied ***any longer.***" The termination of God's pity merits an emphatic "indeed." Another example illustrates several adjectives: "They will hear of your ***great*** name and your ***strong*** hand and your ***outstretched*** arm" (1 Kgs 8:42). Each provides additional color to the noun it modifies. These Hebrew adjectives are similar to those used in English and Greek. Often, though, Hebrew performs the function of description through "construct" phrases to which we referred earlier [as in "the royal seed" (lit. seed of royalty; 2 Kgs 25:25), the "royal throne" (lit. throne of royalty; 1 Kgs 1:46)], or even through apposition ["the deceitful tongue" (lit. tongue of deceit; Psa 120:2)].[157]

In Ja 1:2 discussed above, the writer significantly strengthens the initial command by the inclusion of the Greek adjective "all," translated "pure" in the NIV.[158] To "Consider it ***pure joy*** whenever you face trials of many kinds" is far more demanding than just to "Consider it joy." Without the adjective "pure" this command would be unclear about the quality or amount of joy the writer required. Similarly, the adverb **"generously"** in verse 5 adds a vital dimension to God's giving. He does not simply give, James avers; God gives ***generously*** to all who ask him for wisdom.

Pronouns

Students must not underestimate the significance of several other seemingly routine grammatical items: the use ***of pronouns*** and whether nouns and pronouns are ***singular or plural.*** It is important to determine the antecedents of all pronouns to ascertain to whom or to what they refer. The marking of pronouns, both their case usage and whether singular or plural, is often clearer in Hebrew and Greek than in English. Hebrew marks personal pronouns as to number, person, and gender. In addition, Hebrew employs demonstrative pronouns (this, that), interrogatives and indefinites (who, what, whoever, how, why, where), and relative pronouns (who, whom, which). Greek, likewise, employs a wide array of pronoun types: personal,

[156]Waltke and O'Connor, ***Introduction,*** 657.

[157]Waltke and O'Connor, ***Introduction,*** 255f.

[158]The NIV "pure" here is preferable to the potentially ambiguous "all" where "all" may appear to be a direct object of the verb "consider." The point is not to consider all [things] as joy; rather, consider [it] pure joy when.

relative, demonstrative, intensive (as in the ***same*** man or the man himself), possessive (his, her, my), reflexive (yourself), reciprocal (love ***one another),*** interrogative, and indefinite.

Whereas the pronoun "you" may be either singular or plural in English, Greek (as well as Hebrew) makes a clear distinction. Twice in 1 Corinthians Paul identifies believers as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Warning against the serious dangers of sexual immorality in 6:18–19, he reminds them that each Christian's physical body is a temple of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit. However, Paul's reference to God's temple in 3:16–17 pictures the corporate group of believers-namely, the entire church-as God's temple indwelt by the Spirit. Second-person plural pronouns make this distinction clear. Paul uses the same temple analogy in two distinct ways: to refer both to individuals and to the entire church. Unfortunately, many sincere believers have missed the point of Paul's warning in chapter three not to destroy God's temple. Thinking of their individual body as God's temple, they understand Paul's admonition as a call to personal piety; they do not perceive Paul's true intent-a plea not to allow divisions to destroy the church.[159] At the conclusion of both letters to Timothy the writer says, "Grace be with ***you."*** We might mistakenly think these are Paul's concluding benedictions to an individual, Timothy. Actually, the Greek pronouns are plural, so in fact, he invokes God's blessing upon the entire church.[160]

The specific distinctions that Greek relative pronouns make between singular and plural, as well as between masculine, feminine, and neuter, provide a precision not available in our generic English "who" and "what."[161] Literal English translations of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew do not clarify that Jesus is only the child of Mary, not of both Joseph and Mary. Mt 1:16 reads, "... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of ***whom was*** born Jesus, who is called Christ." Yet, the Greek text uses a feminine singular relative pronoun that restricts "whom" to Mary alone.[162]

Many such grammatical details exist in the biblical languages but do not always appear in English translations. By their very nature translations are the interpretations of the translators and are limited in their ability to bring out all nuances. After all, no two languages ever mirror each other. Hence, accuracy and thorough understanding demand that all interpretations be checked against the original languages to be certain they are consistent with the grammar of the text. As we have repeatedly urged, students must surround themselves with a range of good translations and key biblical commentaries that provide insight into the nuances of grammar.[163]

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[159]Cf. Fee, 1 *Corinthians,* 146–50; 260–66.

[160]Southern American English has a colloquial mechanism for plural you: "y'all." "Thou" and "you" of Old English (ca. 1000) also had this function, as do other languages today.

[161]So the one pronoun "who" can serve in all these ways: "Who is my neighbor?" "Who are those children?" "She is the woman who taught me Greek." "The man who races cars lives down the street." Like English, Hebrew also employs undeclined relative pronouns, e.g., *ʾšr* and *š*.

[162]The NCV avoids the ambiguity by saying, "... Joseph was the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus. Jesus is called the Christ."

[163]The bibliography lists the best resources.

CHAPTERSEVEN

General Rules of Hermeneutics-Old Testament Poetry

Comprising about one-third of the entire Bible, poetry is the second most common literary feature.[1] It even abounds outside the so-called poetical books like Psalms, Job, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. Old Testament narrative books periodically present long sections of poetry, and most prophetic oracles take poetic form.[2] Also, contrary to a common impression, poetry dots the pages of the NT, in original forms as well as in quotations of the OT.[3] Small wonder that Ryken warns, "There is ***no*** book in the Bible that does not require ***the*** ability to interpret poetry to some degree, because every book includes some figurative language."[4]

The purpose of this section is to prepare interpreters to enjoy and to know how to interpret the OT's poetic literature. An understanding of its unique literary

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[1]J. B. Gabel and C. B. Wheeler, *The* Bible *as Literature,* 2nd ed. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 37, 293; and L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible As Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 87.

[2]For examples of poetry amid narratives, see Exod 15:1–18; Judg 5; 1 Sam 2:1-10; 2 Sam 22; 23:1–7. For the suggestion that the book's poetry provides an important interpretative clue for 1-2 Samuel, see B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 272-75.

[3]Though some are questionable, likely sections include Mt 11:17; 13:13; Lk 1:46–55, 67-79; 2:29–32; 6:20–26; 7:31; Jn 1:1-18; Rom 11:33, 36; Eph 5:14; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 2:11–13; 1 Jn 2:12–14; Rev 4:11; 5:9–10; 7:15–17; 11:17–18; 12:10–12; 13:10; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 18; 19:1–8; cf. C. F. Burney, *The Poetry of Our Lord* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925).

[4]Ryken, *How to Read,* 87. According to N. K. Gottwald ("Poetry, Hebrew," *ZDB,* K-Q: 829), only seven OT books-Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi-seem to lack any poetic lines.

dynamics will not only heighten the enjoyment but will also enable interpreters to "hear" the poets' thoughts more clearly.[5] Fortunately, as we shall see, recent scholarly study of Hebrew poetry has uncovered for us a rich lode of insights to mine.

The Dynamics of Poetry

What is poetry? Poetry consists of written compositions typified by terseness, vivid words, and a high degree of structure.[6] Put differently, poetry displays a higher degree of structure, sound, and language than prose. We say to a "higher degree" because many prose texts also have poetic elements. Indeed, one should not think of poetry and prose as totally distinct, unrelated categories; rather, they represent the ends of a literary continuum. The more intense, dense, and compact a literary piece is, the closer it approaches the poetry side of the continuum.[7]

The opening lines of the poem "The Eve of St. Agnes" by John Keats illustrate the basic elements of poetry:[8]

> St. Agnes' **Eve-Ah, bitter chill it was!**
> **The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;**
> **The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,**
> **And silent was the flock in woolly fold. ...**

Structurally, what dominates the piece is not a grammatical sentence or paragraph but the poetic line. Each line is terse—so terse, in fact, that none fills out a full line of the printed page. Read aloud, each shows a natural rhythm of accented and unaccented syllables (and SI-lent WAS the FLOCK in WOOL-ly FOLD).

In turn, the rhythmic structure dictates an economy of language. The poet has carefully carved his thoughts into a few precise words that fit the rhythmic scheme; there are no "wasted words"—words just thrown in to fill blank space or to impress the reader. As for sound, the most obvious feature is the poem's rhyme. The final words of every other line rhyme ("was"/"grass"; "a-cold"/"fold").[9] More subtly, observe the repetition of the sound "f" in the words "for," "feathers," "frozen,"

[5]Occasionally, that understanding may also help us solve thorny textual problems or interpret difficult verses. See the example from Amos 6:12 in W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 307.

[6]Cf. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poety (New* York: Basic Books, 1985), x ("the best words in the best order"); A. Berlin, The *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 5, 16 (a high degree of "terseness and parallelism"); cf. also the detailed discussion of criteria in W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poety,* JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 46-62.

[7]Cf. D. L. Petersen and K. H. Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1314.

[8]For the full text, see 0. Williams, ed., *Immortal Poems of the English Language (New* York: Washington Square Press, 1952 [1969]), 333–43. What follows draws its inspiration and some content from C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 129-35.

[9]In describing poetry, the / sign means "parallels" or "corresponds to ." Later we will use // to signal the end of a poetic unit of parallel lines (e.g., two or more such lines joined by /).

"flock," and "fold." The poet has crafted rhyme and repetition into his lines so they sound pleasant when read aloud.

Finally, several things are striking about the poem's language. First, the poet offers concrete images to convey an abstract idea. He could have simply stated his main idea like "It was very cold on St. Agnes' Eve." Instead, he described the cold through three images-an owl, a hare (a rabbit), and a flock of sheep. How cold was it? It was so cold that the owl's feathers could not keep him warm, the rabbit could barely hop, and the flock could not even bleat a "baah." Now, that's cold![10]

Indeed, this leads us to a second observation. Through vivid language ("bitter chill," "limp'd," "frozen grass," "woolly fold"), the poet wants us to experience his topic--to *feel* the cold of that particular night. So his words appeal not so much to our reason as to our imagination. They paint imaginary pictures that allow us to experience the topic--its feel, sights, smells, touch, or taste. Our imagination sees the freezing owl, the limping rabbit, and the silent sheep; we feel that evening's "bitter chill." In sum, "poetry is a language of images that the reader must experience as a series of imagined sensory situations.""[11]

But some may object that prose often betrays an underlying rhythm and employs similarly vivid language. They may ask, then, how poetry differs from prose. At this point it is best to distinguish between poetic language (i.e., rhythmic sentences and concrete imagery) and poetry. Prose does make use of poetic language, particularly prose that is written for public presentation. The distinct attributes of poetry, however, are its sparseness and its restricted structure; these are not intrinsic to prose. Though prose may be compact and carefully structured, its structure is formed of sentences and paragraphs. The structure of poetry, by contrast, consists of tightly arranged lines and compact language.[12]

How does OT poetry compare to the poetry most familiar to us? Consider the overview of Hebrew poetry that this clever limerick offers:

> Hebrew poems are not just a mess,
> nor is this, we hope, a mere guess.
> They may not have rhyme,
> but you'll find every time
> that the poets composed under stress.[13]

[10]Cf. the observation by Lewis (*Christian Reflections,* 131) that adjectives dominate poetic language.

[11]Ryken, *How to Read,* 91 (his italics omitted).

[12]So Berlin, *Dynamics,* 16, **with reference to the constitutive structure of biblical poetry, Parallelism (to** be **discussed later); cf. Petersen and Richards,** *Interpreting Hebrew Poety,* 14 ("parallelism, rhythm, and style"). Against J. L. Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poety [New* Haven/London: Yale, 19811, 85, 94–95), both Berlin *(Dynamics,* 37) and Alter (*The Art of Biblical Poetry, 4,* 18-26) rightly argue that the categories "prose" and "poetry" remain valid descriptions of distinct types of biblical materials.

[13]Watson *Classical Hebrew Poety,* 100. For a useful survey of the poetic devices used by Jesus, see R. H. Stein,' *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 7-33. The classic catalog of biblical poetic techniques remains E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968 [1898]).

As was true of the Keats poem explored above, OT poetry is "not just a mess" but has sound (but not rhyme), structure, and language. The interpreter's task is to understand each of these three features and, hence, to be able to interpret biblical poems with insight and understanding.

The Sounds of Hebrew Poetry

Rhyme and Meter

First we will consider the feature of ***sound.***[14] Traditional English poetry uses two aspects of sound: rhyme and meter. Rhyme occurs when a poet pairs at least two words with virtually identical sounds at the end of successive or alternating lines (e.g., "The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold / And silent was the flock in woolly *fold"* [italics added]). ***Meter*** involves the rhythmic alternation between accented and unaccented syllables within each poetic line. By printing the accented syllables in capital letters, we can readily see the accentual alternation of the line just quoted from Keats:

> The OWL, for ALL his FEA-thers, WAS a-COLD
> And SI-lent WAS the FLOCK in WOOL-ly FOLD.

Observe that in this example an accent falls specifically on every other syllable, and that each line has a total of five accents.[15]

Hebrew poetry differs from English poetry in its uses of sound. For example, it lacks the rhyme that English speakers deem so basic to poetry. That is, Hebrew poets did not normally structure poetic lines so that their final words rhymed. On the other hand, they occasionally used rhyming sounds with great effect.[16] The most common use is end-rhyme in which the poet rhymes the final sounds of successive lines using suffixes or endings. For example, all four lines of Isa 33:22 end with the same sound, the suffix ***-nû/-ēnû ("our"*** or "us"). The other use is word-pair rhyme in which the poet rhymes two or more words in a row. Observe the three rhymed words that conclude this example from Isa 225:

[14]We realize that this subject relates primarily to readers who can access the original Hebrew text. Nevertheless, we believe other Bible students should be aware of these additional structural dimensions of OT poetry. With such awareness they can at least benefit from the occasional comments on the Hebrew in major reference books. With those students in mind, we have simplified some of our transliterations of Hebrew into English.

[15]Drawing on analogies from ancient Greek poetry, scholars have assigned technical labels to kinds of poetic meter. They call the alternation of unaccented and accented syllables ("in WOOL-ly FOLD") *iambic;* its opposite (i.e., accented followed by unaccented syllables) *trocbee.* With five accents in each line, the Keats poem follows a common meter called *iambicpentameter.*

[16]Cf. the discussion in Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 229–34. *See* also our discussion below of the related phenomena, assonance and alliteration. Hence, in our view, LaSor, et al. *(Old Testament Survey,* 312) go too far in saying that rhyme in Hebrew poetry occurs only coincidentally.

kî yôm	***mehúmâ***	***umebúsâ***	***umebúkâ***
For it is a day	of tumult,	trampling,	**turmoil."**

Does Hebrew poetry have regular meter? Since the 1970s, a lively discussion, spurred in part by studies of extra-biblical Semitic poetry, has produced a divided scholarly house on the question. On one extreme, scholars like Kugel virtually deny that biblical poetry has any meter at all.[18] Others argue that it does indeed have meter and explain it by counting letters or syllables, by alleging uses of stressed syllables, or by analyzing syntax.[19] The problem is that, thus far, no system adequately explains all the poetic phenomena available. At one point or another each has to squeeze or stretch the poetry to fit its preconceived systematic mold.

In our view, Hebrew poetry follows neither lock-step, sing-song meter nor an unanchored free verse. Instead, it follows what Hrushovski calls a ***free*** rhythm, that is, the flexible use of accented syllables within certain broad limits.[20] It shows such flexibility in several respects. First, a given poetic line may have two, three, or four words with accented syllables. Second, its parallel line(s) may or may not have the same number of such words. Scholars commonly use numbers to describe the accented syllables in a poetic couplet. For example, they would call a couplet in which each line has three stresses 3:3. If the second line had two or four stresses, it would be 3:2 or 3:4, respectively. Third, the number of unaccented syllables between accented ones varies, although at least one must intervene. Fourth, the number of parallel lines forming a poetic unit may vary from two to four but normally not more than four. Finally, unlike European metrical poetry, a given Hebrew poem need not consistently follow one rhythmical pattern throughout.

On the other hand, biblical poetry does operate within certain assumed poetic limitations-that is, within its own "poetics." First, regardless of how many accents it has, each line or pair of lines constitutes either a phrase, or a syntactical or logical unit. In other words, each will express either one complete thought or two related

"Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 232, who provides other examples of both types of rhyme (231-32).

[18]Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, 301* ("no meter has been found because none exists"); for a full discussion including critique of recent theories, see pp. 171-203 and 287-304; cf. also Berlin, *Dynamics,* 4 ("biblical poetry lacks any easily discernible meter"). While conceding the periodic presence of poetic stress, Alter believes "the term meter should probably be abandoned for biblical verse" (*The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 9).

'Watson *(Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 97–110) and Berlin (Dynamics, 18–30) provide convenient, critical surveys of these and other systems. The writings of O. Loretz argue for a letter-counting method (for bibliography, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 105-106). For the syllable-counting approach, see D. K. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976). Appealing to syntactical analysis are M. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980) and T. Collins, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).

[20]B. Hrushovski, "Prosody, Hebrew," *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* vol. 13 (Jerusalem: Keter Pub.; New York: Macmillan), 1201; followed by Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry, 8;* similarly, Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry,* 43–47 ("rhythmic patterns" of regularity, variation, grouping, and hierarchy); LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey,* 314. We owe much of what follows to the discussions in Hrushovski (cols.1200–1203) and Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 97–103.

ones.[21] Second, couplets are either of equal or similar length (i.e., 3:3; 3:2; 3:4). Hebrew poetry avoids overly long or short line-pairs (e.g., 5:1; 4:1, etc.). Third, as noted above, two accented syllables never occur in a row; at least one unaccented syllable intervenes. Fourth, also as noted above, normally the number of parallel lines never exceeds four. Finally, Hebrew poetry seems to have certain fixed patterns that occur in certain literature. For example, the 3:2 pattern is typical of funeral dirges (see further development in Chapter 8).[22]

Does a knowledge of Hebrew rhythm help us interpret OT poetry more accurately? The answer is a qualified yes. First, it should make us cautious about adopting alterations in the present Hebrew text because of meter. Since the nineteenth century, it has been common practice for scholars to suggest such minor changes by tailoring the Hebrew to fit an alleged, expected metrical pattern. Their goal is a good one-to recover the wording of (or, at least, that closest to) the original Hebrew text (i.e., the method called textual criticism). Though less popular than before, the practice still appears in commentaries and other books.[23] Given the flexibility of Hebrew meter, however, Bible **students should carefully evaluate** such textual suggestions before adopting them outright.

Second, an awareness of Hebrew rhythm allows us to capture additional dimensions of a text.[24] Indeed, even students without a knowledge of Hebrew can sense those added dimensions. Granted, as a translation, an English Bible provides no glimpse of the accents of the actual Hebrew words, but a literal, word-for-word English translation (e.g., KJV, NASB, RSV) does reveal the relative lengths of the Hebrew poetic lines. In turn, line lengths may point to one aspect of a poem's rhythm, namely, its tempo (the speed at which one should read it). Again, that tempo may say something about the speed of the actions that the words portray.

For example, long lines or several long words convey the idea of slowness (cf. Psa 19:7–9 [Heb. 8–10];[25] Lam 3:6a,15), while short lines or series of short words suggest staccato-like rapidity (cf. Judg 5:22; Jer 46:3–4). At the same time, a sudden, surprising change in line length alters the tempo of reading from fast to slow or vice versa, casting the spotlight on those lines- a kind of poetic "special effects." The shift compels the reader to pay special attention.

Consider an example from the prophet Nahum. He describes the fall of Nineveh, capital of Israel's hated enemy, Assyria:

[21]The Hebrew texts signal the end of the line by a grammatical stop (a phenomenon called "end-stopping"; cf. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 332-33). The commas or semicolons in English translations commonly indicate such stops.

[22]For those who know Hebrew, Watson (Classical *Hebrew Poetry*,99–103) provides details about how to identify stresses and meter.

[23]Cf. the occasional appeal to "m cs" (i.e., *metri causa*, "because of meter") in the textual notes of the current Hebrew text, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

[24]We are indebted for most of what follows to the fine discussion in Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 111-113.

[25]This abbreviation "Heb." is worth identifying here. In various places in the OT the verse numbers of the Hebrew Bible differ from the numbers in our English Bibles. In such places we provide the Hebrew verse number in brackets for those interested.

The crack of whips
the clatter of wheels,
galloping horses
and jolting chariots!
Charging cavalry,
flashing swords
and glittering spears!
Many casualties,
piles of dead,
bodies without number,
people stumbling over the corpses—
all because of the wanton lust of a harlot,
alluring, the mistress of sorceries,
who enslaved nations by her prostitution
and peoples by her witchcraft. (Nah 3:2–4)[26]

The short, compact lines convey both rapid action and quick closeups of specific aspects of a broad scene. They create a vivid sense of action happening in all directions. But by elongating the concluding lines, the writer suddenly slows down the action to a complete halt. The sudden stop in the action directs the reader's focus to one thing: Nineveh's lust. The last lines hammer home the point: Nineveh dies because of her prostitution (i.e., her political seduction of other nations).

In sum, careful study of a good literal English translation gives even the nonspecialized student a partial glimpse of the Hebrew original. That glimpse provides clues to a poem's tempo and to its meaning.

The Sounds of Poetic Words

Besides rhythm, Hebrew poets also used the sounds of words to create poetic effects. Knowing these various uses is an extremely helpful aid to proper interpretation of biblical poems.[27]

Assonance **is the** repetition of the same or closely similar vowel sounds in a series of words. Its primary purpose is to give a feeling of unity to a poetic unit, whether a single phrase, a single line, or a series of parallel lines. By calling attention to itself, assonance also serves a secondary purpose- to give special emphasis to the words that use it. It does so by linking the sounds of the words with their meaning in the same poetic unit. To use a contemporary example, one might say, "I would

"Occasionally, the translation in a commentary captures the rhythm of the Hebrew. For a good example see the rendering of Nahum and Habakkuk in 0. P. Robertson, *The Books* of Nahum, *Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[27]For a full discussion see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry, 222-50*, on whom much of what follows depends; cf. also Berlin, *Dynamics*, 103–26. As we said earlier, full appreciation of word sounds requires a knowledge of Hebrew. We include treatment here, however, to prepare readers for comments about words in standard reference books on the Bible. To hear the full effect of the examples below, readers would need to pronounce the transliterated Hebrew text, aloud.

rather live under communism than die in a nuclear war." But the simple alliterative phrase "Better Red than dead" is far more striking and memorable. The repeated "eh" sound (better, red, dead) provides unity, emphasis, and memorability.

In its simplest form assonance features the recurrence of a single vowel sound. For example, observe the heavy use of -a- sounds in this couplet:

Transliteration	*madûaʿ yārash malkām ʾet-gād* *weʿammô beʿārāyw yāshāb*[28]
Translation	Why then has Molech taken possession of Gad? Why do his people live in its towns? (Jer 49:1)

The Bible also offers more complex uses of assonance that combine several sounds in the same unit. A good example is the repetition of the sound-sequence **a-a-i** in this line:

Transliteration	*loʾ ʾaʾamîn kî yaʾazîn qôlî*[29]
Translation	I do not believe he would give me a hearing. (Job 9:16b)

Alliteration offers a similar use of sounds: the repetition of the same or similar-sounding consonants within a poetic unit. Alliteration serves purposes similar to those of assonance-to give its poetic unit (usually a line) a sense of wholeness as well as special emphasis. Also, it is common for a key word to be dominant in Hebrew poems, and alliteration around that word also serves to highlight it.[30] Finally, by linking sound with sense, alliteration makes the words more memorable. That is why even children can remember the line "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

Hebrew poets use this word device in various ways. Sometimes they alliterate the first letter of each word of a phrase or line ("word-initial alliteration"). Notice, for example, the repetition of initial sh- sounds in the second line of this couplet:

Transliteration	*ʾim-yhwh loʾ-yishmār-ʿîr* *shāwʾ shāqad shômēr*[31]
Translation	Unless the LORD watches over the city, the *watchmen stand guard in vain.* (Psa 127:1b, our italics)

[28]Cf. the use of "e" (Jer 49:8), "i" (Psa 113:8), "o" (Isa 58:12; Job 5:21), "u" (Lam 4:15). As Petersen and Richards rightly point out, however, the sounds of the present Hebrew text may not correspond exactly to those of the original. The reason is that the vowel sounds derive from later scribes whose pronunciation may differ from the original (*Interpreting Hebrew Poetry,* 5–6, 34).

[29]One word of clarification about assonance. Originally, the Hebrew text had only consonants; later scribes called "Masoretes" added the vowels so that later generations would not forget the language. Thus, our perception of assonance assumes a close similarity, if not identity, between the present Hebrew text and its original; cf. Berlin, *Dynamics,* 104, who limited her treatment of sound play to consonants.

[30]For examples and discussion of other functions, see Watson, ***Classical Hebrew Poety, 228.*** In a prose text, observe the repetition of the key thematic word *śûb* ("to return") throughout Ruth 1.

[31]Notice also that the repetition builds on the line's key word *śmr.* Cf. the repetition of initial "b" sounds in the line's preceding parallel.

The most common form of alliteration is the repetition of similar sounds over parallel lines. Notice the recurrence of the -k- and -ts- sounds in this example:

Transliteration	*ketsîts yātsāʾ wayyimmāl* *wayyibrah katstsēl weloʾ yaʿamôd*
Translation	Like a blossom he ***blooms,*** but withers; he is fleet as a ***shadow*** and does not stay. (Job 14:2)[32]

In the first line the -ts- sound occurs twice in the first word (*ketsîts*), then reappears a third time in the second word (*yātsāʾ*). This repetition gives the line a unity of sound. Further, in the second line the consonantal combination -k-ts- of *ketsîts* ("like a blossom") recurs in the phrase *katstsēl* ("like a shadow"), thereby giving the entire poetic pair a cohesive sound. In other cases, the alliteration appears over a series of lines. For example, in Joel 2:15–16a the letter -q- appears eight times in eight lines, four times as the initial letter of a line.[33]

Frequently, poets employ both assonance and alliteration in the same series of words. For example, consider the word pair *lintôsh welintôts* ("to destroy and demolish"), a pleasing phrase in Jeremiah's prophetic commission (Jer 1: 10). Except for the final letters, the two words sound exactly alike (**we** is the conjunction "and"). Similarly, the phrase ***beqeren ben shāmen*** concludes the introduction to Isaiah's memorable "Song of the Vineyard" (Isa 5: 1). All three words end with the same sound (-en), making the phrase almost rhyme.[34]

Some years ago, we heard a preacher contrast the views of self-esteem of Norman Vincent Peale and the Apostle Paul. After arguing that Paul's view was the superior one, he commented, "That's what makes Paul so appealing and Peale so appalling." That delightful line employed ***wordplay*** (also called paranomasia, or more commonly, a "pun"). Hebrew poetry also uses the familiar sound device of wordplay.[35] In the most common form, a poet pairs up two or more words that differ in one of their three consonants. For example, observe how Isaiah concluded his song about Israel as a vineyard that Yahweh planted to produce good fruit (Isa 5:7):

And he [Yahweh] looked for justice (***mishpāt***),
but saw bloodshed (***mishpāch***);
for righteousness (***tsedāqâ***),
but heard cries of distress (***tseʿāqâ***).

[32]Watson's translation (Classical ***Hebrew Poetry, 227).***

[33]Watson, ***Classical Hebrew Poetry, 227.*** A common, extended form of alliteration is the "alphabetic acrostic" in which each verse begins with succeeding letters of the alphabet. Cf. Pss 9; 10; 25; 111; 119; Prov 31:10–31; Lam 1–4; Nah 1:2–8; etc.; K. C. Hanson, ***Alphabetic Acrostics: A Form Critical Study*** (Unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1984).

"In a prose context, a similar combination gives the last line of Ruth 1:6 (*lātēt lāhem lehem,* "giving them food") added emphasis and memorability.

[35]The classic study is I. M. Casanowicz, ***Paronomasia in the Old Testament*** (Boston: J. S. Cushing et al., 1894); but cf. more recently, A. J. Petrotta, ***Lexis Ludens: Wordplay and the Book of Micah (New*** York: Peter ***Lang,*** 1991). What follows draws on J. M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the OT," *IDBS, 968-70,* and Watson, ***Classical Hebrew Poetry,*** 237–50.

Slightly more sophisticated is the "root-play," a pun in which one word's consonants reappear in later words but in a different order. Consider the clever play on the reversible roots *b-w-sh* and *sh-w-b* in Psa 6:10 [Heb. 11] (our translation):

> May all my enemies be ashamed (*yēbōshû*) and dismayed;
> may they turn back (*yāshubú*),
> may they be suddenly disgraced (*yēbōshú*).

Coming in the psalm's final verse, the pun gives the text's conclusion a special rhetorical flourish.

Sometimes the pun plays on changes in vowels between words of the same consonants (i.e., the same root). For example, when Jeremiah told God, "I see a branch of an almond tree (*shāqēd*)," Yahweh's reply picked up on the root *(h-q-d):* "I am watching (*shōqēd*) to see that my word is fulfilled" (Jer 1: 11–12).[36] At other times poets employ a double meaning or "double entendre" wordplay. This involves the repetition of the same word but with a different meaning in each case. Observe how the Preacher repeated the same formula (*'ên lāhem menahēm,* "there was no one to ... ") but with a different meaning for *menahēm:*

> I saw the tears of the oppressed,
> and I saw that there was no one to comfort them.
> Strength was on the side of their oppressors,
> and there was no one to avenge them. (Eccl 4:1, NEB, our italics)

Word repetition is another common type of wordplay. In this case the poet simply repeats a word or words, perhaps in slightly different forms, throughout a series of poetic lines. The prophet Isaiah skillfully used this device in the opening lines of his "Song of the Vineyard" (Isa 5: 1). Observe the recurrence of the words "sing"/"song" (*shîr*), "lover" (*yedîdî, dôdî*), and "vineyard" (kerem):

> I will sing (*shîr*) for the one I love (*yedîdî*)
> a song (*shîr*) of my lover (*dôdî*) about his vineyard (kerem):
> My loved one (*yedîdî*) had a vineyard (kerem)
> on a fertile hillside. (Isa 5:1)[37]

Finally, poets sometimes use ***onomatopoeia,*** that is, words whose own sounds imitate the actual sounds of the actions they portray. The English language has many onomatopoetic words. So we say that a bee "buzzed" around our head, that a baby "babbled," or that a drain pipe "gurgled." Each word imitates the sound made by a bee, baby, or drain pipe. By the same token, one can almost hear the sounds of galloping horses in the second line of this battle scene (Judg 5:22):

[36]Cf. Isaiah's play on the root *'kl: tō'kēlû* "*you* shall eat," *t'ukke'lû* "*you* shall be eaten" (Isa 1:19–20).

[37]After Berlin, *Dynamics, 113.*

> Then thundered the horses' hoofs—
> galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds.
> *middharôt daharôt 'abbîrāw*[38]

Now the use of such literary devices is valid and valuable in and of itself for it highlights the beauty and creativity both of human language and of the poets who skillfully shape it into poetry to entice and delight readers. But how does a knowledge of Hebrew sounds contribute to proper interpretation? Consider that by the clever use of sounds, biblical poets called special attention to their words. While amusing and pleasurable in itself, such showcasing of sounds also signals the poets' intentions. It casts a spotlight on the words that the writer sought to emphasize, and, thus, may point to the poem's meaning. In some cases, wordplay underscores the poem's theme. Certainly, the repetition of "Praise him" (*hallelûhú*) in some psalms shows their theme to be the praise of Yahweh (see Psa 148:3-5; 150). In other cases, wordplay highlights a strategic contrast. To retrieve an earlier example, by reversing the letters *b-w-sh* and *sh-w-b, the* psalmist stressed the reversal of fortune for which his prayer pled (Psa 6:10 [Heb. 11]). Hearing the sound of the poet's words is indeed a useful tool in interpreting biblical poetry.

The Structure of Hebrew Poetry

Parallelism

Scholars refer to the structure of Hebrew poetry as ***parallelism*** *of members,* a term that has unfortunately spawned a common misunderstanding.[39] Many people understand "parallelism" to mean that a second poetic line merely restates or contrasts the point of the previous line in different words. They assume that an equal sign (=) links the lines together. Actually, parallelism is that phenomenon whereby two or more successive poetic lines strengthen, reinforce, and develop each other's thought. As a kind of emphatic additional thought, the follow-up lines further define, specify expand, intensify, or contrast the first. As Berlin puts it,

> Parallelism focuses the message on itself but its vision is binocular. Like human vision it superimposes two slightly different views of the same object and from their convergence it produces a sense of depth.[40]

[38]Cf. Isaiah's imitation of birds chirping (Isa 10:14) and gibberish language (28:10, 13).

[39]"Historically, this discovery goes back to R. Lowth's inaugural lectures as professor of poetry at Oxford (cf. R. Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* [Oxford: Clarendon, 17531; ET: Lectures *on the Sacred Poety of the Hebrews* [London: S. Chadwick & Co., 18471). For a critical reassessment of Lowth's work, however, see Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry,* 204–86. Later discoveries showed the practice of parallelism to be widespread among Semitic poets. For some Ugaritic examples, see LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey,* 313–14.

[40]"Berlin, *Dynamics, 99.* In our view, our discussion reflects an emerging consensus evident in Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, 8;* Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 10–26; and Rerlin, *Dynamics,* 140–41

The succeeding lines do not simply restate the opening line; rather, they add to or expand its thought.

Isa 1: 10 illustrates this structure:

> Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom;
> Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (our translation)

The correspondences between these two lines are obvious. Their grammatical structures are exactly alike—imperative + direct object and a vocative. Individual words also correspond to each other in meaning: "hear"/"listen to"; "word of the LORD"/"law of our God"; and "rulers of Sodom"/"people of Gomorrah."

As we said above, however, the second line is not simply a restatement of the first in different words; both lines betray subtle differences. For example, though some words overlap in meaning, they are not actually synonyms. "Law" (Heb. *tôrâ*) is not really another way of saying "word" (*dābār*) nor is "people" (*'am*) the exact counterpart of "rulers" (*q&n*). The Bible associates "word" with the message of a prophet and "instruction" with the teaching about the Law by a priest (see Jer 18:18). Similarly, "Sodom" and "Gomorrah" are not simply two names for the same town; they designate separate, though proximate, cities (cf. Gen 10: 19; 14; 18). At the same time, when mentioned together they designate "twin cities of sin."

In our view, this combination of similarity and difference serves Isaiah's rhetorical purpose. On the one hand, it stresses that he wants to talk to everyone—both "rulers" and "people"-and cleverly implies that all are sinful (like residents of Sodom and Gomorrah). On the other hand, the change from "word" to "instruction" indicates a subtle but significant development in Isaiah's train of thought. "Word" signals that what follows is a divine revelation, while "instruction" tells the hearers to accept Isaiah's message as they would teaching by a priest.

This example underscores what Kugel emphasizes: the relationships between lines of Hebrew poetry are amazingly complex.[41] The careful Bible student will determine what relationship exists between the poetic lines in each text taking care not to assume a simplistic notion that their unity boils down to one or two main principles.

Basic Units of Parallelism

Traditionally, scholars subdivided parallelism into three types-synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic-depending on whether the succeeding line restated, contrasted, or developed the first, respectively.[42] Recent study, however, has tended to avoid those categories as overly simplistic and misleading. Sadly, no replacement scheme has yet won a consensus.

[41]Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, 2-7,* provides an illustrative sample. As Alter warns (*The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 18), "the evidence of line after line of biblical verse suggests that we are too quick to infer automatic and formulaic rhetorical gesture of repetition when more than that is going on."

[42]Cf. conveniently Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry,* 24–27. As they point out the traditional definition of synthetic parallelism proved to be very problematic.

So we propose simply to suggest a few ways in which parallelism works. Our purpose is two-fold: (1) to sensitize students to the potential communicative power of parallelism, and (2) to help them thread their way through what otherwise might seem an impenetrable thicket of complexity. To do this we will first need to consider how scholars describe poetic lines. With this knowledge we will be able to distinguish poetic lines and, more important, to visualize the similarities and differences between them.

The technical term for a single line of poetry is *stich* (pronounced "stick").[43] Two parallel lines form a unit that scholars designate either as a *couplet* or a *distich.* Three parallel lines form a triplet or *tristich.* Just as the Bible's subdivision into chapters and verses allows us to identify its subparts, so scholars use letters for the subparts of a stich. Consider this example in which two stichs are fairly synonymous (Psa 77:1):

a	*b*	c
I cried out	to God	for help;
a'	*b'*	*c'*
I cried out	to God	to hear me.

Both stichs have three parts labelled *a, b,* and c. Two schematic principles are at work here. First, in each stich the same letter designates elements that have the same meaning (are semantically parallel) or that play the same grammatical role in the sentence (are syntactically parallel). Second, the addition of ' to a letter (e.g., a', called "*ā* prime") shows that it belongs to the second stich.[44] Thus, one would describe the structure of the first stich as *a b c, the* second as a' *b' c',* and that of the whole verse as *a b c / a' b' c'.*

As a second example consider this verse in which the stichs express a contrast (Prov 14:34):

	a	*b*	c
	Righteousness	exalts	a nation,
	-a	*-b*	-C
but	sin	is a disgrace	to any people.

Syntactically, the two lines are parallel, but semantically they express opposite meanings. To indicate that contrast, we prefix the letters describing the second stich with a minus sign (-). Hence, we describe its structure as -a *-b -c* and that of the entire verse as a *b c / -a -b -c.*

Frequently, however, a second (or third) stich may omit items found in the first, a phenomenon called *ellipsis.* For example, it is common for the second stich

[43]From Gk. *stichos* "row, line (of writing)"; plural *stichoi,* "STICK-oy." While many scholars Prefer the term "colon" (plural "cola"), Alter (*The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 9) opts for "verset," while Petersen and Richards favor "colon" or "line" *(Interpreting Hebrew Poetry, 23).*

[44]Were there a third parallel line, each of its components would bear a double prime (e.g., *a''* or "ā double prime"). Those of a fourth parallel line (a rare but possible occurrence> would have a triple prime (e.g., *a'''*).

to assume the presence of the verb from the first stich but not to repeat it. This omission leaves the second stich without a verb. Study this example (Amos 8:10):[45]

	a	*b*	c
	I will turn	your religious feasts	into mourning,
		B'	*c'*
and		all your singing	into weeping.

The second stich assumes but omits the verb "I will turn" from the first stich. Presumably, the wording chosen for the second stich dictated the omission of the verb. That omission does not mean, however, that the second stich is shorter than the first. It may, in fact, be about the same length and even be longer. When a succeeding element is longer than its parallel, we signal this with a capital letter (e.g., ***B'*** [B heavy prime] vs. ***b*** above).

In other cases, the second stich may omit the verb and add elements unparalleled in the first:

	a	*b*	
	He summons	the heavens above,	
		b'	c
and		the earth,	that he may judge his people.

(Psa 50:4; cf. Amos 9:10)

The second stich omits (but assumes) the verb "he summons" but also adds a phrase that, quite significantly, specifies the purpose of that summons. In other words, rather than simply restate the point of the first stich, here the second one further ***develops*** it by stating its purpose.[46] This example has the structure ***a b/b' c.***

How Parallelism Works

The relationships that bind parallel stichs range across a continuum of increasing complexity-a complexity that is not adequately described by the traditional categories of parallelism (i.e., synonymous, antithetical, synthetic). At one end of the continuum are the rare cases of synonymous parallelism in which the second stich simply restates the first in different words (Prov 19:5):

> A false witness will not got unpunished,
> and he who pours out lies will not go free.[47]

[45]We owe the first example to LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey*, 308, the second to Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 6. What we call "ellipsis," Alter calls " 'hidden' repetition" (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 23; cf. his illuminating discussion of the phenomenon, 24-26).

[46]Notice also the development from "heavens" to "earth," that is, from the upper extreme of the created cosmos to the lower one. Such paired extremes (heaven and earth) are called *merismus*.

[47]Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 22; Job 27:4. Here belong also the even more extreme, rare exact parallelisms, that is, repeated refrains like "for his loyalty is forever" (Psa 136) or "praise him" (Psa 150); *cf.* Berlin, *Dynamics*, 130.

The parallels are obvious: "false witness"/"he who pours out lies" and "not go unpunished"/"will not go free." There is no perceptible development from the first line to the second. At the other end of the continuum are cases in which the second stich shows no similarity at all to the first (Psa 115: 18):

> It is we who extol the LORD,
> both now and forevermore.

In this case, the second stich completes the first grammatically; the two stichs form a single sentence.[48] As we shall see, most biblical poetry falls somewhere between these two extremes. In order to determine where a stich should be placed on the continuum we need to understand the dynamics of parallelism-how does it work? This understanding is crucial for an accurate analysis of poetry.

As Berlin has shown, parallel lines may interrelate grammatically, lexically and semantically, and phonologically.[49] Some parallels are interrelated by only one of these factors, others by all three. The ***grammatical factor*** is the structural skeleton of parallelism. It concerns the elements of grammar (tense, mood, case, number, etc.) that appear in each stich of a parallel pair. For example, in comparing stichs, one might observe a change in nouns from singular to plural or in verbs from present to future tense. One stich might make a statement while its parallel stich asks a question; another stich might state something positively, while its parallel states it negatively.[50]

If grammar provides the skeleton, the ***lexical-semantic factor*** provides the flesh and blood.[51] This aspect focuses on the relationship between the specific words in each parallel line. For example, like their linguistic kinsfolk at ancient Ugatit, Hebrew poets often built their poetry around "word pairs," sets of words commonly associated together.[52] This explains why parallel lines commonly develop around pairs of synonyms (eat/drink, earth/dust) or antonyms (right/left, there is/there are not).[53] At the same time, it also permits a poet to juxtapose two nonassociated words creatively for poetic effect (for examples, see below).

The ***phonologic factor*** refers to the use of words of similar sounds (e.g., word-play or paranomasia) either within a single stich or in parallel ones. English speakers commonly use this delightful device for rhetorical effect. One popular joke, for example, tells of a man condemned to hang for continuously

[48]Cf. Berlin, *Dynamics*, 90, n. 42.

[49]Here we offer a simplified overview of Berlin's excellent, detailed treatment (*Dynamics*, 31–126; cf. also the summary paradigm, 29).

[50]Cf. the examples provided by Berlin, *Dynamics*, 56-57, 59: "For in Death there is no mention of you/In Sheol who can acclaim you?" (Psa 6:5 [Heb. 6]). "My son, do not forget my teaching/And let your heart guard my commandments" (Prov 3:1).

[51]Berlin, *Dynamics*, 64.

[52]For catalogues of this phenomenon, see M. Dahood, "Ugaritic-Hebrew Parallel Pairs," *Ras Sbamra Parallels* [=*RSP*] (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1972), 1:71–382 (ed. L. R. Fisher); *RSP* (1975), 2:1–39 (ed. L. R. Fisher); *RSP* (1981), 3:1–206 (ed. S. Rummel). For its interpretation, see Berlin, *Dynamics*, 65–102.

[53]Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 131-32 (cf. also his fine overview, 128–44).

making puns. As he stood on the scaffold, the merciful crowd commuted his sentence, to which he replied, "No noose is good news!" Of course, to access this aspect in the OT the student must read the Hebrew aloud, listening for similar sounds. Nevertheless, English Bible readers need to understand this phenomenon because biblical commentators often refer to it. Occasionally, footnotes in English translations point out puns on Hebrew names (in NIV, e.g., Jer 1:12; 19:7; Mic 1:10-15; etc.).

Types of Parallelism

How do parallel lines of Hebrew poetry interrelate? We have gleaned some examples from the studies of Alter, Berlin, and Kugel and have arranged them systematically. The categories here are our own, and we intend to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. We also intend them to be descriptive rather than technical. This is by no means a full-scale taxonomy of parallelism. Admittedly, some of the categories overlap, but they suggest the kinds of things the student must watch for. Our purpose is to train the reader's eye to identify them and to provide some working descriptive categories for the student to understand how they function-key elements in interpreting poetry.

1. Biblical poetry often displays a parallelism of ***subordination.*** In these cases one stich is grammatically subordinate to its parallel. In Psa 111:6, for example, the second stich describes the ***means*** by which Yahweh accomplished what the first stich stated:[54]

> He has shown his people the power of his works,
> giving them the lands of other nations.

In other words, the first stich leaves the reader with a question: how did Yahweh show his people his power? The second stich answers it: he displayed it by taking territory owned by other nations and giving it to his people.

It is also common for one stich to state the ***reason*** for the claims of the other, as Exod 15:21 shows:

Sing to the LORD,	(statement)
for he is highly exalted.	(reason)
The horse and **its rider**	**(example)**
he has hurled into the sea.	

Correct interpretation requires the reader carefully to follow the logic of each line. "Sing to the LORD" demands that one burst into song. But why should one sing Yahweh's praise? Because he is a "highly exalted" God (cf. also Psa 13:6). That is, he is the cosmic ruler of heaven and earth. But the verse answers one last question: What evidence confirms his exalted position? "Horse and its rider he has hurled

[54]So Berlin, *Dynamics,* 81

into the sea"- a n allusion to Yahweh's stunning defeat of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. In sum, the poet supports his command with a reason, then supports his reason with an example (see also Psa 106: 1; 107: 1). To understand the poet's meaning properly, one must walk through the stichs, sorting out each line as we did above.

In other cases, one stich specifies the ***time*** of its parallel:

By the rivers of Babylon	
we sat and wept	(statement)
when we remembered Zion. (Psa 137: 1)	**(temporal clause)**[55]

Here the poet describes how exiled Israelites sat down and wept in Babylon. The temporal clause defines the time when they wept-when they remembered Zion, the holy mountain in their homeland. Implicitly, however, the temporal clause also reveals the reason for the people's grief-memory of beloved Zion.[56]

2. A parallelism of ***contrast*** occurs when a poet juxtaposes stichs that contrast each other. Its best known form is the old "antithetical parallelism," which Prov 11:20 (NCV) illustrates:

> The LORD hates those with evil hearts
> but is pleased with those who are innocent.

The verse sharply contrasts Yahweh's response to two kinds of people. He "hates" the wicked but "is pleased with" the righteous. We call this an "antithetical" contrast because it speaks of opposites that share no common ground. In the Bible, good and evil are opposites engaged in deadly combat. Because of his nature, Yahweh cannot delight in the wicked nor detest the righteous. In passing, one should notice the double-edge this proverb wields-it both encourages and warns. On the one hand, it encourages the righteous to keep up their blameless lives. On the other, it warns the wicked to abandon their hateful conduct. Occasionally, parallel lines may convey a contrast that is not antithetical. (That, by the way, is why we define this category as one of "contrast," not "antithesis."[57]) Consider Judg 5:25:

> He **asked** for water,
> and she gave him milk. . . .

The line contrasts the water, which the Canaanite general Sisera sought, and the milk, which the Kenite woman, Jael, served him. Unlike the previous example, there is no antithesis here, for water and milk are acceptable alternatives, not direct opposites. In sum, parallelism of contrast involves both simple contrast and actual antithesis.

[55]Cf. Psa 14:7b, **"When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people [temporal clause]/ let Jacob rejoice and (let) Israel be glad!" [call to rejoice]. In this case, the statement also expresses the** *result* **of the temporal clause.**

[56]Cf. **also cases where one stich is a prepositional phrase subordinate to the other: "There on the poplars/we hung our harps"** (Psa 137:2; **so Alter,** *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 19). **Cf. Judg** 5:25b.

[57]So **Berlin,** *Dynamics,* **95.**

The careful student must learn to distinguish both types and to interpret such cases accordingly.

3. In cases of parallelism of ***continuation,*** succeeding parallel lines present a progression of thought. For example, observe how Isa 40:9 creates the illusion of simple repetition but actually portrays progress:[58]

> You who bring good tidings to Zion,
> go up on a high mountain.
> You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,
> lift up your voice with a shout,
> lift it up, do not be afraid;
> say to the towns of Judah,
> "Here is your God!"

At first glance, repeated phrases and parallel words create the impression that succeeding lines restate the first in other words.[59] Actually, the text paints the actions of the messenger in the order in which they would normally occur. First, he would ascend a high mountain to address a large area, then he would shout out his message. Only then would he say, "Here is your God! "-reserved here for the climactic last line. Hence, to understand such examples, the reader must see beyond the illusion of repetition and think through the logic of each line to discover how each interacts with its predecessor. Failure to work through this process will result in a misreading of the text.

4. In a parallelism of *comparison,* parallel lines form a simile, that is, a comparison. (For similes, see below). Psa 103:13 illustrates this common parallelism:

> As a father has compassion on his children,
> so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

Here the psalmist describes the LORD's compassion by comparing it to that of a father toward his children. He explains the unknown (or lesser known)-the LORD's compassion—by appeal to something well (or at least better) known-the compassion of a father. Through the comparison, the poet puts flesh on what otherwise would remain an abstract idea ("the LORD has compassion"). Implicitly, he recalls the reader's own childhood experiences-how mercifully his or her father had glossed over glaring goofs with a smile and a hug. The reader now visualizes the LORD's mercy along similar lines. And that is the point-"the LORD has compassion."

Sometimes, however, the comparison is implicit rather than explicit. We say "implicit" in these cases because the Hebrew text lacks the explicit signals of the simile-the words "like" or "as." Instead, it simply aligns two stichs side-by-side without clarifying their connection (i.e., a metaphor). Consider how Psa 125:2 reads literally:

[58]Cf. Berlin, *Dynamics,* 90–91, who, however, offers a more technical linguistic discussion; cf. also Isa 165.

[59]I.e., "you who bring good tidings," "lift up (your voice)," "Zion" / 'Jerusalem."

> Jerusalem-mountains surround it;
> And YHWH surrounds his people. . . .[60]

Why did the psalmist arrange these two stichs together? How do they interrelate? Obviously, he juxtaposed "mountains" and "YHWH" (Yahweh) because they somehow compare. What do they have in common? Both protect Jerusalem from the attacks of her enemies. Hence, the couplet compares the protection both offer. As before, the poet speaks of an abstract idea in a concrete way. The line about Jerusalem's mountains serves as a simile for the protection given by Yahweh. Recognizing this, the *NIV* rightly makes the implicit simile explicit by using the English grammatical marker "as":

> As the mountains surround Jerusalem
> so the LORD surrounds his people. . . .[61]

Pondering Yahweh's protection, one imagines it to be a huge, towering wall of solid rock-impossible for enemies to penetrate. To understand the poet's meaning, the reader must determine how mountains and the LORD compare, and whether the psalmist's real focus is on the mountains or on the LORD (obviously, the latter). When the student interprets comparisons, care must be taken to avoid being preoccupied with the simile distinction (the meaning of "mountains" or "father"), as if that were the poet's meaning. Rather, the student must seek to understand the main point (the LORD's compassion or protection) in light of the simile's portrait.

5. In the parallelism of ***specification,*** each succeeding stich makes more specific what the opening stich states in general terms. In other words, the movement is from general to specific.[62] There are various forms of specification. Sometimes it has to do with spatial or geographic entities. Isa 45:12 illustrates this type (NRSV, *our* italics):

I made the ***earth***	(general)
and created ***humankind upon it;***	(specific)
it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,	(general)
and I commanded all their host.	(specific)

In these two distichs, Yahweh affirms that he created the universe.[63] Observe how each first line concerns a general geographical realm (the earth, the heavens) while

[60]The example and translation come from Berlin, *Dynamics,* 101 (cf. the entire discussion and other examples, 100–101).

[61]Cf. also Prov 26:9.

[62]We owe much of what follows to Alter, *The Art of* Biblical *Poetry,* 9–26; cf. his comment (19): "The rule of thumb . . . is that the general term occurs in the first verset [i.e., stichl and a more specific instance of the general category in the second verset."

[63]In context, the strophe provides evidence to banish his people's doubt about his ability to bring them home from exile (see w. 11–13). The argument runs: "If my power made the whole massive cosmos, it can certainly redeem Israel from human hands."

the second focuses in on something more specific within that realm, namely, its inhabitants. This movement, from general to specific, narrows the reader's attention to a smaller perspective.

In other cases of this type, succeeding stichs provide an explanation of the opening line. Consider, for example, how the lines in Isa 48:20b–21 explain the opening line by giving specifics:

> Say, "The LORD has **redeemed his** servant Jacob.
> And they ***did not thirst*** in the **deserts where he led them;**
> **water from a rock he *made flow* for them.**
> **He *split* a rock and water *Bushed out.*"**[64]

The first line offers the general statement "the LORD has redeemed Israel"; those that follow explain that redemption. Further, the following lines become increasingly more specific, each implicitly answering a question arising from its immediate parallel. Alter describes this technique as an "explanatory chain":

> **What does it mean that God "redeemed" Israel (first verset [i.e., line])? They were not thirsty in the desert (second verset). How could they not have been thirsty?-because He made water flow from a rock (third verset). How did He make water flow from a rock?-by splitting it so the water** gushed (fourth **verset)** .[65]

The poet might have taken the subject of Israel's redemption in many directions. His comments might have recalled, for example, the defeat of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, the wondrous provision of manna, Israel's freedom from slavery, or the meeting with God at Mt. Sinai. Instead, he focused on one episode-the day Yahweh split a rock to give Israel water (cf. Num 20:11). Again, proper interpretation carefully considers the development of thought between the opening and subsequent lines.

In another variety of the parallelism of specification, the second stich specifies the first in a dramatic fashion; the general terms of the opening stich are followed by striking language in the second. Notice, for example, the dramatic effect achieved by a simple change in a verb:

> **The desert tribes will bow before him**
> **and his enemies will *lick the dust.* (Psa 72:9, our italics)**

The context is prayer for a successful reign by Israel's king, perhaps on the occasion of his coronation.[66] The speaker (possibly a priest) affirms one aspect of that hoped-for success: the king's wide dominion. Typically, the first stich makes a general statement that desert tribes will submit to the king's rule. In ancient custom to "bow before" someone was to show that person great honor. The second stich, however,

[64]Our translation; italics as in Alter, The ***Art of Biblical Poety, 20.***

[65]Alter, ***The Art of Biblical Poetry, 20.***

[66]Cf. E. S. Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1***, FOTL ***14*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 19; Pss 2; 110.

gives two specifics: it details that these tribes are not royal friends but "enemies," and it graphically portrays their bowing-they "lick the dust." The startling language dramatically states the completeness of their surrender.

In yet another variety, the second stich may specify the purpose of the first. Consider Prov 4:1, for example:

a	***b***	
Listen, my sons,	to a father's instruction;	
a'		c
pay attention	[to a father's instruction]	and gain understanding.

The parallelism between "listen" (a) and "pay attention" (a') creates the impression that the second line (a' ***c***) simply restates the first. The ellipsis of ***b*** ("to a father's instruction"), however, permits the poet some rhythmic space to add a purpose clause (***c,*** "to gain understanding"). Thus, **a' c goes** beyond a mere restatement of a Lit specifies the latter's purpose (Why should a son listen to his father's teaching? To gain understanding). The complementary nature of the second stich must be recognized for a proper interpretation. A correct paraphrase of the proverb would be: a wise son listens to his father's teaching so that he may gain understanding.

6. The last major use of parallelism is ***intensification.*** Intensification occurs when the second stich of a couplet restates the first in a more pointed, extreme, or forceful way. To paraphrase the dynamics, we might say the second develops the first by saying, "Not only that but more so!"[67] The effect of this intensified language is to heighten the poetic power of the entire distich. The most obvious example of intensification is the use of numbers in parallelism. Consider this verse from Moses' farewell address to Israel shortly before his death:

> How could one **man chase a thousand,**
> **or two put ten thousand to flight . . . ? (Deut 32:30)**

Obviously, the numbers "one" and "two" or "thousand" and "ten thousand" are not synonyms. Instead, the latter ten-fold numerical increase aims for a poetic effect: to heighten the image of the stunning military rout to which Moses refers.[68]

Intensification occurs in other ways as well. Observe, for example, the contrast of intensity between the verbs in this verse:

> **Your granaries will *be filled with* abundance,**
> **with new wine your vats will *burst.* (Prov 3:10, Alter's translation, our italics)**

[67]Alter, ***The Art of Biblical Poetry,*** 11, who compares it to the a ***fortiori*** logical argument; cf. Kugel's summary formula "A is so, ***what's more,*** B is so" (***The Idea of Biblical Poety, 8).*** This compares to what some scholars call "climactic parallelism"; so L. Ryken, ***Words of Delight*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 181-82.

[68]Cf. also "seven"/"seventy-seven" in Lamech's boast (Gen 4:24). A more common phenomenon is to parallel a number with a number larger by one (e.g., "seven"/"eight," Mic 5:4). Scholars describe this device with the formula "n/n + 1." For a full discussion of numerical parallelism, see Watson. ***Classical Hebrew Poety,*** 144–49.

In content, the lines supplement each other: line one is about grain, line two is about wine. Taken together, they make the single point that God will amply provide for those who honor him (i.e., both food and drink). There is an emotive contrast, however, between the verbs "be filled" and "burst." The former describes a state; the latter paints a picture with a touch of hyperbole. That is, Israel will have so much wine that her vats will burst! Other poets achieve the same effect by stringing together parallel nouns. Consider, for example, these lines:

> Is your love **declared in the grave,**
> **your faithfulness in Destruction (*'abaddôn*)?**
> ***Are*** your wonders known in the place of darkness,
> or your righteous **deeds** in the land of oblivion?
> (Psa 88:11–12 **[Heb. 12–13]; cf.** Isa 59:9–10)

In context, the psalmist presses Yahweh to save him from death. Surprisingly, he argues that God should do so because only the living, not the dead, are able to praise Yahweh. As Alter notes, however, the language combines two sets of parallel words, one fairly synonymous, the other signaling development. The near synonyms are "love"/"faithfulness" and "wonders"/"righteous deeds." The other set, however, "carries forward a progressive imaginative realization of death. ..."[69] The poet first pairs the common term "grave" with the poetic synonym "Destruction" (*'abaddôn*). The latter steps up the emotive intensity slightly by pointing out the grim fate that the grave cruelly imposes--extinction.

Then, he parallels another everyday word (darkness) with a second poetic expression for the underworld (the land of oblivion). "Darkness" goes beyond "grave," however, because it introduces the sensory experience of death, thereby making the fate more personal. Finally, "land of oblivion" both summarizes the previous lines and brings them to an emphatic close. It implies that "death is a realm where human beings are utterly forgotten and extinct, and where there can be no question of God's greatness being recalled."[70]

Now, in some texts, the student may have difficulty distinguishing the dimension of intensification from that of specification since the two overlap somewhat. We must also allow the possibility that both phenomena may be present in a single passage. Indeed, with any poem the student must scrutinize succeeding poetic lines to define precisely what relationship links them. As Petersen and Richards point out, "The juxtaposition of an A and B provides the opportunity for an almost infinite number of correspondences."[71]

Other Poetic Structures

To conclude our survey of Hebrew poetic structure, we introduce the reader to other distinct structural devices that are common among biblical poets. As its

[69] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 14.
[70] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poety*, 14.
[71] Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poety*, 35.

name implies, ***staircase*** (or ***stairstep***) ***parallelism*** is a couplet (or tristich) in which the succeeding lines develop in steps.[72] That is, they add things not found in the opening couplet, frequently with the use of ellipsis. Observe the stairstep structure of these two examples:

> Return, 0 Virgin Israel,
> Return to your towns. (Jer 31:21b)

> Awake, my soul!
> Awake, harp and lyre!
> I will awaken the dawn. (Psa 57:8 [Heb. 9])[73]

By combining repetition and variation, follow-up lines extend the thought of the first forming a verbal "staircase." The concluding element actually completes the thought. The poetic effect is for each line to build on its predecessor, the last line serving as a kind of climax.

Chiasm (or chiasmus) is another common structural device in which the word order of a parallel line is the reverse of its predecessor (a ***b / b' a').*** Lines drawn between the parallel elements would form an X-the Greek letter ***chi*** from which the device draws its name. Generally the chiasm can be observed only in the Hebrew text (cf. Job 6:15; Psa 137:5–6a), but occasionally it is reflected in the English translation. Study the word order reversal and X pattern of this example:

a	b
In Judah	God is known;
b'	***a'***
his name is great	in Israel. (Psa 76:1)

Here the chiasm hinges on the reversal of the parallel elements "in Judah"/"in Israel" and "is known"/"is great." Usually, chiasm is more than just a decorative device. Poets use it to convey something about the meaning of the lines concerned. For example, a poet might use chiasm to underscore the contrast between the content of two stichs (to show a reversal of fate or to stress their antithesis [cf. antithetical proverbs]). The Bible student, thus, must analyze how each case of chiasm affects the meaning of the biblical text.[74]

The use of chiasm is not limited to individual stichs. We also find examples of ***extended chiasm*** in the Bible. These are chiastic structures that underlie entire

[72] Cf. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 150–56.
[73] These examples (but not their translation) come from Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 151.
[74] For further discussion with examples, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 201–208. Chiasm also occurs in lines of prose texts (e.g., Gen 4:4–5; Ruth 1:14; et al.). On chiasm in the NT see J. L. Bailey and L. D. Vander Broek, *Literary Form.5 in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 49-54, 178-83.

passages and even entire books.[75] Basically, when extended chiasm occurs, the second half of a text or book corresponds to its first half except in reverse order. Each corresponding section has parallel content, and in the case of single texts, often the very same or similar words.

Further, the climax of an extended chiasm falls in the structural center of the text, that is, the one section that lacks a parallel. The climax constitutes the structural hinge or turning point that joins the text's two halves. This is precisely where we find the main point of the passage. Finally, a text's secondary emphasis appears in its frames, that is, in the sections at the beginning and the end (i.e., A and A').

Jeremiah 2:5-9 offers an example of extended chiasm in a single text. Observe the correspondence between parallel parts (e.g., A/A', B/B', etc.), the inverse order of the second half, and the turning point (E in all caps).[76] To highlight the links between sections, we have set key words in italics:

This Yahweh has said:
A What did your *fathers* find wrong with me, 2:5
to keep their distance from me?
B Chasing "Delusion" and being deluded
C Never saying: :6
***"Where* is Yahweh"**
D who brought us from the *land,* Egypt
steered us through the desert :7
through the *land* of steppe and chasm,
through the land both hot and dark,
through the *land* no one crosses,
where no man Lives.
E I BROUGHT YOU TO AN ORCHARD LAND, TO EAT ITS LOVELY FRUIT
D' But, on arrival you fouled my *land.*
my **bequest you made disgusting.**
C' The priests never *said:* :8
'Where is Yahweh?'
Law-experts did not know me,
pastors rebelled against me;
B' prophets prophesied by Baal,
and after "no-go(o)ds" ran.
A' So, my case against you rests, :9
Yahweh's word,
against your ***grandchildren*** is my case.

[75]Extended chiasm was a common literary technique in the ancient Near East. J. W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981) provides the best critical collection of suggested biblical and extra-biblical examples. For examples in the NT, see N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992); C. L. Blomberg, "The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1989): 7–8 (with bibliography).

[76]The example (slightly modified) comes from W. G. E. Watson, "Chiastic Patterns in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* 141.

Can you see the parallels between most of the corresponding sections? Note how C' repeats the wording of C while D' recalls the emphasis on land in D. B' clarifies the word "delusion" in B as a reference to idolatry, while the familial terms "fathers" (A) and "grandchildren" (A') parallel each other. Without a parallel, E forms the structural hinge and states the text's main point: that Yahweh (vice Baal) brought Israel to a fruitful (vice barren) land. The frames, A/A' state that Yahweh condemns all Israel, both ancestors and descendants. Obviously an understanding of the structure provides a key starting point for interpreting passages such as this.

Extended chiasm may also underlie the overall structure of a biblical book. For example, study the simple, parallel structure proposed by Radday for the Book of Kings:[77]

A Two chapters (I Kg. 1-2): Introduction and Rise
B Nine chapters (I Kg. 3-11): A Single Kingdom, Solomon
C Twenty-nine chapters (I Kg. 12-11 Kg. 17): The Divided Kingdom
B' Six chapters (II Kg. 18-23): A Single Kingdom, Josiah
A' Two chapters (II Kg. 24-25): Conclusion and Fall

According to this structure the book's main focus is on the divided kingdom and only secondarily on the "Introduction and Rise"/"Conclusion and Fall" frames. This understanding of the overall structure provides a starting point for further interpretation of the book of Rings. With this background information the student could proceed to study the central section (C) to determine what the book emphasizes about the divided kingdom. From that study would emerge the main themes of the entire book.

Merismus is another literary device that appears in both prose and poetry. Merismus occurs when a writer mentions the extremes of some category in order to portray it as a totality-that is, those opposites and everything in between them.[78] One common form of merismus is the use of polar word pairs in a single phrase. In some cases the phrase's wording expressly states a continuum. For example, consider these lines from the prophet Jeremiah:

> No longer will a man teach his neighbor ... saying, "Know the LORD,"
> because they will all know me,
> from the *least* of them to the *greatest*.... (Jer 31:34b, our italics)

The prophet wanted to stress that under the new covenant everyone would know the LORD. To reinforce his point he invoked the extremes of the category "important people" through the merismus "from the least [important] ... to the

[77]Y. T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in Welch, ed., *Chiasmus* in *Antiquity,* 62 (*cf.* his discussion of chiasm in Kings, 61-67). Radday rightly assumes the original unity of the material since the division into 1 and 2 Kings derives from the Greek translation.

[78]LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey,* 596, n. 26; Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 321–24.

greatest. " Paraphrased, the latter means "from unimportant to important people—and everyone in between." In other cases, only the word "and" joins the two extremes. For example, observe the merismus in the Bible's familiar opening line: "In the beginning God created the ***heavens*** and the ***earth***" (Gen 1:1, our italics). The phrase "heavens and earth" invokes the extremes of the category "universe" to affirm that God created them and everything in between.[79]

A second common merismus employs polar word pairs in parallel stichs. Study how the psalmist displayed God's greatness in this double merismus:

> In his hands are the ***depths of the earth,***
> and the ***mountain peaks*** belong to him.
> The ***sea*** is his, for he made it,
> and his hands formed the ***dry land.*** (Psa 95:4–5, our italics)

To achieve a comprehensive effect, the psalmist portrays two pairs of extremes of the category "earth," each in a parallel stich. The first pair describes earth's vertical extremes ("depths"/"peaks"), the other its horizontal ends ("sea"/"dry land"). The total effect is to affirm forcefully that God owns everything on earth, and in context, this offers evidence of his greatness.

The final structural device we mention also occurs in both prose and poetry: ***inclusio***—framing a poem by repeating the opening lines at the conclusion.[80] This repetition provides a unity and finality the poem would not have otherwise.[81] For example, Psalm 8 opens and closes with this inclusio:

> 0 LORD, our Lord,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psa 8:1a, 9)[82]

The observation of this inclusio is important for two reasons: it signals that the psalm's main theme is the majesty of Yahweh on earth, and it suggests that one must understand all remaining verses (lb-8) in light of that theme. In other words, they illustrate or amplify it. Take, for example, the lengthy section about humanity (w. 3-8). It marvels at a strange mystery-that God cared enough about puny humans to appoint them as rulers over his own created works. The thematic inclusio indicates, however, that humanity's elevation to greatness is simply an expression—perhaps even a reflection-f God's greater majesty. In other words, God displayed

[79]This phenomenon closely resembles another device called hendiadys (Gk. hen *dia dys,* "one through two"). Hendiadys joins two words by "and" to convey a single idea; cf. Isa 51:19 ("ruin and destruction" meaning "destructive ruin"). More precisely, the two nouns mutually define each other; hence, one serves as an adjective modifying the other. For discussion, see Watson, Classical *Hebrew Poety, 324-28.*

[80]For prose examples, see 1 Sam 3:1, 21; Ruth 1:6, 22; Mt 4:23–25; 9:35.

"'Watson calls this the envelope figure *(Classical Hebrew Poety, 282-87;* cf. E. S. Gerstenberger, "The Lyrical Literature," in D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker, eds., *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress/Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 423; Berlin, *Dynamics, 130.*

[82]Observe also operation of parallelism here, i.e., how the distich conveys a single sentence composed of a as a vocative, *b* as an exclamation. Cf. Pss 103:1a, 2a, 22b; 118:1, 29; 145–150.

his own greatness by condescending to raise insignificant mortals to a position of great importance.[83]

The Language of Poetry

In addition to unique structure and sound, biblical poetry also uses distinct ***language.*** Unfortunately, a preoccupation with the phenomenon of parallelism too often creates the impression that parallelism alone is the essence of biblical poetry. But as Ryken observes,

> Parallelism ... is not the most essential thing that a reader needs to know about biblical poetry. Much more crucial ... is the ability to identify and interpret the devices of poetic language.[84]

We hope to prepare the reader to do just that—"to identify and interpret the devices of poetic language." We will treat two aspects of poetic language: imagery and poetic devices.

Imagery

Initially, we must understand the nature of poetic language. Poets are essentially artists who paint pictures with words. From their poetic palette they draw ***images***—"words that evoke a sensory experience in our imagination."[85] If well chosen, those words conjure up vivid mental pictures and stir up powerful emotions. By appealing to our senses and emotions, they compel us to see and experience their word-pictures. Thus, to be effective an image must be concrete, not abstract. For the abstraction, "The LORD takes good care of me," the biblical poet substitutes, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing" (Psa 23:1). He paints a simple but warm picture of care at its best: a shepherd who ensures that his sheep get everything they need.

Further, effective images also have an element of surprise, either by introducing a new, unknown image or by giving an old one a new twist. Certainly, Jeremiah startled his hearers when he described the state funeral that God had planned for King Jehoiakim:

> He will have the burial of a donkey
> -dragged away and thrown
> outside the gates of Jerusalem. (Jer 22:19)[86]

[83]Closely akin to the inclusio is the use of refrains, that is, the repetition of a phrase within a poem; e.g., Psa 136 ("his love endures forever"); Song 2:8 [Heb. 7]; 3:5; 8:4 ("Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires"); cf. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poety, 295-99.*

[84]Ryken, *How to Read, 90,* who commends the essay by C. S. Lewis ("The Language of Religion," in *Christian Reflections* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19671, 129–41) as a good introduction to poetic language.

[85]Ryken, *How To Read, 90.*

[86]Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry, 252;* cf. Jer 9:21; 17: 11.

Normally, respectful Hebrews did not speak of their kings with such disgust! But that surprise element is what makes the poem so effective. Poets constantly speak in the concrete, familiar terms of daily life-of clouds and rain, rocks and rivers, flowers and grass, lions and lambs, mothers and fathers. It is that familiarity and vividness that makes their words so appealing and so memorable.

Devices of Poetic Language

Similes and Metaphors

Similes and metaphors are two poetic devices that are significant in biblical poetry.[87] A simile is a figure of speech that compares two things using the words "like" or "as."[88] OT poetry uses several kinds of simile. A simple simile draws a single correspondence between two items in a single sentence. Consider these two examples:

> ***Now*** **then, I will crush you**
> ***as a cart*** **crushes**
> **when loaded with grain. (Amos 2:13)**

> **Like** ***a lily*** among **thorns**
> **is my darling among the maidens. (Song 2:2)**

In the first case, Yahweh compares his imminent crushing judgment to the ground being crushed by cart wheels. He will roll over Israel, crushing her into the dust. In the second case, the lover brags about how much prettier his girlfriend is than other girls; she stands out in a crowd-like a solitary lily in a field of thorns.

The parallelism typical of Hebrew poetry easily lends itself to the use of paired similes. These are similes that are part of parallel stichs. Study these examples:

> **The mountains will melt beneath him,**
> **and the valleys split apart,**
> ***like wax*** **before the fire,**
> ***like water*** **rushing down a slope. (Mic 1:4)**

> **He [the righteous king] is** ***like the light*** of **morning at sunrise**
> **on a cloudless morning,**
> ***like the brightness*** **after rain**
> that brings the grass from the earth. (2 Sam 23:4)

[87] Composers of biblical prose also use poetic devices. For example, we could collect numerous examples of the first feature-simile-from the prose of the NT. To cite only two: "and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove" (Lk 3:22); "Suddenly a sound *like* the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven . . ." (Acts 2:2).

[88] Hebrew forms similes with the preposition *kᵉ/kᵉmô,* the conjunction *kaᵃšer,* the verb *māšal* ("to be like"), and the formula *kᵉ . . . kēn* ("like . . . so [is]"); cf. Watson, Classical *Hebrew Poetry, 257-62,* from whom some of what follows derives; Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry,* 50–60.

Frequently, Hebrew poets string together series of three or more similes to heighten the effect. Examine the four-item series of similes in this description of Yahweh's future judgment of Israel:

> So I will come upon them ***like a*** *lion,*
> ***like*** **a** ***leopard*** I will **lurk by the path.**
> ***Like a bear*** robbed of her cubs,
> I will attack them and rip them open.
> ***Like*** **a lion I will devour them;**
> a wild animal will tear them apart. (Hos 13:7–8)

Pairing similes or stringing them together in series is an extremely effective poetic device. Each simile compares to the brush strokes of a painter on a canvas: the more there are, the richer the portrait. Observe the progression of thought and increasing terror effected by the simile series.[89] The first mention of the lion sparks instinctive human fear but does not specify the animal's actions. With the lurking leopard, however, the prophet clarifies the danger and increases the reader's feelings of fear: at any moment Yahweh can spring upon Israel from his hiding place. The bear adds even more clarity and more terror: Yahweh is driven by outrage, so he will rip Israel to pieces, killing her. The lion delivers the final blow-Yahweh will devour Israel's national carcass, leaving only useless carrion behind. In sum, the string of similes forecasts terrible judgment for Israel. Yahweh will pounce on her (lion), taking her by surprise (leopard), killing her for personal injury (bear), and eating her bloody remains (lion). Hosea certainly demonstrates how powerful similes can be.

Finally, OT poets often developed an extended simile. An extended simile makes a simple comparison, then amplifies it with a lengthy commentary on the poetic **image invoked.** For example, review how Jeremiah compared an Israelite who depends on Yahweh to a fruitful tree:

> **But blessed** is the man who trusts in the LORD,
> whose confidence is in him.
> Simile: **He will be** ***like a tree*** **planted by the water**
> **that sends out its roots by the stream.**
> **Comment: It does not fear when heat comes;**
> **its leaves are always green.**
> **It has no worries in a year of drought**
> **and never fails to bear fruit. (Jer 17:7–8)**[90]

[89] Here we follow the insights of Petersen and Richards, ***Interpreting Hebrew Poetry, 55-57.***

[90] Cf. also his comparison of someone who trusts in human strength to a bush in a desert (w. 5–6); Psa 1:1–3; Ezek 31:2–9.

To interpret such examples properly, the student must first define the image invoked (e.g., a tree rooted by a stream) and then must observe what the writer says about that image. In this case, Jeremiah focuses specifically on the tree's lack of fear in crises of deprivation. The point is that the believer's trust gives him or her a calm confidence of thriving amid turmoil. Though not stated explicitly, it is implied that Yahweh will surely meet the believer's needs.

In these instances, care must be taken to interpret the image in light of the commentary. Here the student might ask how the tree's being rooted by a stream illustrates the nature and benefits of trusting in Yahweh; why do the "roots" create such fearless confidence in the face of daunting circumstances?

Like a simile, a ***metaphor*** also ***draws*** a comparison between two things;[91] however, the metaphor draws the correspondence more bluntly. Omitting the words "like" or "as," it states straightforwardly "A ***is*** B."[92] So, the psalmist solemnly affirms:

> Your word is a ***lamp*** to my feet
> and a ***light*** for my path. (Psa 119:105, our italics)

The writer compares God's word to a lamp illuminating a dark path. As a lamp helps a traveler stay safely on the path, so the word illuminates believers on what lifestyle pleases God. In another example, the prophet Zephaniah describes the civic leaders of Jerusalem:

> Her officials are ***roaring lions,***
> her rulers are ***evening wolves,***
> who leave nothing for the morning. (Zeph 3:3, our italics)

What a vivid picture of political tyrants! They are hungry animals recklessly roving Jerusalem day and night, terrifying her inhabitants, and preying on her weak. Their appetite so drives them that they never delay their destruction.[93] Finally, recall this psalmist's portrait of God:

> The ***eyes*** of the LORD are on the righteous
> and his ears are attentive to their cry;
> the face of the LORD is against those who do evil,
> to cut off the memory of them from the earth. (Psa 34:15–16, our italics)

[91]Recent movements in linguistic philosophy and literary criticism have engendered a lively, influential discussion on the subject and definition of metaphor. For overviews, see D. S. Miall, ed., *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, *1982); S.* R. Levin, *The Semantics of Metaphor* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, *1977);* and M. Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metapbor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981). *C.* L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), *134-44,* reviews and critiques the discussion's influence on recent interpretation of NT parables.

[92]Ryken, *How To Read,* 91. Much of what follows derives from Ryken, *Words of Delight,* 166–69; and Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 263–72.

[93]Cf. also Micah's graphic description of Israel's leaders as cannibals (Mic 3:1b–3).

He pictures God as a human being with eyes, ears, and a face-a type of metaphor called ***anthropomorphism.***[94] The point is not that God has an actual body just like humans but that God constantly tunes his senses to the needs of his people and will confront those who try to harm them.

How do metaphors work? Implicitly, metaphors compare two things that although ***different*** share something in common; in some way the two words or concepts overlap in meaning.[95] The comparison of two basically dissimilar things gives the metaphor its striking effect. For example, study the line "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous" just cited from Psa 34:15. Here the comparison is between human eyes and the LORD. What do these have in common? They share the trait of focused attention. As human eyes "watch" things with keen interest, so Yahweh "watches"-pays close attention to-his beloved people.

Similarly, the line "Her officials are roaring lions" (Zeph 3:2) implicitly compares city officials with wild animals. In tbis case, the overlap between these two concepts is less obvious. Without exhausting the possibilities, we suggest that they share great hunger and unstoppable power. The two traits of the animals are physical-a ravenous appetite for prey and overwhelming physical strength. The traits of the leaders are more abstract-a ravenous greed for financial gain and unlimited political power to obtain it.

Like similes, metaphors may also occur in series and in extended form. For example, Jacob's blessing of his children (Gen 49) strings together a series of metaphors, one for each son. Judah is a lion's cub (v. 9), Zebulun a safe harbor (v. 13), Issachar a donkey (v. 14), Dan a viper (v. 17), Naphtali a doe (v. 21), Joseph a fruitful vine (v. 22), and Benjamin a ravenous wolf (v. 27). By painting each son metaphorically, the poet pictures their varied tribal destinies. As a whole, the series of metaphors also offers an impressive poetic collage of Israel's complex future as a nation.

In addition, the Bible teems with examples of extended metaphors. Consider this lengthy description of female beauty:

> Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
> milk and honey are under your tongue.
> The fragrance of your garments
> is like that of Lebanon.
> You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
> you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.
> Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
> with choice fruits. . . . (Song 4:11–13)

This lengthy description appeals to all the reader's senses. It enables one to taste, smell, and see this great beauty. Its effect is cumulative and comprehensive.[96]

[94]Psa 18:8–16 teems with anthropomorphisms. God has nostrils, a mouth (w. 8, 15), feet (v. 9), and a voice (v. 13). Verse 16 also implies that he has hands. See also images of God as roaring lion (Amos 1:2; 3:8), water spring (Jer 2:13), rock (Psa 18:2), and mother hen (Psa 91:4).

[95]Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry, 263.*

[96]For other extended metaphors, see the descriptions of Egypt as a crocodile (Ezek 29:3–5), Jerusalem's judgment as a full cup (Ezek 23:32–34), and Tyre as a shipwreck (Ezek 27:25–36).

Permit us, however, to warn readers against the "overinterpretation" of similes and metaphors. Overinterpretation occurs when the student draws meanings from an image that the poet never intended. For example, we once heard someone speak on Psa 1:3, "He is like a tree planted by streams of water. ..." Ignoring the specific point made by the context, he expounded thirteen ways the righteous resemble palm trees. Jesus' metaphorical statement "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13) frequently suffers from similar overinterpretation. One hears commentators interpret it in light of various modern uses of salt (as a seasoning) rather than in light of its surrounding context and use in Bible times (more as a preservative).

The best guard against ***overinterpretation is to adhere to the rule of context. We*** must understand poetic images in light of their use in the immediate context. Since images commonly invoke only a few points of comparison, the proper interpretation requires that we understand them within this limited range rather than read in meanings not intended by the writer.

Other Poetic Language Devices

The devices of simile and metaphor certainly dominate biblical poetry, but readers must also be aware of several other common figures of speech. By ***personification*** a poet writes about something nonhuman-an inanimate object or abstract idea-as if it were human.[97] This figure of speech enables the poet to make the subject vivid and concrete. Biblical poets use it in several ways. Sometimes they employ personification to bring an abstract idea to life. Consider this example:

Send forth your light and your truth,
let them guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell. (Psa 43:3)

Here the poet portrays the abstract concepts "light" and "truth" as people-guides who will help him find the temple. Of course, the implication is that to find the temple is to meet God since he lives there. Similarly, Prov 8 presents the abstract idea "wisdom" as a woman calling out to passersby in the streets:

To you, 0 men, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind. ...
Listen, for I have worthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right. ...
I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
bestowing wealth on those who love me
and making their treasures full. (Prov 8:4, 6, 20–21)[98]

[97]Ryken, *Words of Delight,* 178.

[98]Later, the "woman" gives her credentials-her participation in the creation of the universe (vv. 22–31).

The picture of a woman brings the abstract idea of wisdom to life. It enables us to understand it in "personal" terms and, hence, to relate to it more personally than we would otherwise.

Other personifications picture objects as people:

Let the rivers clap **their hands,**
let the mountains sing together for joy. (Psa 98:8)

Obviously, rivers do not have hands to clap nor mountains voices to lift in song. But the psalmist treats them as if they had those human traits to evoke the tumultuous joy that **should greet the arrival of King Yahweh. Another form of personification** is to portray a nation, tribe, or city as a person:

Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan.
And Dan, why did he linger by the ships?
Asher remained on the coast
and stayed in his coves. (Judg 5:17).

The device of ***apostrophe*** closely resembles that of personification. Indeed, poets frequently employ both in the same context (see the examples below). Apostrophe is "a direct address to someone or something absent as though it were present."[99] Typically, it appears suddenly in a context, as if the poet, overcome by emotions, blurts out his address. The thing addressed may be an abstract idea or an inanimate object. Apostrophe serves a twofold purpose: to give vent to strong feelings and to generate a sense of excitement.

We occasionally use apostrophe ourselves. For example, arriving home from work, parents discover that their kids have left the family kitchen a mess. As if the offenders were present, the parents say, "You kids are in big trouble now!" Again, safely out of earshot of the boss a frustrated employee might explode, "I'm going to get you for this, boss!" Examine the addressees and emotions evident in these three biblical examples:

Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth. (Psa 2:10)

Where, 0 death, is your victory?
Where, 0 death, is your sting? (1 Cor 15:55; cf. Hos 13:14)

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail
because of the misery that is coming upon you. (Jas 5:1)

In the first example, the psalmist addresses the kings of the earth, none of whom was probably present on the occasion of this psalm. Also, his address marks a

We owe the definition and the discussion to Ryken, *Words of Delight, 177-78.*

noticeable literary shift in the context: it follows a report of God's decree establishing the Davidic monarchy (Psa 2:7-9). In the second, Paul breaks off his discourse on Christian hope to address "death"-presumably absent-as a mighty warrior. In the third, James comforts his poor, oppressed readers by condemning their (absent) oppressors. Appearing suddenly in the context, they convey strong emotional feelings and generate a sense of excitement.""'

Occasionally all of us resort to another common device: ***hyperbole.*** "I worked until I dropped," we say to describe our physical exhaustion. A frazzled parent might reprimand, "I've told you a ***thousand times*** never to exaggerate! " Hyperbole is "conscious exaggeration for the sake of **effect."**[101] Its purpose is to state something the poet feels strongly-the joy of salvation, the bitterness of death, the awfulness of judgment. Hence, as Ryken notes, it stretches the literal truth for the sake of emotional impact. Study these examples:

At this my heart pounds
and leaps from its place. (Job 37:1)[102]

I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me. (Psa 22:14)

Saul and Jonathan-in life they were loved and gracious,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions. (2 Sam 1:23)

Obviously, the three speakers offer exaggerated descriptions of their situations. In the Job passage Elihu's heart did not literally jump out from his chest. He simply exaggerated-"It pounded so hard it popped out!"-to show his excitement at God's greatness. Similarly, the psalmist's entire skeleton did not really get out of joint nor did his heart suddenly become melted wax. Through exaggeration he emphasizes, "I've got no fight **left** in me." By the same token, David's exaggerated tribute to Saul and Jonathan underscored their great physical prowess.

Biblical poets also use numbers to express hyperbole:

The city that marches out a
***thousand* strong for Israel**
will have only a *hundred* left;
the town that marches out a *hundred* strong
will **have only *ten* left.**
(Amos 5:3, our italics; cf. Isa 4:1)

""'Cf. the excitement generated by the catalogue of apostrophes in Psa 148. For more examples, see Bullinger, Figures *of* Speech, 901–905.

[101]Ryken, *Words of Delight,* 177; cf. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* 316–21.

[102]Job 37:1 exemplifies the parallelism of intensification that we discussed earlier; that is, the hyperbole of the second stich gives more intensity than the first.

Note, the prophet is not presenting precise statistics here. He is exaggerating the numbers, both high and low, to portray Israel's high casualty rate. His point is that the coming divine judgment will be catastrophic for the nation. Nor does Jesus advocate mutilation in calling his disciples to gouge out their eyes or literally to cut off their hands (Mt 5:29–30; cf. Gal 5:12). The Bible abounds with examples of extended hyperbole in which the exaggeration continues at length (see Jer 5: 16–17; Nah 3:15b–17; Job 3:4–9).[103]

The device called ***metonymy*** features the substitution of a word or idea for one closely associated with it. In other words, the substitute serves as a verbal stand-in representing the other. Note these examples of metonymy (cf. the metonymic word in italics)?

You prepare a *tab&* before me
in the presence of my enemies. (Psa 23:5a)

The high places of *Isaac* will be destroyed
and the sanctuaries of Israel will be **ruined. (Amos 7:9)**

Truthful *lips* endure forever,
but a lying *tongue lasts only* a moment. (Prov 12: 19)

The psalm does not say that God will make the psalmist a brand new piece of **furniture** to impress his enemies; rather, "table" substitutes for the bountiful "meal" that a host spreads across it. Again, **Prov 12:19** does not teach that liars will suddenly lose their tongues. Instead, the physical organs of speech, "lips" and **"tongue,"** represent the speakers who he or tell the truth-and **suffer** the consequences each deserves. Similarly, biblical history identifies Isaac as a patriarchal ancestor of Israel. So in Amos **7:9 "Isaac"** rightly becomes another way of saying **"Israel"** (Isaac/Israel). In sum, the device of metonymy represents something indirectly by substituting something else associated with it.

A similar principle underlies a related device called ***synecdoche.*** In synecdoche, a part of something serves to represent the whole idea or item. This device allows the writer to focus reader attention on something specific as a symbol of something larger. Study these examples with the synecdochal word in **italics:**[105]

I will turn your religious feasts into mourning,
and all your *singing* into weeping. (Amos 8: 10)

I do not trust in my *bow,*
my *sword* does not bring me victory. ... (Psa 44:6 [Heb. 7])

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[103]For an example that uses hyperbole, apostrophe, and personification, see Psa 114 and Ryken's comments (*Words of Delight,* 179–80).

[104]We owe these examples to M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* rev. ed. (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1911), 16142. For more examples, see Bullinger, *Figures of Speech,* 538–612.

[105]We have gleaned these examples from Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* 73–74; and Bullinger, *Figures of Speech,* 614-56. Cf. also Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 162–63.

And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my spirit on all *flesh*.... (Joel 2:28 [Heb. 3:1], RSV)

In Amos 8:10, "singing" parallels the word "feasts" in the preceding line. Singing constituted one important part of Israelite feasts, so "singing" rightly represents the whole series of festival activities. Along the same line, "bow" and "sword" (Psa 44:6 [7]) symbolize the larger category of weapons. Again, in Joel 2:28 [3:1] one constituent of human nature, "flesh," represents the whole person. Thus, "all flesh" really means "all people," a conclusion confirmed by the following verse ("my servants, both men and women").

Besides identifying metonymy and synecdoche, the interpreter must consider the writer's purpose in using them. In other words, what effect does each example intend to convey? We suggest, for example, that the phrase "you prepare a table in the presence of my enemies" (Psa 23:5a) aims to conjure up more than the general idea of food. In context "table" portrays the idea of God's plenteous provision of food despite the enemies' attempts to cut off such supplies. Similarly, Amos 8:10 specifies "singing" rather than another festival activity like "praying" because the former symbolizes joy and celebration. Thus, "(joyous) singing" serves to contrast the "mourning" and "weeping" that the coming divine judgment will inflict.

Finally, we mention the device of ***irony in*** which a writer says the very opposite of what he means. In contemporary terms, he speaks tongue-in-cheek; a moment later the reader expects to hear an emphatic " Just kidding!" At times, irony becomes sarcasm whereby the speaker pokes fun at the object of his or her words. Though not all drawn from poetry, the following verses illustrate the use of irony:

Go to Bethel **and** sin;
go to **Gilgal and sin yet** more.
Bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three years. (Amos 4:4b)

And the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter"
-the handsome price at which they priced me! (Zech 11: 13)

At **noon Elijah began to taunt them [i.e., the priests of Baal]. "Shout louder!"**
he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling.
Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (1 Kgs 18:27)[106]

Amos *knew the* city of Bethel as a center of Israelite pagan worship ("Go to Bethel and sin"). Hence, despite his command to "bring your sacrifices ...," he really wants Israel ***not*** to go, that is, to repent of its pagan practices. Similarly, the phrase "handsome price" intends to convey just the opposite meaning-the price asked is insultingly low. Finally, Elijah does not believe that Baal is a god actually preoccupied with other activities. His words, in fact, sarcastically state the opposite: Baal

[106]Two **of the above examples (1 Kgs 18:27; Zech 11:13) come from Terry,** *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 165–66. **For others, see Rullinger,** *Figures of Speech,* 807–815.

has not answered the prayers of his priests because he does ***not*** exist; hence, he can ***not*** do anything.

How to Interpret Poetic Language

In order to interpret the meaning conveyed through poetic devices, the student must take the following steps.[107] First, ***identify the*** kind of figure of speech present (i.e., simile, metaphor, personification). Remember that more than one device may be present in the same biblical text. For example, a verse may employ hyperbole through both a simile and a metaphor.

Second, ***interpret the figure*** of speech. From analysis of its literal meaning determine its figurative meaning. By "literal meaning," we mean the actual physical object denoted, the ideas that object conjures up, and the emotional connotations the reader associates with it. By "figurative meaning," we mean the aspect of the literal meaning that the poet desires to highlight. The student will have to decide which of the literal meaning's associated ideas and connotations best fit the emphasis of the context.

For example, one psalmist describes his enemies this way:

I am in the midst of lions;
I lie among ravenous beasts—
men whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords. (Psa 57:4)

From the first two lines, one might see the poet as literally cornered by terrible beasts. Men with "teeth" and "tongues" in the last two lines, however, indicate an allusion to verbal slander. Literally, the metaphors "spears and arrows" and "sharp swords" refer to common weapons of ancient warfare. The latter have three main features: (1) the enemy launches them from a distance (spears and arrows) or from close-by (sharp swords); (2) they inflict painful, if not fatal, wounds by piercing the body; (3) an ordinary person has no defense against them.

These observations point to the metaphor's figurative meaning, that is, what those weapons suggest about slander. They portray it as harsh, "pointed" words that wound their victim. They conjure up images of a victim flinching with continuous pain. The words also imply that slander sometimes strikes suddenly, "out of the blue"-probably an allusion to the secrecy of slander. Furthermore, by striking suddenly, slander leaves its victim defenseless; there is no way to protect against it. In sum, literal weapons figuratively illumine the psalmist's portrait of verbal slander.

Finally, the student should determine the ***function*** of the figure in its context. In other words, why did the poet use this particular figure? What did it contribute to the meaning he desired to convey?

Let us apply these steps briefly to Psa 18:2 [Heb. 3] as an example:

[107]Cf. **Ryken,** *How to Read,* **94-96; id.,** *Words of Delight, 161-62, 177-78.*

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock in whom I take refuge.
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold.

The kind of figure the psalmist used here is metaphor. As for the literal meaning, the verse pictures several common, concrete images: "rock," "fortress," "shield," "horn," and "stronghold." Together they suggest ideas of immovability, impenetrable protection, and great strength ("horn").[108] Emotionally, their connotations are positive; the reader would view them as "saviors" in a day of near-death.

This analysis helps us see the figurative meaning. What fortresses and shields have in common with Yahweh is great strength and protection. Thus, the figurative meaning is that Yahweh is the psalmist's protection, the one whose awesome strength surrounds him. Finally, we suggest that within Psa 18 the figures function to sound one of the psalm's main themes-God's protection-a theme the psalmist's own testimony (Psa 18:4–19) confirms.[109]

Larger Units of Poetry

Sense Units

Thus far, our discussion may have created the impression that all Hebrew poetry consists of only a few lines. Obviously, a glance at the psalms quickly confirms that this is not the case! The Bible's parallel **stichs** actually form part of larger structural units we will call *sense units.*[110] A sense unit constitutes the major subdivision of a poem. Just as a house may have one or more rooms, so a poem has at least one sense unit but may have many more of varying sizes.

The key indicators of a poem's sense units are as follows: (1) changes in content, grammar, literary form, or speaker; (2) the concentration of keywords in a section; and (3) the appearance of **refrains** or repeated statements."' Psalm 32 provides an example of sense units and their **indicators:**[112]

[108] **Of course, this step requires the student to have a good understanding of the biblical world. For example, the point is to find what "horn" connoted back in Bible times, not today. We recommend the regular use of Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias as excellent sources of background on figures of speech. Recall our prior explanation of word studies.**

[109] **Careful readers must also watch for poetic language in nonpoetic passages (e.g., Gen** 4:7; **Mt** 23:37; **Jas** 1:15); **cf. Ryken,** *Words of Delight,* 180.

[110] **We borrow the term from Petersen and Richards** *(Interpreting Hebrew Poetry,* 60–63) **as an alternative to popular but ambiguous terms like "stanza" and "strophe" (against Watson,** *Classical* Hebrew ***Poetry,*** 160-67).

[111] **"These same indicators may also signal the main literary divisions of prose passages.**

[112] **Cf.** Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1,*** 140–43. Having your Bible open here is crucial to see this point.

Sense Unit	Verses	Indicators
1	1-2	form: impersonal "blessed is the person" formula content: sin, forgiveness **function:** to provide general thematic introduction
2	3-5	transition: **"for"** change of speaker: "I" form: report of personal experience content: experience of forgiveness **function:** to illustrate the forgiveness theme
3	6-7	transition: **"for"** form: exhortation (v. 6), affirmation of confidence (v. 7) addressee: God ("you" singular) content: prayer, protection, deliverance function: to urge people to pray
4	8-10	form: instruction (cf. prohibition [v. 93, proverb [v. 10]) addressee: Israel ("you" singular) content: teaching about trust in Yahweh function: to teach the benefit of trust
5	11	form: call to rejoice addressee: righteous Israelites (**"you"** plural) content: rejoicing, gladness, singing function: to call for response to entire psalm

Sense units are basic to the structure of a poem, so if we want to decipher this structure we must first **identify** the poem's sense units. With a piece of note paper in hand, read the poem watching for the key indicators mentioned above. When these indicators change significantly, indicating a break between sections, write the verses of the sense unit just concluded. Continue this analysis until all the poem's sections are identified. After the sense units are identified the student should isolate any subsections within those sense units. Read the poem a second time, **identifying** the subsections within each sense unit. Write the verses for each subsection under the verses for each sense unit.

Finally, beside the verses for each sense unit/subunit, write a short label that describes its literary form. Be sure that the label describes the literary *form* rather than the ***content.*** The difference is this: a content label describes ***what*** a sense unit says (its content); a literary label describes bow it says what it says (its literary form). For example, Psa 73:1 ("Surely God is good to Israel/to those who are pure in heart") constitutes a sense **unit** whose content is about God's goodness to Israel. Its form,-

however, is that of an affirmation. By the same token, in content Amos 5:6a ("Seek the LORD and live") is about devotion to God, but its form is a call to worship.

To illustrate this procedure, consider how you would describe these three sections of Psa 32:

w. 3, 5 **When I kept silent, my bones wasted away**
through my groaning all day long. . . .
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"
-and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

v. 9 **Do not be like the horse or the mule,**
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

v. 11 **Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;**
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Obviously, the excerpt of w. 3 and 5 is about the ending of personal trouble through the confession and forgiveness of sin. One might describe the content as "The trouble and forgiveness of sin" or "Confession of sin ends trouble." Observe, however, that this is not an impersonal, abstract discussion of human suffering caused by sin. Bather, it offers a personal report given by an individual about a past experience of forgiven sin. The proper literary label would be something like "Personal report: trouble and forgiveness."

Taken by itself, the content of v. 9 easily wins labels like "An appeal for self-control" or "An example of stubbornness." Since it follows up v. 8, however ("I will instruct you ... in the way you should go"), one might describe its content more precisely as "Stubborn resistance to good teaching." Literarily, however, notice that v. 9 is not a description but a prohibition ("Do not be like the horse or the mule ... ") that the speaker urges upon his audience. So, one should label it literarily as a "Prohibition." As for v. 11, its content readily calls to mind a label like "Rejoicing and singing." Again, however, observe the form: two commands with which the speaker exhorts the audience ("Rejoice ... sing"). Literarily, then, one should describe it as an "Exhortation" or "Call to Worship."'

After completing the descriptions of sense units and their subparts, we suggest two final steps. First, one should write a literary outline based on those descriptions. The purpose of such an outline is to present the poem's literary structure in visual form. The outline, then, can become the basis for analyzing the poem's literary and thematic development. A literary outline of Psa 32 might look like this:[113]

[113]The following is a modification of Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1,*** 140. For a fuller treatment of this method and its application to poetic and nonpoetic texts, see G. M. Tucker, ***Form Criticism of the*** *Old* ***Testament*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

I.	Superscription	1a
II.	The Psalm	**1b-11**
A.	Declaration	1b-2
B.	Personal report: trouble and forgiveness	3-5
1.	Description: trouble	3 4
2.	Description: forgiveness	5
C.	Exhortation and confession	6-7
1.	Exhortation	6
2.	Confession	7
D.	Instruction	8-10
1.	Statement of intention	8
2.	Instruction itself	9-10
a.	Prohibition	9
b.	Proverb	10
E.	Closing exhortation	11

Notice the consistent use of literary terms rather than descriptions of content. As indicated, we describe w. 3-5 as a "Personal report" because that is its form (the comment "trouble and forgiveness," however, adds some clarification). Because the exhortation ofv. 11 concludes the psalm, we call it a "Closing exhortation." Our "Prohibition" (v. 9), however, forms only part of a larger section (w. 8-10) along with a proverb (v. 10) and a declaration of intention to give instruction (v. 8). Since v. 8 introduces what follows as instruction (w. 9–10), we label the entire section as "Instruction."

Second, using the literary outline as a guide, one should analyze the poem's structure. To do so, the reader might study the outline to answer questions like the following:

1. What comes first in the poem? What comes last? Why?
2. What comes in the middle of the poem? Why?
3. What organizing principle underlies its structure (e.g., liturgical practices, thematic development, etc.)?
4. What is the poem's main theme(s)?
5. How does each sense unit contribute to its thematic development?
6. What is the poem's intention or purpose (i.e., What did the poet hope to accomplish?)?
7. What is its main point?

In sum, analysis of a poem's structure is more than an academic exercise. Applied carefully, it provides readers with a helpful tool of interpretation. In fact, one may also apply this same method-the preparation of a literary outline-to nonpoetic texts. In such cases, however, the outline would describe its subparts though not as poetic sense units. Our method provides a way for readers to break a text down into its constituent parts. Awareness of those parts gives readers the basis for tracing the thematic development of a passage.

PART IV

UNDERSTANDING BIBLE GENRES

CHAPTEREIGHT

Genres of the Old Testament

It is a simple fact of life: the right tools are necessary to do the right job. A hammer is fine for attaching something with nails but nearly useless for loosening a screw. A pipe wrench works great for removing a sink drain but not so well for removing a windowpane! The same is true of tools of measurement. If a recipe calls for a certain amount of flour and oil, the right tool is a measuring cup-not a volt meter! In short, the nature of the task determines what tool is appropriate.

The same principle applies to the interpretation of the Bible. The nature of this task necessitates certain tools. Now, the Bible is neither a rock formation nor a constellation of planets; it is not a sink drain or a windowpane. It is written **literature**—compositions of prose and poetry in various sizes and shapes written by human beings in human language. God chose to convey his revelation to humans in a way they could understand-by written literature. To interpret it properly, then, we must use literary tools.[1] Literary tools enable us to understand the Bible **holistically**—with both our minds and our imaginations. They sharpen our reason so we can uncover its ideas; they tune our imagination so its truth can grip us **emotionally**.[2]

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[1] Cf. L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible As Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1984), **11-12:** " .**when** the Bible employs a literary method, it asks to be approached as literature and not as something else."

[2] Cf. Ryken, *How to Read*, **21.**

Specifically, literary tools help Bible readers to develop what John Barton calls *literary competence*.[3] Each kind of literature has its own frame of reference, ground rules, strategy, and purpose. Literary competence is the ability to discern cues within the text that indicate what kind of literature we are working with and, hence, what to expect or not to expect from it.[4] The Bible student who knows the formation and function of each literary type is in the best position to interpret correctly and to avoid serious misunderstandings.

Poetry uniquely illustrates this point.[5] Unlike narrative, it conveys truth through tightly structured, rhythmical patterns that may also involve rhyme. In metaphorical language it expresses abstract ideas in a concrete, vivid way. For example, one Bible writer describes the navel of his lover as "a rounded goblet that never lacks ... wine" (Song 7:2). The interpreter who understands how poetry functions will not interpret the text literally (the woman has a bulging, bubbly midsection) but metaphorically. He or she will sense that the author has chosen his lover's navel to symbolize the beauty of her whole body-a beauty that is comparable to the lasting, tasty delights of delicious wine. In other words, her striking beauty always invites him to "drink it in" with pleasure. Clearly, an appropriate reading and interpretation depend on a competence in literary tools and rules.

This is true of all types of literature in the Bible including narratives. Most readers approach Bible narratives simply as historical reports of what happened back in Bible times. They imagine the writers as historians whose main purpose was to pass on a detailed history of ancient events.[6] In one sense that assumption is correct: like historians, the Bible writers accurately report historical events. On the other hand, such an assumption overlooks an important fact we believe the texts themselves evidence: biblical writers report events more as storytellers than as pure historians.

Unlike documentary history, most biblical narratives show some marks of the storyteller's craft. They utilize description, plot, characterization, dialogue, wordplay, narrative pacing, etc.[7] Their purpose is more to instruct than to inform; more to teach later generations about God-honoring conduct than to make sure they

[3]J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 11-19. Cf. Annemarie Ohler, *Studying the Old Testament from Tradition to Canon* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 9: "The foundation of work with the Old Testament ... is the art of reading texts in relation to their literary form." The same principle applies to the NT.

[4]Ryken, *How to Read, 25;* G. W. Coats, "Genres: Why Should They Be Important for Exegesis?" in G. W. Coats, ed., *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in the Old Testament,* JSOTSup 35 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 8.

[5]Technically, of course, poetry is a style of writing, not a type of literature. Nevertheless, since it operates under its own unique ground rules, it still illustrates our point about literary genres.

[6]G. W. Coats (*Genesis,* FOTL 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 3) observed "a penchant among members of western audiences, particularly American audiences, for destroying the narrative in an effort to discover the 'real' history experienced by its heroes and hidden behind its forms."

[7]Of course, the amount of conscious literary art will vary from narrative to narrative. Some will display great literary art, while others will narrate the facts with little embellishment. Cf. Ryken's helpful distinction (How *to Read,* 33) between biblical stories that, like entries in a historical chronicle, simply tell *about* an event and full-fledged stories (e.g., David, Job) that *present* an event in full detail

merely have the facts straight. Hence, while historians seek to present a comprehensive picture of what happened, biblical narrators only include what serves to communicate their themes. Thus to competently interpret narratives, the interpreter must track the storyteller's art to discover the main themes that art intends to express.*

To encourage and aid the student in developing literary competence in both the OT and the NT we want to survey briefly the Bible's main literary forms. Our purpose is threefold: (1) to provide reliable first steps in thinking "literarily" about the Bible; (2) to teach a preliminary literary vocabulary that will aid the student in interpretation; and (3) to demonstrate how an understanding of literary forms is crucial to correct biblical interpretation.[9]

Narratives

Narratives dominate the biblical landscape. They offer some of its most charming and alarming episodes. Their characters are unforgettable-and so much like us in so many ways! Though their communication is indirect, narratives nevertheless speak God's truth powerfully when they are properly interpreted. Narratives are the most common type of literature found in the Bible.[10] The OT makes up 75 percent of the Bible, and 40 percent of the OT consists of narratives." In reality, one cannot speak of one kind of narrative ("Old Testament narrative") for the OT has many kinds of narratives.[12] Understanding the distinctives of these narratives is a necessary first step in developing biblical literary competence.

Old Testament Narratives

Nearly half of the OT consists of a great variety of narratives; however, this brief survey will be limited to the most common types of narratives.[13] Now the OT

[8]Cf. Ryken, *How to Read,* 33: "Narrative is the dominant form in the Bible. .. What this means to readers of the Bible is that the more they know about how stories work, the more they will enjoy and understand vast portions of the Bible."

[9]Most of what follows derives from the modem discipline of form *criticism.* For OT students, two good introductions to this method are G. M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); and K. Koch, *The Growth of Biblical Tradition (New* York: Scribner's, 1969). Cf. also the more technical theoretical essay by R. Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered," *Znt 27* (1973): 435–67.

"Though Bible readers commonly call OT narratives "history," we have opted for the literary term "narrative" because "history" describes the content of the material, "narrative" its literary form. Of course, in so' doing, we still affirm the historicity of the Bible.

[11]G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 73; cf. S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 9. See also the helpful discussion in Ryken, *How to Read,* 33-73, or the longer treatment in Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art.*

[12]J. B. Gabel and C. B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction,* 2d ed. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19–20.

[13]For additional details, see the comprehensive surveys and concluding glossaries in Coats, Genesis, l-10; B. 0. Long, *1 Kings,* FOTL 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 1-8, 243–65; and, less comprehensively, Ryken, *How to Read, 75-85.*

itself offers no classification of narratives, so the terms we use here are based on the descriptions used for comparable ancient and modem narratives. In some cases we adopt labels widely accepted by scholars; in others, we have developed our own. Students should regard these terms as descriptive, not technical.'*

Reports

The simplest biblical narrative is the *report:* a "brief, self-contained narration, usually in third-person style, about a single event or situation in the past."[15] It narrates what happened, presenting the facts in a style without literary embellishment. OT examples include reports about tribal settlements in Canaan (Judg 1:16–17), royal construction projects (1 Kgs 7:2–8; 12:25), and military campaigns (1 Kgs 14:25-26; 2 Kgs 24:20b–25:7). Occasionally, reports serve an aetiological purpose, that is, they explain how a certain place acquired its name (Gen 35:8; Exod 15:23; et al.).

The OT has several kinds of reports. An *anecdote is* a report that details an event or experience in the life of a person.[16] It represents private biography rather than public history. It may report conversations and use imaginative descriptions. Examples of anecdotes include the gift-cities King Solomon gave to King Hiram of Tyre (1 Kgs 9:10–14) and the episode in which Elisha became Elijah's disciple (1 Kgs 19:19–21).[17]

A *battle report* recounts a military clash between opposing forces and its outcome, whether of victory or defeat.[18] Among the Bible's many battle reports are defeats of the Amorites (Num 21:21-24), Moabites (Judg 3:26–30), Arameans (2 Sam 10:15–19), two Midianite kings (Judg 8:10–12), and the Canaanite city of Ai (Josh 7:2-5). A *construction report,* on the other hand, recounts the construction of important buildings or objects and describes their size, materials, and decoration in great detail. The most familiar examples are the construction reports about the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod 36:8–37:16) and the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 6-7).

Two other reports relate special experiences. Told in first- or third-person, the dream *report* details an individual's experience of a dream. Two stylistic features help identify this genre: repetition of the verb "to dream" and use of the phrase "and behold" (Heb. *wᵉhinnēh*) to demarcate major changes in the dream's subject matter. Usually a separate, subsequent scene interprets the experience for the awakened

[14]One must also remember that genre categories describe two levels-both an individual biblical passage as well as the larger context it serves. The reason is that one genre (e.g., a history) may contain several other specific genres within it (e.g., a historical story, an anecdote, a battle report, etc.). By the same token, one genre (e.g., a song) may be a component of a larger genre (e.g., a historical story).

[15]Long, *1* Kings, 5; cf. Coats, *Genesis,* 10. Long labels a short report a "notice," a longer one an "account." For ancient analogies, see the Siloam inscription and report of Egyptian expeditions in *ANET,* 227–28, 229-30, 321, etc.

[16]Coats, *Genesis,* 10; Long, *1 Kings,* 243–44.

[17]An *annul* is a report, often part of royal records, that details chronologically events concerning an institution like the monarchy or the temple. According to Long (*1 Kings,* 243), the OT has no annals, although some texts may be based on them (e.g., 1 Kgs 3:1; 9:15–23; 2 Chr 11:5–12).

[18]For the following discussion of reports, we acknowledge dependence on Long, *1 Kings, 244, 247, 248.*

dreamer. OT dream reports include those concerning Joseph (Gen 37:5- 1 1), his two prisoner friends (40:9–11,16–17), the Egyptian Pharaoh (41:1–8), and a Midianite soldier (Judg 7:13–14).[19]

An *epiphany report,* by contrast, reports an experience in which God or the angel of the LORD appears to someone, often to convey a message. Typically, the verb "to appear, become visible" (Heb. *rāʾâ,* niph.) signals the beginning of such epiphanies. They played an important role in the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham (Gen 12:7; 17:1–21; 18:1–33) and Isaac (26:2–5, 24), Moses (Exod 3:2–12), Samson's parents (Judg 13), and King Solomon (1 Kgs 3:4–1 5; 9: l-9). One should describe the experience of Jacob at Bethel as a *dream epiphany since* it involves God's appearance in a dream (Gen 28:12–16; cf. 48:3–4; Mt 2:19–20).[20]

The *genre historical stories are* reports written with more literary elaboration than an ordinary report.[21] They develop a rudimentary plot (moving from tension to resolution), record dialogues and speeches by characters, and include dramatic literary touches. Like the simple report, they aim to recount an event, but they do so with an appealing written flair. Two excellent examples are the stories of Saul's emergence as king (1 Sam 11: l-l 1) and of Ahab's confrontation with the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kgs 22:1–37; see also Judg 9:1-21; 1 Kgs 12:1–20; 20: 143).

Authors or editors may compile a series of reports and consciously structure them to underscore connections between events and to sound certain themes. The result is a *history,* a lengthy document that focuses on a particular subject or historical era.[22] Explicitly or implicitly, the authors/editors convey their evaluation of the sequence of events reported. The purpose of a history is to apply instruction or legitimation from the past to situations or institutions in the author/editor's own day.[23] This genre includes the book of Kings, the book of Chronicles, and a hypothetical document called the "court history of David" (2 Sam 9-20; 1 Kgs 1–2).[24]

Finally, we mention a subtype of history, the *memoir.* Written in the first-person, a memoir reports incidents in an individual's life in order to portray the history, not of the writer, but of the era in which he or she lived. Scholars believe the memoirs

[19]Cf. also the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar in the narrative sections of the book of Daniel (Dan 2:1-11; 4:1–18).

Inexplicably, Long reckons all divine appearances as dream epiphanies even when the context either says nothing about a dream or, in the cases of Abraham (Gen 18) and Moses (Exod 3), actually specifies their nondream circumstances (I *Kings, 248).*

*'Long, *1 Kings,* 6–7.

[22]Long, 1 *Kings, 7-8.*

[23]Scholars commonly assume that palace scribes responsible for recording affairs of state prepared such histories. Cf. Long, *1 Kings, 8: "The* OT is unrivaled in the ancient Near East for its use of this literary genre."

[24]Most scholars believe that the "court history" and Kings later formed part of a larger historical work, the "Deuteronomistic History," edited during Israel's exile in Babylon (sixth century B.C.) and encompassing the books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings; cf. M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien,* 2d ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1957); ET: *The Deuteronomic History,* JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981). For a popular introduction to this theory with bibliography, see T. E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

of Ezra (Ezra 7:27–9:15) and Nehemiah (Neh 1:1–7:73a; 12:27–31) comprise part of the books that bear their names.[25]

Principles of Interpretation-Reports

Note the following principles for interpreting reports:

1. In simple reports the focus should fall on the subject and how it contributes to the themes of the larger context.

2. Reports tend to stress factual matters (what happened, who did what, etc.). Readers, thus, must accept that they probably provide little devotional content. The exceptions to this rule are reports in which God participates (e.g., dream reports, epiphany reports). For example, Jacob's dream report (Gen 28) stressed God's personal relationship with Jacob and assured him of God's presence on his journey. Such truths certainly have implications for today.

3. Typical of narratives, reports make their points indirectly. The reader must ask: What is this text trying to say? What subtle signals has the writer woven into the account to convey the message? The student will probably find more interpretive clues in historical stories and histories than in simple reports. For example, 1 Kgs 22 obviously portrays the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah as the courageous hero persecuted by a corrupt Ahab. In so doing, it condemns Ahab's nominal Mosaic religion and, by implication, all other examples of less than fully committed faith.

4. Histories are like orchestras-a series of individual voices (i.e., reports) combine to sound common themes. To find those themes, the reader must analyze the emphases of the individual reports to see what they share in common. For example, compared to Rings, Chronicles focuses on Judah, David's patronage of Israel's worship, and the importance of the temple. Whereas Rings evaluates the Israelite monarchy as a spiritual disaster, Chronicles seeks to highlight its positive spiritual contribution: its establishment of proper temple worship. Written for post-exilic Judah, the book reviews Israel's history in order to urge its audience to worship Yahweh obediently.[26]

Heroic Narrative

A more common OT genre is the heroic ***narrative?'*** This consists of a series of episodes that focus on the life and exploits of a hero whom people later consider

[25]See conveniently, H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra,* Nehemiah, WBC 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), xxiv-xxxii. Cf. also the illuminating literary treatment of Ezra and Nehemiah in T. C. Eskenazi, *In* An Age of Prose, SBLMS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

[26]W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1982), 633-37.

[27]Ryken, *How to Read,* 75–80. For this category, Coats (Genesis, 6) and Long (I Kings, 250) prefer the term "heroic saga." Despite the currency that the term "saga" enjoys among scholars, we have bypassed it for several reasons. First, it derives from a certain kind of traditional Icelandic literature

significant enough to remember. Typically, such heroic narratives include some account of the person's birth, marriage, life work, and death. They place particular emphasis on the hero's displays of virtue and extraordinary heroism. As Ryken observes,

> Such stories spring from one of the most universal impulses of literature-the desire to **embody accepted norms of behavior or representative struggles in the story** of a **character whose experience is typical of people in** general.[28]

Heroic narratives may seek to inculcate such behavioral norms by both positive and negative examples. A hero who failed offers as powerful a lesson about important life values as one who succeeded.

The life of Moses (Exodus-Deuteronomy) offers the best OT example of this genre.[29] At length, it depicts his birth, marriage, sense of vocation, exploits as leader and lawgiver, and his death.[30] Certainly, his life embodies both the struggles of Israel's national life during that period and the ideal of consummate loyalty to God. Again, one may consider the book of Judges as a collection of heroic narratives.[31] The stories of Deborah (Judg 4–5), Gideon (Judg 6–8), and Samson (Judg 13-16) particularly show traits of this genre. They symbolize Israel's dual struggles during that period: invasions from outside and idolatry inside. Their successes and failures embody Israel's own national struggles with political survival and faithfulness to God.[32]

The ***epic*** represents a subvariety of heroic narrative since it tells the heroic exploits of a virtuous hero.[33] Two unique traits set it apart: its greater length and its

whose comparability to biblical narratives we question. Second, its definition by scholars seems to downplay the historical value of the biblical texts discussed, a judgment that we do not share. For additional critique of the term, see J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition (New* Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 131-37.

[28]Ryken, *How to Read,* 75.

[29]Cf. F. E. Greenspahn, "From Egypt to Canaan: A Heroic Narrative," in A. Gileadi, ed., *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays* in *Honor of Roland K. Harrison* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1-8. In the NT, the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus show traces of this genre, although they focus more on his teaching than on his biography. See our discussion of the gospel genre to follow.

[30]Knierim even argues that the genre of the whole Pentateuch is the biography of Moses with particular emphasis on his unique role as mediator at Mt. Sinai; cf. R. P. Knierim, "The Composition of the Pentateuch," in K. H. Richards, ed., *SBLSP* 24 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 409–415. For exposition of other examples, see B. 0. Long, ed., *Images* of *Man and Gad: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981).

[31]So Ryken, *How to Read, 80,* conceding, however, that "certain features of the book resemble epic" (on which, see below). Cf. the stimulating literary analysis by K. R. R. Gros Louis, "The Book of Judges," in K. R. R. Gros Louis et al., eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 14162.

[32]Within the book of Judges, however, their lives contribute to its main theme, i.e., Israel's need for a king to stave off invasions, to end tribal rivalries, and to ensure religious fidelity (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25); so R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 692-93.

[33]Ryken, *How to Read,* 78-81; cf. the typology of epics applied to ancient Near Eastern examples in A. Berlin, "Ethnopoetry and the Enmerkar Epics," in J. M. Sasson, ed., *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East Dedicated to Samuel Noah Kramer (New* Haven: American Oriental Society, 1984), 17-24.

magnification of the hero's exploits to a greater scale of importance. An epic displays a strong nationalistic interest with the hero representing the destiny, not just of a family, but of a whole nation. In other words, it narrates events that the entire nation admires in retrospect as epoch-making. Hence, its themes are large-scale ones-conquest, kingdom, warfare, and dominion. Since epics portray a nation's formative history, they abound with historical allusions.

In addition, the epic involves supernatural settings, events, and characters. Events play themselves out in a cosmic arena, which includes both heaven and earth, and supernatural agents participate directly in human history on earth. Again, the plot of an epic is mildly episodic (it presents separate incidents rather than a chain of connected events) and often aims at a central feat or quest by the hero.

The OT has several sections that fit the description of an epic. Genesis l-l 1 offers a cosmic ***epic*** because it narrates the formative story, not just of a nation, but of the cosmos and its human inhabitants." Supernatural elements abound, for God participates directly with Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3) and with Noah in the great flood (Gen 6-9). Later, he scatters people across the earth and separates them into distinct language groups (Gen 11). The genealogies of Adam (Gen 5) and Noah (Gen 10) also evidence a variation of the nationalistic **motif:** interest in the origins of earth's major ethnic groups.

As for historical allusions, we observe a variety of them: references to the beginning of human occupations (Gen **4:20–22),** the giant race called the Nephilim (Gen **6:4;** cf. Num **13:32–33),** and the foundation of ancient cities (Gen 10: 10-12; cf. **11:2–3).** In these texts the hero is not an individual but a series of individuals, yet, in context, they serve to represent early humanity as a whole. Again, recall that toward the end of this epic, the narrative focus narrows to the Semites, the racial ancestors of the Hebrews (Gen ll:lO-32).

We classify Gen 12-36 as an ancestral ***epic.***[35] It certainly shows nationalistic themes-the destiny of Israel and her ownership of the land of Canaan. Indeed, the programmatic promise to Abram (Gen **12:1–3)** predicts Israel's destiny as the instrument of blessing for all other ethnic groups. Though not prominent, supernatural elements are nevertheless present. Yahweh actively participates, appearing to the patriarchs (Gen **17:1; 18:17–33; 26:2; 35:1, 7),** raining down destruction on Sodom, and giving elderly Sarah a son **(21:1–2).**[36]

As for historical allusions, in our view Abraham's defeat of Kedorlaomer's military coalition (Gen **14:1–16)** recalls an ancient event long-remembered in the region.[37] Granted, the patriarchal narratives involve a sequence of four heroes rather than one. Nevertheless, their story traces Israel's national roots and defines her national destiny. Further, the idea of promise that drives the plot of Gen 12-36 (Gen **12:1–3;** etc.) favorably compares to the motif of the typical epic quest (the quest for land and national **destiny).**[38]

"Cf. Coats, Genesis, 5-6 ("the **primeval saga"). An ancient Near** Eastern parallel, the "Epic of Atrahasis," lends some cultural support to our categorization of Gen **l-11 as epic. A good case can be made that those two texts follow a similar narrative structure; cf. I. M. Kikawada and A. Quinn, Before** *Abraham Was* **(Nashville: Abingdon,** 1985).

[35]Cf. Coats, Genesis, 6 **("family saga").**

[36]Cf. **also Lot's angelic rescuers** (19:1, 15) **and Jacob's mysterious wrestling match** (31:22–32).

"Cf. G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* **WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word,** 1987), 319 ("the evidence suggests **that this chapter is based on one of the oldest literary sources in Genesis"); Coats,** *Genesis,* 317 (cf. also pp. 118–22), **whose genre glossary lists Gen** 14:1–24 under "annals" with the definition "a report from the archives of the royal court"; and K. A. Kitchen, ***The*** *Bible* ***In Its*** *World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, **1977), 59–68,** who believes the patriarchal narratives closely resemble historical works from the ancient Near East. For a more critical view, see G. von Rad, ***Genesis,*** OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, **1961), 170–76.**

[38]**With** good reason, Ryken (How to ***Read,*** **80)** also **finds** epics in the book of Joshua (e.g., "the conquest epic") and the rise of King David (1 Sam 16-2 Sam 8). For an insightful literary study of the story of David, see D. M. GUM, ***The*** *Story of King* ***David: Genre and Zntetpretation,*** JSOTSup 6 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978).

[39]**"Prophet** story" replaces the often-used term "legend" after the suggestion of R. M. Hals, "Legend," in Coats, ed., ***Saga,*** 55 (cf. also pp. 45-51); similarly, J. J. Scullion, **"Märchen,** Sage, Legende: Towards a Clarification of Some Literary Terms Used by Old Testament Scholars," *VT* 34 (1984): 334.

[40]**For** possible subcategories of prophetic stories, see A. **Rofé,** ***The*** *Prophetical Stories* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988).

[41]**Cf.** the illuminating comparison of Elijah and Elisha to Shakespeare's Hamlet by K. R. R. Gros Louis, "Elijah and Elisha," in Gros Louis, et al., ***Literary Interpretations*** 1, 177–90. For the Daniel narratives, see J. Goldingay, ***Daniel,*** **WBC *30*** (Dallas: Word, **1989), 320–22.**

[42]**L.** C. Allen, ***The*** *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah,* **NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,** 1976), **175.**

[43]Similarly, **Allen, The** *Books of Joel,* **190-91 ("the unwelcome truth of God's sovereign compassion** for foreigners and beasts").

Prophet Stoy

The ***prophet story*** recounts events in the life of a prophet, particularly those that demonstrate virtues worthy of emulation.[39] Its specific purpose is to edify its audience by presenting the prophet as a model of proper conduct or as a standard of judgment for political and religious **criticism.**[40] The narratives about Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17-2 Kgs 9; 2 Kgs **13:14–21)** and Daniel (Dan l-6) best illustrate prophet stories.[41] For example, Elijah and Elisha model perseverance in the face of royal political pressure and offer a standard by which to gauge religious apostasy. In prophet stories about Elisha miracles sometimes play a prominent role (e.g., Elisha's healing of the Shunarnmite woman's son **[2** Kgs **4:8–37]** and his rescue of the sunken ax head [6: **1–7]).**

Similarly, Daniel shows faithfulness in the face of pressures from foreign overlords like Nebuchadnezzar. He also models an unwavering confidence in God's sovereign protection of his people. The book of Jonah also fits in this category, although it instructs through a negative **example.**[42] In our view, its literary style intentionally imitates the prophetic stories about Elijah. Again, it clearly has a didactic aim: to teach the reader about God-honoring attitudes toward non-Israelites (see Jonah **4:10–11).**[43]

Principles of Interpretation-Heroic Narratives and Prophet Stories

To interpret heroic narratives and prophet stories, we suggest the following principles:

1. Interpretation should focus on the life of the main character, whether an individual, a family, or a nation. The question to consider is: How does the hero's life model a relationship with God and with other people?

2. Since heroes portray values, the student must ask what values a given hero represents. For example, several texts elevate Abraham as an example of dogged faith (cf. Gen 15:6; 22:12). Thus, he exhibits the kind of trust in God expected of ancient Israel and of modern Christians, too.

3. Besides the values presented, interpretive priority should be given to finding the large themes involved (election, conquest, religious apostasy, etc.). For example, the life of Elisha portrays Israel's disloyal rejection of Yahweh in favor of Baal. By implication, it underscores how important loyalty is to the covenant requirements for Israel to experience God's blessing.

4. Application of these narratives should focus on analogous situations between Israel and the Church. For example, one theme in the ancestral epic presents God miraculously overcoming infertility to keep the patriarchal line alive (cf. Gen 2 1; 29-30). But the application is not that God always provides believers with children. For reasons known only to him, God may choose ***not*** to give them children in some situations. A better analogy is that the epic reminds Christians of God's firm commitment to carry out his salvation plan today. It is better because it draws on a biblical truth that never changes rather than on one subject to God's mysterious will.

Comedy

To modern readers, the term *comedy* probably conjures images of comic television shows. In literature, however, a comedy is a narrative whose plot has a happy ending, in some cases through a dramatic reversal. It often aims to amuse.[44] Typically, the following features play prominent roles in comedies: disguises, mistaken identity, providential coincidences, surprising turns-of-events, escapes from disaster, and the conquest of obstacles. Comedies often conclude with a marriage, a celebratory feast, reconciliation with opponents, or victory over enemies.

[44]C. H. Holman and W. Harmon, A *Handbook to Literature*, 6th ed. (New York: MacMillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1992), 95-99; cf. Ryken, *How to Read*, 81–83. For an insightful treatment of Job as comedy, see J. W. Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," in R. Polzin and D. Robertson, eds., *Semeiu 7: Studies in the Book of Job* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), *l-39*. For OT tragedies, the negative counterpart of comedy, we suggests Gen 3 and the life of Saul (1 Sam 9-31).

We classify the book of Esther as a comedy.[45] Its plot turns tragedy into triumph, involves the conquest of obstacles (Haman's treachery and King Ahasuerus' ignorant complicity); disguise (Esther's hidden Jewish identity; Esth 2:10, 20); providential coincidence (the timing of Ahasuerus' insomnia; 6: 1- 11); surprise (the unmasking of Haman's plot; 7:1–6); sudden reversal of fortune (chaps. 8-9); and a concluding feast (Purim; 9: 18–19).[46]

The story of Joseph (Gen 37-50) offers a second example of OT comedy.[47] From the tragedy of Joseph's exile and imprisonment in Egypt (Gen 37, 39-40) the plot ends in triumph: Pharaoh elevates him to prime minister (41:39–40), Joseph rescues Egypt and his own family from famine (42–50), and Joseph is reconciled with his brothers (42-45, 50). In between, one reads of obstacles overcome, providential events (cf. 41:51, 52; 45:7, 8; 50:21), and Joseph's hidden identity (42-44). In sum, it is a fitting example of comedy.[48]

Principles of Interpretation-Comedy

The following principles are useful for interpreting OT comedy:

1. Since plot drives a comedy, interpretation must trace how tragedy turns to triumph. So, the student would trace how Joseph and Esther save Israel from their respective crises. In the process of tracing this development it is particularly important to define the story's crisis, the turning point, and the climax.

2. Character development merits some attention. Note the character traits of both heroes and villains and how they contribute to their respective success or demise. Also observe positive and negative developments in characters. For example, Esther seems to change from a reluctant intermediary to a bold, courageous leader (cf. Esth 4; 7). At the same time, Haman appears to degenerate from supreme self-confidence to childish self-pity (Esth 3; 6).

3. Discern what role God plays in the story: is it a direct or an indirect one? Ask whether or not the biblical writer views accidents and coincidences as acts of hidden divine providence.

[45]Technically, Esther represents a "comedy of situation" because of its ingenious plot (cf. Holman and Harman, *Handbook*, 98–99). In our view, the book's unflattering portrait of the Persian king also smacks of satire. For a summary of other options, see S. Niditch, "Legends of Wise Heroes and Heroines," in D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker, eds., *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 44648. Because of the books ties to the Purim festival, Niditch seems to classify Esther as a "festal legend" (448).

[46]For the definitive literary treatment of Esther to date, see S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, SBLDS 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979).

[47]Cf. D. B. Redford, A *Study* of *tbe Biblical* Story *of Joseph*, VTSup 20 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970); D. A. Seybold, "Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative," in Gros Louis, et al., eds., *Literary Interpretations* 1, 59-73; J. S. Ackerman, "Joseph, Judah, and Jacob," in K. R. R. Gros Louis, et al., eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 85–113.

[48]For the possible literary connections between the Joseph story and the book of Esther, see Berg, *Esther*, 123–42, 173–87. For a reading of it as a novella, see W. L. Humphreys, "Novella," in Coats, ed., *Saga*, 85-88.

4. Define the comedy's main theme(s). The Joseph story sends several clear thematic signals: God guided Joseph's ups and downs to preserve Israel's existence (Gen 45:7–9; 50:20). Esther sounds its themes more subtly, but certainly a major one would be God's preservation of his people before tyrants.

5. Application follows from the comedy's main theme(s). So, for example, Joseph and Esther echo a key biblical truth that God takes care of his people, whatever their hardships.

Farewell Speech

Finally, the ***farewell speech*** deserves mention because of the important role it plays at key junctures of OT narrative literature. The farewell speech is an address in the first-person voice reportedly given by someone shortly before his or her death.[49] Typically, the speaker refers to his or her old age or imminent death and exhorts the hearers to live along certain lines in the future.[50] The speakers are usually leaders of such great historical prominence that the speeches tend to mark momentous turning points in Israel's national life.[51] Though expounding legal instructions, the series of speeches given by Moses in Deuteronomy represent an expanded form of the farewell speech.[52]

Principles of Interpretation-Farewell Speech

The following principles will be helpful in interpreting the farewell speech:

1. The student must determine what makes the occasion of the speech historically pivotal. In other words, why did the speaker give the speech? What surrounding circumstances or pressing issues lie in the background?

2. Given the historical setting, the student must also summarize the speaker's main point in a brief sentence. What does the aging leader urge his audience to do about it?

3. Decide what a given speech contributes to the themes of the larger context. For example, how does Samuel's speech (1 Sam 12) develop the themes of the book of 1 Samuel?

[49]Long, *1 Kings,* 249.

[50]Often a brief report of the speaker's death and burial follow the speech (Gen 49:33; Deut 34:5–6; 1 Kgs 2:10).

[51]The following list of farewell speeches reads like an abbreviated outline of OT history: Jacob to his sons (Gen 49:29–30), Moses to Israel (Deut 29:2–30:20; 31:1–8), Joshua to Israel (Josh 23:1–16), Samuel to Israel (1 Sam 12), and David to Solomon (1 Kgs 2:1–9); cf. Paul in Acts 20:18–35; and Jesus in Jn 13:1–17:26.

'*Jesus' post-resurrection speeches to the disciples offers a NT analogy (Mt 28:16–20 par.; Acts 1:1-11). Though not speeches, NT epistles written late in an apostle's life seem to carry on the same tradition (e.g., 2 Tim 4:6–8; 2 Pet 1:12–15).

4. Look for application from the speech's momentous historical setting and its main point. The student should think of a contemporary situation that closely compares to the biblical one and then apply the speaker's main point to that situation. For example, Samuel's words would exhort us to serve God faithfully despite our fears of criticism from unbelievers.

Embedded Genres

Popular Proverb

Other kinds of literature are embedded within OT narratives.[53] When we say, "That's the way the ball bounces," we invoke a ***popular proverb*** (Heb. *māšāl*)—a pithy, well-known saying that comments on everyday people and events. Colorfully, it says, "That's life!" Ancient Israel had similar sayings, normally prefaced by the formula "so it became a saying" or "that is why they say. ..." For example, 1 Sam twice reports the popular proverb "Is Saul also among the prophets?" Apparently that Israelite expression highlighted someone's unexpected, uncharacteristic behavior (10:12; 19:24).[54] Popular proverbs always occur as quotations in a larger context, although the book of Proverbs may incorporate some in its collections (Prov 18:9; 24:26; 29:5). (For the interpretation of proverbs, see below under wisdom).

Israel also commonly invoked blessings and curses as part of her daily life. The formula "Blessed is/be [someone]" (Heb. *bārûk* . . .) was the way Israelites wished others well (Gen 9:26; Deut 28:3; Ruth 2:19, 20). The opposite formulas, "cursed is/be [someone/thing]" (Heb. *ʾārûr* . . .) or "cursed is/be one who . . ." (Heb. *ʾārûr hāʾîš ʾăšer*) seeks the opposite consequence for its object (see Gen 9:25; Deut 27:15; Judg 5:23; Jer 11:3).[55]

Riddles, Fables, and Parables

Old Testament narratives also contain examples of riddles, fables, and parables. A ***riddle*** **(Heb. *hîdâ*) is a simple statement whose hidden meaning must be discovered.**

[53]Koch (*Growth,* 23-25) called these "component literary types," e.g., non-narrative types included within larger narratives.

[54]Cf. R. P. Gordon, Z & ZZ *Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 119. Other examples: "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord" (Gen 10:9); "From evildoers come evil deeds" (1 Sam 24:14); "The 'blind and lame' will not enter the palace" (2 Sam 5:8); "The days go by and every vision comes to nothing" (Etek 12:22); "Like mother, like daughter" (Ezek 16:44); "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18:2).

[55]For Israel's understanding of this practice, see the convenient summary of J. Scharbert, "*ʾārar,*" *TDOT* 1:408–12, 416-18; and id., "*barak,*" *TDOT* 2:302–308. The genre "imprecation" also wishes dire misfortune on someone but without invoking the curse formula and without addressing the person directly (e.g., Psa 109:6–20). Though resembling a blessing on the surface, a "beatitude" actually makes a declaration ("Blessed is the person who ") rather than a wish (e.g., Psa 1:1).

The classic example is the one Samson used to stump his Philistine companions: "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet" (Judg 14:14).[56] By contrast, ***fables*** teach moral truths. They are brief stories in which plants and animals behave like people. Fables from Egypt and Mesopotamia abound, and the OT offers two fine examples, both of a political sort.[57] In one, Jotham told how trees sought a king among various trees and vines but found only the thorn bush willing to serve (Judg 9:8-15). His fable warned the people of Shechem to be wary of Abimelech's leadership as king. Then in 2 Kgs 14:9 King Jehoash responded to the challenge of Amaziah with a little fable of a thistle that sent a message to a cedar. Meanwhile, a wild animal trampled on the thistle. Jehoash's message to Amaziah was clear: do not think too highly of yourself and your strength!

A ***parable*** is a brief story with common human characters that illustrates an important truth. Though OT writers used this form much less than did the rabbis and Jesus, the OT has at least two good examples, one in a narrative context and the other in a wisdom book. The prophet Nathan told Ring David how a greedy rich man stole a poor man's only lamb to feed a visiting guest. The story, alluding to David's adultery and act of murder, caused him to face his sin (2 Sam 12:1–4).[58] Similarly, the Preacher told how the wisdom of a poor man had once saved a besieged town but that afterward no one remembered him (Eccl 9:13–15). The lesson was that wisdom is better than strength even if people disregard it (v. 16). As with the NT, OT parables always occur as part of a larger context.

Songs

Singing played a significant role in Israel's daily life. It is not surprising, then, that OT narratives quote several kinds of ***songs.*** The ancient "Song of the Well" (Num 2 1: 17-18) apparently was a work song sung during the digging of wells.[59] Israel also sang victory songs after winning great military battles. Hence, the "Song of the Sea" (Exod 15:1–18) celebrated Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea, and the "Song of Deborah" (Judg 5) celebrated his conquest of Jabin the Canaanite king (cf. also Exod 15:21; Num 21:27–30; 2 Kgs 19:21–28).[60]

On the other hand, the loss of loved ones, particularly fallen military comrades, was the occasion for singing (or chanting) a funeral ***dirge*** (Heb. ***qînâ***). One key to recognizing such dirges is the opening word "How ...!" (Heb. ***'êk***). They

[56]For the answer, see v. 18. Solomon and Daniel were renowned for their ability to solve riddles (1 Kgs 10:1; Dan 5:12). Josephus (Ant. VIII v, 3, 146-9) even reports a contest of riddle-solving between Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre.

[57]Cf. A. M. Vater Solomon, "Fable," in Coats, ed., ***Saga,*** 114-25.

[58]Cf. U. Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe Iamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," ***Bib*** 48 (1967): 207–42.

[59]Other texts mention rejoicing and singing that celebrated other occasions; see Gen 31:27; Judg 9:27; 21:21; 1 Sam 18:6–7; Isa 16:10; and the convenient table of E. Werner, "Music," *IDB,* K-Q:458.

[60]For other kinds of songs, see our discussion of poetry below.

also have a distinctive poetic meter-five stressed syllables per line-that scholars call the ***qînâ*** (i.e., "dirge") rhythm. The best known are David's laments for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:19–27) and for Abner (2 Sam 3:33–34; cf. 2 Chr 35:25).[61] (Further information on dirges in the prophets follows.)

Lists

Finally, OT narratives also often incorporate ancient ***lists.*** Basically, a list is a recounting of names or items whose shared characteristics allow their logical categorization. In the ancient world compiling lists was a common practice. Sometimes these lists served as a means of accounting or inventory-control; at others they functioned as a primitive classification of observed phenomena.[62] OT narratives include lists reflective of similar activity in ancient Israel.[63] So, one finds lists of booty (Num 31:32–40), votive offerings (Exod 35:5b–9; cf. w. 21–29), Israelite cities and towns (Josh 15–19), royal mercenaries (2 Sam 23:24–39), and royal officials (1 Kgs 4:2–6, 8–19).

Numbers 33 records an ancient itinerary, the list of places where Israel camped en route from Egypt to Mount Hor (see w. 5-37). The most common list, however, is the genealogy or list of ancestors (Gen lO:l-32; 22:20–24; 25:1–4; Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chr 2:1–3:24).[64] This list traced the descent of an individual or tribe from antiquity down to a later time. Genealogies tend to bore the modern reader, but ancient peoples regarded them as crucial legal documents. They used genealogical records to establish their claims to be king or high priest, to possess certain property, and to marry into certain families.[65]

*Principles of **Interpretation—Embedded** Genres*

The following principles will help the student to interpret embedded genres:

1. Usually, an embedded genre forms a component of a larger context; it is not an independent context itself?[66]

[61]Though technically not funeral dirges, Lam l-2 and 4 offer a collection of dirges over the city of Jerusalem similar in content and rhythm to David's funeral laments.

[62]For lists from Ugarit, see C. H. Gordon, ***Ugaritic Textbook,*** AnOr 38 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), § 17.2 (290–91). For Egyptian examples, see the lists of Ramses III (twelfth century B.C.) in *ANET,* 261–62.

[63]See the brief discussion in Long, ***1 Kings, 4-5.***

[64]To date, the definitive study of genealogy, both biblical and extrabiblical, remains R. R. Wilson, ***Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); cf. also his "Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," ***JBL*** 94 (1975): 169–89.

[65]The genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:1–17) serves a similar purpose. By tracing Jesus' descent from David, it establishes his claim to David's royal throne, thus to his identity as Messiah.

[66]Some longer texts like songs or dirges represent exceptions to this principle. One may, in fact, study them both as independent contexts and as components of their surrounding context.

2. Thus, the goal of interpretation is to find what that component contributes to the message of the whole.

3. To attain that goal: (a) define the main point of the embedded genre (read by itself, what does it say?); (b) define the main idea(s) of its surrounding context (what subject does the context treat and what does it say about it?);[67] and (c) analyze the relationship between the point of the embedded genre and the idea(s) of its context (how does the embedded genre contribute to the message of the whole?).

4. The best clues to the main idea(s) of a context are specific statements that reflect the author/editor's viewpoint (when present) and the content itself.

To illustrate the application of these principles, let us briefly consider two examples. The first is the genealogy of Adam's descendants (Gen 5).[68] Besides giving their names in order, the passage seems to focus on two key statistics for each descendant: his age when he fathered a son and his total lifespan. Its main point is that many generations and many years passed between Adam and Noah. As for the context, it apparently revolves around two ideas: the negative results of the fall of humankind (Abel's murder, Gen 4) and its numerical growth (Gen 6:1). In our view, the genealogy contributes two ideas to the context. By tracing many generations, it shows the proliferation of human life between Adam and Noah. It also serves as a literary bridge between them, as if to say simply, "Much time passed here."

The second example is the song Hannah sang after she gave birth to Samuel (1 Sam 2:1–10).[69] At first glance, the song seems slightly out of place in the context-an unexpected musical disruption in the narrative's flow. Its content soars far beyond the simple thanks of a once barren woman for her infant son. Rather, it praises God's great sovereign power over history in routing his enemies and in exalting his friends. Further, it falls between reports of Samuel's dedication to Yahweh (1:21–28) and the sinfulness of Israel's priesthood (2:12–17).

What does the song contribute to the context? In our view, it signals that the sovereign God of history stands behind the emergence of Samuel (and, later, of David, too). That he routs his enemies anticipates the prophecies of divine judgment on the priesthood that follow (2:27–36; 3:11–18).

Law

People commonly think of the OT as a book of law. The content of its first five books, the so-called Law of Moses, tends to confirm that picture; and indeed,

[67]Here "context" actually means a series of contexts that surround the embedded genre as if the latter were the center of several concentric circles. The closest "circle" (the *immediate* context) probably will consist of a few verses before and after the genre. Succeeding circles (the *larger* context> may be a chapter, several chapters, or both.

@'Concerning genealogies and Genesis, see B. S. Childs, ***Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 145–53.

""Here we draw on the insights of Childs, ***Introduction, 272-73.***

law does dominate the final four books of the Pentateuch. Actually, scholars believe that the "law" consists of four major collections of laws: the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22–23:33), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12–26), the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), and the Priestly Code (Exod 25-31; 34:29–Lev 16; parts of Numbers).[70]

Comparative study of large legal codes from the ancient Near East has considerably enriched our understanding of biblical law.[71] In this brief survey of law we will first discuss the OT's two main types of legal forms, and then we will discuss the genres of legal collections. Finally, we will suggest some principles for interpreting OT law.

Types of Old Testament Legal Material

Casuistic Law

The first main type of legal form is ***casuistic law*** (or "case law").[72] Its distinctive "if. .. then" grammatical structure and impersonal third-person style make it easily recognizable. The "if" clause describes the case concerned, the "then" clause describes the legal penalty for infractions.[73] Consider this example:

condition **If** men quarrel **and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to bed,**

penalty **the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.** (Exod 21:18-19)

Observe the ancient form of legal expression in both the condition and the penalty. Legal precision carefully defines everything. Actually, in form (and to some extent,

[70]W. M. Clark, "Law," in J. H. Hayes, ed., ***Old Testament Form Criticbm*** (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1977), 100. For a summary of the literary treatment of OT legal materials, see R. Thompson, ***Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf,*** VTSup 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 53-105. For an exposition of these codes, see D. Patrick, Old ***Testament Law*** (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 63-261.

[71]The major extrabiblical collections are the Laws of Ur-Nammu, the Lipit-Ishtar Law Code, the Laws of Eshnunna, the Code of Hammurabi, the Middle Assyrian Laws, the Hittite Laws, and the Neo-Babylonian Laws. For translations of the collections, see ***ANET,*** 159-98. For a survey and critical assessment, see J. N. Walton, ***Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 69-92.

[72]The classic study of the two basic forms is A. Alt, "The Origins of Israelite Law," in Essays on ***Old Testament History and Religion*** (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 101–71. For the larger discussion, see Clark, "Law," 105-l 16.

[73]Heb. *kî ʾîš / ʾᵃnāšîm* + 3rd person verb. If a law describes subcases as part of it, the form is *ʾim* ("if ") + an imperfect verb (Exod 21:31, 36).

in content) Israelite casuistic law resembles ancient Near Eastern law.[74] In other words, the roots of this genre pre-date Israel's entrance into the arena of history. With regard to content, OT casuistic law primarily treats civil or criminal cases rather than religious ones.[75]

Apodictic Law

The second major category is ***apodictic law*** (or "absolute law"). Apodictic law embodies laws promulgated in unconditional, categorical directives such as commands and prohibitions.[76] Instead of finely tuned case descriptions, they issue absolute orders about right and wrong-allowing no exceptions. They also feature personal direct address ("you shall/shall not") and primarily treat moral and religious matters.[77] The best known form of apodictic law is the ***prohibition*** or negative command (e.g., "You shall not murder," Exod 20:13).[78] Bluntly, the prohibition orders, "Don't do this!" Though less common, the ***admonition*** issues a positive command (Heb. imperative): "Honor your father and your mother ..." (Exod 20:12; cf. v. 8). The admonition commands "Do this!" without considering any exceptions.[79]

Another apodictic genre draws its name from its grammatical form. The ***participle law*** deals with capital crimes: "Anyone who hits a person and kills him must be put to death" (Exod 21:12, *NCV*).[80] The Hebrew participle ("anyone who ...") describes the case while the main verb prescribes the penalty ("put to death"). Typical of apodictic law, the statement is categorical and allows no exceptions.

Last, we mention the well-known law ***of retaliation (or "lex talionis")***:

> **. . . if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. (Exod 21:23–25; cf. Gen 9:6; Lev 24:18–22; Deut 19:21)**

[74]Cf. this example from the Laws of Eshnunna (*ANET*, 162, para. 30): "If a man hates his town and his lord and becomes a fugitive, (and if) another man takes his wife-when he returns, he shall have no right to claim his wife." For a comparative discussion of biblical and extrabiblical legal forms, see S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant* in *the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law*, VTSup 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 112-18.

[75]Patrick further subdivides casuistic law into *remedial law* (laws that prescribe a legal remedy for violations) and *primary law* (laws that prescribe the rights and duties of legal relationships; cf. Exod 22:25); cf. Patrick, *Old Testament Law, 23;* id., "Casuistic Law Governing Primary Rights and Duties," *JBL* 92 (1973): 180-84.

[76]Alt, "The Origins of Israelite Law," 133-71; R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Formal Aspect of Ancient Near Eastern Law," in W. S. McCollough, ed., *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T. J. Meek* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 39.

"Only a few examples of apodictic law appear in ancient Near Eastern law codes; cf. the Code of Hammurabi (*ANET, 174*, para. 187): "The (adopted) son of a chamberlain, a palace servant, or the (adopted) son of a votary, may never be reclaimed"; cf. also the Laws of Eshnunna, paragraphs 15-16 and 51-52 (*ANET, 162, 163)*.

[78]Grammatically, Heb. *lō'* ["not"] + 2nd person imperfect + a direct object or clause. Cf. also Exod 20:14–17; 22:18.

[79]For a similar form see our discussion below of wisdom instruction (cf. Prov 5:7–8).

[80]Grammatically, the participle is the subject of the verbal clause "must be put to death." Cf. also Exod 21:15–17; 22:19; 31:14–15; Gen 26:11; Lev 20:10; 24:16, 21; Num 35:16–18, 21.

Like other apodictic law, it addresses the audience personally ("you are to..."). Its subject is premeditated crimes involving bodily harm (but see Deut 19:21). Strikingly, it articulates a broad legal principle-the equivalence of injury and penalty-rather than a specific action.[81] As with casuistic law, this genre goes back to pre-Israelite ancient legal practice.[82] We may rightly lay to rest, however, the older view that the law of retaliation represented a "primitive" form of justice.[83]

Legal Series

Laws rarely occur in isolation, so a consideration of legal literature must include types of legal collections. Scholars call a text with a small number of laws phrased in a similar style a ***series*** of laws. Apodictic laws typically occur in series and thereby take on an almost poetic quality when read.[84] Probably the best known OT series is the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2–17; Deut 5:6–21). They typify a unique ten-member series or decalogue (cf. Deut 10:4) like the one Exod 34 claims to have (see v. 28; one is hard pressed, however, to count exactly ten commandments). Though certainty eludes us, such texts may reflect an ancient practice to view a series of ten as an ideal law code.[85]

Casuistic laws are grammatically more complex and wordy than apodictic laws. Hence, the OT organizes them, not in series, but in ***topical groups.*** A brief review of one context replete with casuistic laws, the so-called Covenant Book in Exodus, makes this evident. There we find sections of laws that prescribe policy for the treatment of servants (Exod 21:2–11), bodily injuries (21:18–32), and property losses (22:1–15).[86]

Legal Instruction

The Pentateuch has two lengthy instruction genres. As its name implies, ***priestly instruction*** aims to instruct priests in professional matters such as ritual

*"According to Ohler (*Studying the Old Testament*, 129), *the* point is "justice must be maintained."

[82]E.g., the Code of Hammurabi, para. 1%: "If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, **they shall destroy his eye"** (*ANET,* 175). For the possibility that, by offering equal protection, this form marked a significant advance in legal history, see Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant,* 75-76.

[83]Another apodictic genre, the curse, occurs only in Deuteronomy as a legal form, e.g., "Cursed is the person who ..." (Deut 27:15–26; cf. Gen 3:17) or "Cursed are you/is your ." (Deut 28:16–19; cf. Gen 3:14; 4:11). For discussion and bibliography, see J. Scharbert, "*'arar,*" *TDOT* 1:408–412; C. A. Keller, "*'arar,*" *THAT* 1:236–40.

[84]Patrick, *Old Testament Law, 20-22;* cf. series of prohibitions (Exod 20:13–17; Lev 18; 19; cf. Hos 4:2; Jer 7:9), participle laws (Exod 21:15–17; Lev 19), and curses (Deut 27:15–26; 28:16–19).

[85]Contrast B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus,* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 395, who traces the practice to later Israel. For longer series, see Lev 18 and 19.

[86]Cf. the commentary in Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant, 43-98;* Childs, *Exodus,* 440–96.

procedures.[87] To recognize these the reader must determine from both the context (e.g., Lev 6:9) and the content that the text addresses the tasks of priests. Examples of priestly instruction include Lev 6-7 (about offerings) and Lev 2 1 (about priestly purity).[88] Given their intended audience, it is best to interpret them as texts that concern the duties and expectations specifically of leaders.

The other instructional genre is ***ritual:*** instruction for lay people about how to perform rituals properly-for example, how to bring offerings and what to offer (Lev 1–5).[89] To recognize this genre the reader must determine a lay orientation from the context and content of the passage.

Principles of Interpretation--Law

OT law poses an interpretive challenge for the Bible student. One problem is a common misunderstanding of the nature of biblical law. To the modern mind, the word "law" conjures up images of massive, intricate legal codes and a spirit of "legalism." Yet in reality, for all its detail, the OT's legal sections do not constitute a comprehensive legal code. Instead, they present a select sample of illustrative cases or topics whose legal principles were to serve as a guide to Israel. Their purpose was to teach the Israelite fundamental values, not to provide them with a handy legal reference tool.[90] In short, their aim was instructional rather than judicial.

Further, OT law is best understood in a covenant framework. It articulates the stipulations of the covenant made between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai;[91] thus, OT law represents the personal demands of Israel's sovereign Lord, not an abstract system of morality or a technical legal code. In light of this, readers must interpret law relationally-as the guidelines that govern Israel's ongoing life with her gracious God. In return for his protection and blessing, God expects his people to obey what the law commands-in short, to maintain their relationship with God on a healthy footing. The Ten Commandments (Exod 20; Deut 5) express the broad, overarching ethical principles whose details the subsequent legal codes flesh out.[92]

[87] Scholars call this genre *priestly* ***da'at*** (Heb. ***da'at,*** "knowledge"); cf. Hos 4:6; Mal 2:7; J. Begrich, "Die priesterliche Tora," ***Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament,*** TBü ***21*** (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1964), 251-58; R. Rendtorff, Die ***Gesetze der Priesterschrift,*** 2nd ed., FRLANT 62 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 2, 77; id., ***Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers*** im ***Alten Israel,*** WMANT ***24*** (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1967), 10–11. Readers may wonder, "Are there no sources on this point in English?" Unfortunately, in places like this, we cite no English **titles because to our knowledge there are none.**

[88] Cf. also Exod 12:43–49; Num 6:1–8, 22-27.

[89] K. Koch, ***Die Priesterschrift von Exodus 25 bis Leviticus 16,*** FRLANT 71 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959); Rendtorff, ***Die G'esetze der Priesterschrift,*** 12, 77; cf. id., ***Studien zur Geschicbte des Opfers im Alten Israel, 7-10.***

[90] G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, ***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19821, 139; Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., ***The Book of Ruth,*** NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 50.

[91] Here we follow the helpful discussion of ancient treaty-making as the background of the Mosaic covenant in G. Wenham, "Grace and Law in the Old Testament," in B. Kaye and G. Wenham, eds., ***Law, Morality, and the Bible*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1978), 9–13.

[92] G. Wenham, "Law and the Legal System in the Old Testament," in Kaye and Wenham, eds., *Law, Morality, and the Bible,* 28–29.

(Observe, for example, that the Decalogue prescribes no penalties.) Thus, Bible students must interpret them as ethical principles, not as a legal code.

According to Wright, OT law can be subdivided into five distinct types.[93] ***Criminal law*** defines offenses against God and the whole community; it includes some penalty. Examples include kidnapping and sorcery for which the law prescribes the death penalty (Exod 21:16; 22:18). ***Civil law,*** by contrast, treats private disputes between Israelite citizens. Primarily in casuistic form, it details the provisions and penalties for cases like assault, accidental injury, damage, negligence, slavery, and property disputes.

Family law defines the judicial role of the Israelite family. It handles things like the marriage of childless widows (Deut 25:5–10), inheritance (Deut 21: 15–16), and the redemption of mortgaged family property (Lev 25:23–31). ***Cultic law*** regulates Israel's specific religious practices-sabbaths, festivals, tithes and offerings, sacrifices, dietary and hygienic rules. Finally, ***charitable law*** includes various kinds of humanitarian legislation. To this category belong laws that protect and provide for the weak and vulnerable-widows, orphans, and resident aliens (Exod 22:21-27; Lev 19:9–10; Deut 14:28–29; et al.).

For modern Bible students the question is: How ***does the law apply to Christians today? In*** reply, we affirm two fundamental interrelated assumptions about the nature of OT law.[94] First, we believe that God intends it to serve as a paradigm of timeless ethical, moral, and theological principles. In other words, the law is more than a temporary, dispensable cultural phenomenon. Actually, it plays a key role in Israel's priestly ministry as a "light to the nations" (Isa 49:6; cf. Exod 19:5–6). Christians who dismiss it as outmoded and irrelevant deprive themselves of the teachings God conveyed through it.

Second, to properly interpret law the student must discover the timeless truth beneath its cultural husk. In some cases, the truth lies right on the surface unobscured by culture. Prohibitions like "Do not murder" and "Do not steal" (Exod 20:13, 15; Deut 5:17, 19) need no cross-cultural translation; they clearly identify murder and stealing as wrong. Similarly, the timeless aspect of the instructions about equitable legal procedure (Exod 23:1–8) are fairly obvious: witnesses should tell the truth, not cater to the crowd (w. l-3); opponents at law should treat each other civilly (w. 4-5); and judges should judge by evidence and refuse bribes (w. 6–8).[95]

In other instances, a thick cultural covering seems to hide the underlying truth. Proper interpretation demands the liberation of the timeless kernel from its time-conditioned shell. Consider, for example, the perplexing laws that decree a woman's menstrual bleeding makes her and everything she touches unclean (Lev 15 : 19-30).[96]

[93] C. J. H. Wright, ***An Eye for An Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983), 153-59. We prefer his more sociologically based categories to the traditional division of OT law into civil, ceremonial, and moral types.

[94] Wright, ***Eye,*** 40-45, 156–57, 161–62.

[95] Wright, ***Eye,*** 170-71.

[96] Here we draw on the comments of G. J. Wenham, ***The*** *Book* ***of*** *Leviticus,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 219–24. Anyone who was "unclean" could not, among other things, join the community in public worship.

At first glance, these laws seem rather harsh and unfair, in effect making women untouchable one week out of every four. What timeless principle could possibly underlie these laws?

To answer this question we need to consider the Israelite cultural background. Israelite women married early, had children early, weaned their children late (at ages two or three), and tended to have large families (cf. Psa 127:4–5). Thus, a monthly menses was much less common among Israelite women than it is today, especially among married women. In actuality, the unmarried adolescent women were most directly and frequently affected by these laws. We suggest then that these laws, in effect, sought to regulate teenage passions and discourage sexual relations between young unmarried Israelites.[97] If so, an underlying truth appears to be a moral principle that sexual relations outside of marriage displease God.

Since the early days of church history, Christians have often spoken of Christ as the key to interpreting the OT. Jesus himself established precedent for this view when he declared, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17). Clearly the Gospel writers believed that Christ fulfilled many prophecies. Five such "fulfillment quotations" appear in Mt l-2 alone. But here Jesus refers to "the Law" as well as to the prophets, presumably meaning all the Hebrew Scriptures, and Matthew goes on to illustrate Jesus' code of ethics in contrast to the OT Law. Therefore, to fulfill a law must mean to bring to completion everything for which that law was originally intended (cf. v. 18: "until everything is accomplished"). In some cases, as with sacrifices and various ceremonies (cf. Col 2:16–17), that point of completion was Christ's death and resurrection. Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenged fundamental principles of both oral and written ***Torah,*** especially those relating to Sabbath and dietary laws. At the same time, he never broke any of the written Law while it remained God's will for his people (i.e., before the cross, resurrection, and sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost inaugurated the age of God's new covenant).[98] In other cases, as with many moral injunctions, the point of completion will not occur until Christ's return.

Matthew 5:17, therefore, suggests the following hermeneutical principle for applying the OT in the NT age: ***All of the OT applies to Christians, but none of it*** *applies* ***apart from its fulfillment in Christ.***[99] Thus, we reject both the opposing views often found, respectively, in classic covenant theology (all the OT applies except what the NT repeals) and in classic dispensationalism (none of the OT applies except what the NT repeats). The former would logically lead to prohibitions against most modern farming practices and clothing fashions (Deut 22:9–12). The latter

[97]So Wenham, *Leviticus,* 224. Conceivably other factors also come into play in this instance (e.g., ritual taboos associated with bodily emissions).

[98]Cf. especially R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition,* SNTSMS *28* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975); D. J. Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT 20* (1984): 3–49.

[99]*Cf.* esp. D. A. Dorsey, "The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise," *JETS* 34 (1991): 321–34.

would logically lead to the acceptance of sorcerers, mediums, and spiritists (despite Deut 18:9–13)! For in neither case does the NT say anything one way or the other about these specific practices.

Instead, interpreters should accept all of the OT laws as "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16), but only as one discovers how those laws are fulfilled in Christ. Where the NT specifically refers to a particular law, the interpreter's task is eased considerably. We obey the laws of sacrifice by trusting in Christ as our once-for-all sacrifice (Heb 9:1–10:25), not by bringing sheep or goats to be slain each Sunday in church. The kosher laws were designed to set the Israelites apart from the other nations so we obey this principle as we morally separate ourselves from sin (2 Cor 6:17), even though Christ declared that all foods are clean (Mk 7: 19b). The symbol of baptism parallels the principle behind the law of circumcision (Col 2:11b–12a), though the rites are not identical in all aspects. For example, Christians baptize women as well as men, and most likely the NT envisioned only people old enough to repent from sin rather than infants as recipients (Col 2:11a–12b).

Where the NT does not address a particular law, we must discover if it fits a category of law the NT does address. For example, orthodox Jews view the command "you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21) as a dietary law that prevents them from serving milk and meat dishes at the same meal. If this was the law's original intention, since God has declared all foods clean, this command takes its place with the other kosher laws that no longer apply literally to Christians' diets. Alternately, it may have been a command meant to dissociate the Israelites from certain pagan, religious practices, much like the otherwise unrelated warnings, "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves" (Lev 19:27–28). Any practices, whether relating to diet or personal appearance, that represent pagan worship (as in the self-mutilation practices of several world religions and occult sects today) remain strictly forbidden for believers. But if Christians partake of goat's meat and milk or get tattooed for some nonreligious reason, they do not transgress God's commands.

To summarize, OT law relates to Christians in light of the NT in the following ways:

- Some laws retain literal validity for Christians. For example, Jesus reafiirmed the OT injunctions to love the LORD wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbor (Mt 5:21–48; 22:40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Similarly, Paul invoked the OT legal requirement of two or three witnesses to establish guilt in the case of accusations against Christian leaders (1 Tim 5:19; cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor 13:1). Any other laws that the NT applies to Christians remain valid.
- In some cases, the NT actually makes the OT law more strict. For example, in the case of marriage, the seventh commandment

forbids adultery, and the OT permits divorce and remarriage (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18; 24:1–4). But unlike the OT, the NT regards divorce and remarriage (and, by implication, polygamy) as adultery (Lk 16:18; Mt 19:3–12; Mk 10:2–12). Further, Jesus permitted divorce only when marital infidelity had occurred (Mt 19:9); Paul, only in the case of desertion by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15–16). The truth behind both OT and NT laws was the value of preserving stable marriages.[100]

Some laws no longer have literal validity because of NT teachings (i.e., their fulfillment in Christ renders their literal practice obsolete).[101] Thus, Christians no longer need to literally follow the OT sacrificial system (Heb 10:1–10), to obey its food laws (Mk 7:19; cf. Acts 10:9–16), or to perform circumcision (Gal 5:2–6).

Laws that are no longer literally valid still teach important timeless truths. Thus, the OT sacrificial system graphically reminds Christians that God takes sin seriously, requires a severe penalty, yet graciously offers forgiveness. Similarly, the clean animals in OT food laws probably symbolized Israel as the chosen people, in contract to her unclean counterparts, that is, Israel's pagan neighbors. Hence, eating reminded Israelites (and, by implication, Christians) of their gracious election by God and their resulting duty to pursue God-like holiness.[102] Even the cultic law concerning the sabbatical fallow year (Lev 25; Deut 15) proves instructive. It underscores that compassionate humanitarian service ultimately represents service for God.[103]

Understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law also has implications for interpreting NT ethics more generally. Kingdom demands, like the Mosaic Law, follow from the redemption of God's people. They do not earn anyone's salvation. But failure to observe OT laws often led to specific sanctions and punishments; failure by the nation at large eventually led to loss of peace, prosperity, and land. Because Jesus has fulfilled all of God's demands in Scripture for justice,[104] few NT ethical texts ever suggest that keeping or transgressing God's commandments today lead to the identical material blessings or punishments. Although the story of the woman caught in adultery almost certainly was not in John's original text, a

[100]Wenham, "Law and the Legal System," 36-37, who comments, however, that "in practice the differences [between OT and NT teachings] were quite slight."

[101]Cf. J. J. Davis, Foundations *of* Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 257-58.

[102]Wenham, "Law and the Legal System," 30.

[103]Wright, *Eye*, 156-57. Cf. also Paul's application of Deut 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain") to the right of Christian leaders to earn their living by ministry (1 Cor 9:7-12); and his teaching that love underlie-and, thereby, its practice fulfills--the law (Rom 13:8–10).

[104]Particularly as the necessary, once-for-all sacrifice for our sins, on which see esp. Heb 4:14–10:39.

good case can be made for its authenticity as a true story about what Jesus did and said.[105] In it he establishes a precedent for forbidding the application of OT sanctions even for such a fundamental moral issue as adultery. A possible exception appears in the case of murder. Because what we would call "first-degree homicide" was the only sin for which a ransom could not be substituted for a sacrifice (Num 35:31),[106] some Christians believe capital punishment for murder remains appropriate in the Christian era. But many others point to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice as obliterating the need for further sanctions-whether physical or spiritual-for all sin.

As for specific ***principles of interpretation, we*** recommend the following:

1. Whatever its literary type, the collection or series in which an individual law appears serves as its literary context. Thus, the student should investigate surrounding laws for interpretive clues.
2. The student should endeavor to understand the original meaning of laws in light of their cultural background. Since many readers lack such knowledge, we recommend that they liberally consult Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other background sources.
3. Apply laws primarily to the NT counterpart of the original audience. For example, laws aimed at Israel as a whole make proper application to Christians in general. Since the NT affirms the "priesthood of all believers," both priestly and ritual instructions would also apply to Christians in general, not just to clergy.
4. Whether a given law applies literally, in principle, or both, depends upon how it compares to laws in the categories discussed above. The reader may use the latter as guidelines for making application.

Deuteronomy

In a sense, the book of ***Deuteronomy*** represents a collection of laws, yet it is a unique literary genre that requires special consideration. Deuteronomy offers a comprehensive restatement of the Mosaic Law. Excluding the brief narrative opening (1: 1–5) and lengthy conclusion (31–34), the book consists of Moses' speeches to the Israelites while they were camped east of the Jordan River (1:6–4:40; 5-26; 27:11–28; 29:2-30). Scholars commonly describe the rhetoric of these speeches as ***parenesis***—a ***style*** of speech that intends to persuade the audience to adopt a certain course of action.[107]

Further, the structure of the book closely resembles that of suzerain-vassal treaties like those of the Hittites and Assyrians (second and first millennia B.C., respectively).[108] Such treaties dictated the relationship between a major power (the

[105]See esp. G. M. Burge, "A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11)," JETS 27 (1984): 141-48.

[106]See esp. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 165–68.

[107]So Long, *1 Kings, 255,* citing Deut 6–11; Zech 1:3–6; Josh 24:2–15; 1 Kgs 8:56–61.

[108]See the helpful summary with bibliography in D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1972), 10-34; more recently, J. J. M. Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," in Knight and Tucker, eds., *The Hebrew Bible,* 93-94. For translations of Egyptian and Hittite treaties, see *ANET,* 199–206.

suzerain) and its subject nation (the vassal). Like the latter, Deuteronomy has a historical prologue (1:6–4:43), a list of stipulations (chs. 5–26), mention of witnesses to the agreement ("heaven and earth," 4:26; 30:19; 31:28), and blessings and curses (chaps. 27-28).

On the other hand, in one significant respect Deuteronomy differs from ancient treaties: in the latter, the Hittite or Assyrian king addresses the subject nation; in the former Moses, not King Yahweh, addresses Yahweh's subject, Israel. In sum, one should read Deuteronomy not as a treaty but as a series of exhortations by Moses that, taken as a whole, resemble the structure of an ancient treaty.[109]

Principles of Interpretation: Deuteronomy

We suggest that readers interpret Deuteronomy according to these guidelines:

1. Deuteronomy is best understood as a covenant document akin to ancient treaties. It must be interpreted against this treaty background.
2. The student should read the book in light of one crucial datum of historical background: the potential, corrupting influence of the Canaanite religion on Israel. The foreboding shadow of Baal worship haunts much of its content, a fact that interpreters must integrate into their interpretation.
3. Approach Deuteronomy as a book of passionate exhortations rather than abstract, technical legal instruction. After all, it basically reports farewell speeches by Moses to Israel just before he died and Israel entered Canaan. Above all, Moses worries about religious accommodation to Canaanite religion.
4. The literary nature of each section should dictate the interpretive approach to it. For example, poetic sections (chaps. 32-33) require treatment appropriate to poetry, laws those proper for legal materials, etc. By the same token, application should follow guidelines for each genre.

Poetry

After narratives, poetry is the most common literary form in the Bible. Virtually all biblical books, even those not traditionally called "poetical," contain some poetry.[110] Now poetry is not a genre per se but a literary style-the alternative to prose. So to study poetry we will survey the major literary types of OT poetry and conclude with suggested principles of interpretation.

[109]Of course, Moses' exhortations restate the covenant just before Israel enters the promised land. In passing, we observe that a few OT narratives report ancient Israelite legal processes. Awareness of their legal nature will enable the reader to understand them better. These include an investigative procedure called an ordeal (Num 5:11–31), several criminal trials (Gen 31:25–42; 2 Sam 1:1–16; 4:5–12), and a civil process about prior rights (Ruth 4:1-12).

[110]Gabel and Wheeler, The *Bible as Literature*, 37. For example, the books of Exodus and Judges each have a lengthy victory song, the "Song of Moses" (Exod 15:1–18; cf. v. 21) and the "Song of Deborah" (Judg 5; see also 1 Sam 2:1-10; 2 Sam 23:1–7; Jonah 2:1–10).

Types of Old Testament Poetry

Prayers

The ***complaint*** constitutes the most common genre of prayer in the psalms.[111] Whether prayed by an individual or the corporate worshiping community, a complaint is a heart-felt petition for Yahweh to deliver from some humanly unsolvable crisis. For an individual the crisis might be severe illness, misfortune, or false accusations; for the community, it might be a drought, plagues, or invasions by enemies. Most scholars assume that complaints were prayed at a sanctuary, such as the temple in Jerusalem, as part of a larger ritual process. Unlike dirges or laments, complaints assume the crisis can be resolved by God's intervention.

Psalm 22 provides an excellent example of the typical complaint psalm. It opens with an invocation of God's name(s) as a way of making contact with Yahweh (w. l-2). It includes an affirmation of confidence (w. 3-5) by which the petitioner affirms trust in God. The complaint element (w. 6-8) describes in general terms the affliction threatening the individual or community. In the petition (w. 19-21) the worshiper specifically asks for God's help in resolving the problem. Finally, complaints often close with a thanksgiving element-in this case, a hymn of thanksgiving (w. 22–26)—in which the petitioner offers thanks in advance of receiving his petition.[112] When the king either speaks or is spoken of, we designate that psalm a ***royal complaint*** (see Pss 89; 144).

A few complaint psalms include an imprecation as part of the petition. Hence, such texts are sometimes called ***imprecatory psalms.*** The horrible things that the imprecations request from God trouble some readers (e.g., "For the curses and lies they utter, consume them in wrath, consume them until they are no more," Psa 59:12b–13). We suggest, however, that students should understand their extreme language as hyperbole-emotional exaggerations by which the psalmist hopes to persuade Yahweh to act. In other words, the psalmist wants God to know how strongly he feels about the matter.

A ***dirge*** is a funeral lamentation spoken as part of ancient mourning rites. Its main components are expressions of moaning or wailing, a description of some disaster, and a call for others to weep and wail.[113] Obviously, the emotional mood is one of utter despair over an irreversible loss. Though dirges are absent from the

[111]What follows draws heavily on E. S. Gerstenberger, "Psalms," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J. H. Hayes (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1977), 198-205; and id., *Psalms 1* FOTL 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 11-14, 108. More briefly, see his "The Lyrical Literature" in Knight and Tucker, eds., *Hebrew Bib&*, 429. The classic form critical treatment of the psalms, unfortunately never translated into English, remains H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933; repr. 1984).

[112]Other common elements include a confession of sin or assertion of innocence (e.g., Pss 7:3–5; 51:3–5) and an imprecation against enemies (e.g., Pss 5:11; 109:6–20). For a list of these psalms, see Gerstenberger, Psalms *1*, 14.

[113]Gerstenberger, *Psalms 1*, 10–11. For the best examples, see our comments about genres embedded in OT narratives.

Hebrew Psalter, scholars sense their influence on several psalms (Pss 35:13–14; 44; 74). Parts of the book of Lamentations, however, have dirges that lament, not the loss of a person, but the destruction of a city and its population (see chaps. 1–2, 4). Indeed, the book may reflect an ancient custom of mourning the loss of a city.[114]

Recognition of the Bible's dirges is beneficial in several ways. First, it enables the interpreter to read the text with a specific scenario in mind: wailing mourners bitterly rending their clothes or donning sackcloth. Second, it underscores the hopelessness of the situation which the text describes. Death remains a tragedy with no conceivable human remedy. The reader, thus, must sense the emotional despair in Lamentations, even though the author's appeal to God for rescue does offer hope (cf. 1 Thes 4:13). Third, it legitimizes the expression of human grief among Christians today. By honoring grief practices of old, the Bible stamps them as "normal" for God's people who suffer similar losses today.

songs

Songs--especially those sung in worship at the temple-played a prominent role in the life of God's people. Apparently, even Israel's neighbors highly valued her musical expertise, for the Assyrian king Sennacherib proudly listed male and female musicians among the items of tribute given to him by king Hezekiah of Jerusalem (eighth century B.C.)[115]

The ***thanksgiving song*** (Heb. *tôdâ*) is closely associated with the complaint. Through such songs, the individual or community voiced joyful gratitude to God for deliverance from previous misery. They, as it were, made good on their previous promises of thanks.[116] Significantly, speakers directly address their remarks both to Yahweh and to others participating in the ceremony.

Psalm 30 illustrates the two elements at the heart of this song: the praise of Yahweh for his help (w. 1, 12b) and the invitation for others to join in thanking and praising Yahweh (w. 4-5). A third key element is an account of salvation that reports what Yahweh has done to merit praise (w. 2-3, 6–12a).[117] As with complaints, when the king either speaks or is spoken of, we designate such a text as a ***royal thanksgiving song*** (see Pss 18; 2 1).

[114]See S. N. Kramer, *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur,* Assyriological Studies 12 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1940); *ANET,* 455-63. For a discussion of the relationship between Sumerian antecedents and Lamentations, see Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature* in *Its Cultural* Context, 160-63.

[115]See the Prism of Sennacherib, *ANET, 287-88.* Further, Psa 137:3 ("Sing us one of the songs of Zion!") may imply that the Babylonians found Israelite music appealing, just as many people find delight in modern Hebrew music.

[116]The key study of this genre is F. Criisemann, *Studien zur Formgeschichte von Hymnus und Danklied in Israel,* WMANT 32 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1969). But see Gerstenberger's critique *(Psalms 1,*16) of his denial that the psalter has any communal thanksgivings.

[117]According to Gerstenberger *(Psalms 1,* 15) another crucial element is the offertory formula "I give you thanks," which he takes to mean "I am handing over to you my thank offering" (Psa118:21; 138:1–2; cf. Isa 12:1).

The *hymn* (or song of praise) closely resembles the thanksgiving song and comprises a major genre in the Psalter. Originally part of a large, colorful Israelite festivity, a hymn is a song that praises Yahweh.[118] (For hymns in prophets and Job, see below.) Psalm 96 exemplifies the two main structural components of a hymn: the summons to praise, addressed to other worshipers and probably sung by a song leader or choir (w. l-3; cf. w. 7-13); and the actual praise of Yahweh (vv. 4-6).[119] In some cases, an individual offers praise for some personal experience of Yahweh's greatness, so we call that a ***personal hymn (see*** Pss ***8;*** 77; 103-104; 139; et al.).

Several other hymns were limited to ceremonies that either involved *the* king or celebrated the uniqueness of Jerusalem. Indeed, for that very reason, many scholars have called them "royal psalms" (occasionally, "messianic psalms"). For example, Pss 2 and 110 (and possibly 72) are ***coronation hymnssung*** or read during *ceremonies* at the accession of a new king to power (see 2 Kgs 11:4–12). A *Zion* ***hymn*** is one that praises Mount Zion as the residence of Yahweh, the main site of Israelite worship, and Jerusalem as a royal city (see Pss 46; 48; 76; 84; 122; 132). Presumably, on various festive occasions Israel commemorated such divinely sanctioned truths about Jerusalem. Also at home in such liturgical festivities was the ***Yahweh-kingship hymn*** that extols his supreme rulership as well as his association with the Davidic dynasty (Pss 47; 93; 96–99).[120]

Finally, the OT contains a few love ***songs.*** For example, Psa 45 is a royal ***wedding*** *song* that was probably sung at royal marriage ceremonies.[121] Verse 2 eulogizes the king's beauty (cf. 1 Sam 9:2; 16:12) while w. 10–12 address the bride. Recognition of this genre enables the reader to understand references to the ceremony's participants and proceedings (w. 9, 14, 15). The reader can imagine a splendid scene-one not unlike modern royal weddings-repeated over the centuries when monarchs ruled Israel. More important, it helps the reader learn something of the behavior and policy God expected of those rulers.

The Song of Songs offers the Bible's best-known love ***songs.***[122] Though its origin is a matter of dispute, the book probably is a collection of love poetry some of which may have been used at weddings (see 3:6–11).[123] Recognizing this aspect of the literary style enhances proper interpretation. It allows the book to be read as an anthology united around common themes, not as a narrative with plot and

[118]What follows depends heavily on Gerstenberger, *Psalms 1,* 1619. According to the book of Chronicles, families of temple singers, not the congregation, sang such hymns (1 Chr 15:16–22; 16:5–7; 2 Chr 5:12); cf. Gerstenberger, "The Lyrical Literature," 430.

[119]For other examples of hymns, see Pss 8; 19; 65; 66; 67; 68; 95; 96; 100; 104; 105; et al.

[120]Gerstenberger, "The Lyrical Literature," 430; id., "Psalms" 216-18; cf. Ryken, *How to Read, 117,* who uses the term "Worship psalms" for "Zion songs."

[121]Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 1, 186-90 with additional bibliography and discussion of alternate views.

[122]**Song of Songs renders the book's actual Hebrew title (lit., "the best song"). We prefer this title to the more common "Song of Solomon" found in most older English Bibles.

[123]For discussion and bibliography, see R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature,* FOTL 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 98–104. For the classic study of the book's subgenres, see F. Horst, "Die Formen des althebräischen Liebesliedes," in *Gottes Recht,* TBü 12 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1961), 176–87.

development. It also allows the interpreter to take the book's eroticism with full seriousness-as glorification of human sexual love within the context of marriage.[124]

Liturgies

Israel worshiped together as a community in the temple in Jerusalem. ***Liturgy*** psalms undoubtedly were used on such occasions. A liturgy is a text used in worship in which two or more speakers participate in response to each other.[125] The most common speakers include priests as worship leaders and the whole congregation speaking as **"we"** or **"us."** Less frequently, individual lay persons speak as "I" and prophets give messages fi-om Yahweh. For instance, observe the different participants evident in the following excerpt from Psa 118, a "thanksgiving liturgy" that celebrates a great national victory:[126]

Call to praise (*priests*)	**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let Israel say:**
Response (*congregation*)	**"His love endures forever. ..."**
Call (*priests*)	**Let the house of Aaron say:**
Response (*congrega tion*)	**"His love endures forever. ..."**
Testimony (kind)	**In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free. ... All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the LORD I cut them off. ...**
Petition/Thanks (*congregation*)	**0 LORD, save us; 0 LORD, grant us success. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. ...**
Thanksgiving (*king*)	**You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.**
Call to praise (*priests*)	**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. (Psa 118:1–3, 5, 10, 25–26, 28-29; cf. Pss 66; 75; 136)**

[124]Similar **love songs abound in the ancient** Near East, primarily in Egypt. For a survey, see Murphy, ***Wisdom Literature, 101-103;*** for a detailed study, see J. B. White, ***A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry,*** SBLDS 38 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978).

[125]Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1,*** 252, notes that the liturgies evident in the OT prophetic and 'poetic books represent only parts, extracts, or summaries of liturgies rather than whole pieces.

[126]Verses 19-21 imply that Israel recited this liturgy during a procession that ended at the gate of the temple. If so, the phrase "from the house of the LORD we bless you" (v. 26) and the reference to the "horns of the altar" (v. 27) suggest that the procession was at that point inside the temple grounds.

Psalms 15 and 24 reflect an ancient "entrance liturgy," **a ceremony apparently performed at the temple gate at which time worshipers affirmed their readiness to be admitted into the sanctuary.[127] The liturgy follows a question-and-answer format. The worshipers ask a series of questions that the priest answers from inside the gate with a *torah* instruction. Psalm 24:3–6 offers an excellent example:**

Question (worshipers)	**Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? *Who* may stand in his holy place?**
***Torah* Response (*priest*)**	**He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. ... Such is the generation of those who seek him, Who seek your face, 0 God of Jacob. (cf. Psa 15; Isa 33:14–16; Mic 6:6–8)**

Psalm 95 illustrates a subgenre, the "prophetic liturgy," which combines congregational processions and praise with a word from a prophet. In w. 1–7a, (probably) a priest calls the congregation to proceed into the temple to give Yahweh praise. In w. 7b–11, however, Yahweh personally addresses a stern warning to the worshipers, presumably through a prophet who served on the temple staff.

Call to praise (*priest*)	**Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.**
Yahweh's warning (*prophet*)	**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, ... where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. ... So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." (Psa 95:1–2, 7b–8, 11; cf. Psa 12 with an oracle of salvation in w. 5-6; and the sermon in Psa 50:7–23)**

Wisdom Psalms

Long ago scholars recognized that certain psalms seemed to belong not to Israel's public worship life but to the private educational sphere of her wisdom teachers (see Jer 18:18).[128] Their language, style, and themes more closely resemble the

[127]K. Koch, "Tempeleinlass Liturgien und Dekaloge," in R. Rendtorff and K. Koch, eds., ***Studien zur Theologie der alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen*** (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1961), 45-60; S. Mowinckel, ***Le décalogue*** (Paris: Alcan, 1927). For additional literature, see Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1, 89.***

[128]Gerstenberger, ***Psalms 1,*** 19-21; id., "Psalms," 219-221; id., "The Lyrical Literature," 430. Concerning the "wisdom school" and its literature, see G. von Rad, ***Wisdom in Israel*** (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1972); J. L. Crenshaw, ***Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*** (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes than the Psalter's woeful complaints and joyous thanksgivings. More meditative in mood and didactic in intention, they focus on ethical issues such as the justice of human suffering and God's apparent injustice in tolerating it. Theologically, their interest lies more in God as creator and cosmic ruler than as Israel's redeemer and lord.

Hence, we call such psalms ***wisdom psalms.*** Uncertainty over what literary elements constitute such a genre, however, has produced scholarly disagreement as to which psalms fit it. The strongest case can be made for Pss 1, 19, 33, 39, 49, 127.[129] Psalm 1, for example, shows the common wisdom theme of the contrasting fates of the wicked and the righteous. The comparison of the righteous to a tree planted by flowing streams also has a parallel in Egyptian wisdom literature, which suggests that it is a common wisdom motif. When the psalmist beholds God's glory in the heavens (Psa 19), he reflects wisdom's love of creation and its empirical approach to discovering truth. By including a lengthy section of instruction (w. 12–19), Psa 33 betrays the priority of wisdom, which is to teach a God-pleasing lifestyle.[130]

Principles of Interpretation-Poetry

From this survey of poetic genres we can denote the following interpretive principles:

1. Poems originated as complete units, so the student should interpret them in their entirety rather than as isolated verses.

2. For purposes of interpretation, each psalm serves as its own literary context because the psalm and the psalms that surround it undoubtedly originated independent of each other rather than as a single piece of literature.[131] On the other hand, we may use psalms of the same genre to interpret each other since they share a common literary form, setting, and purpose. But in so doing we must treat them as representatives of a common literary type with a shared background, not as literature composed by the same person.

3. The occasion on which ancient Israel used a psalm constitutes its historical context. For example, a liturgy, wedding song, or dirge must be interpreted as if it was used at a worship, wedding, or funeral service, respectively. If a poem implies

[129]In an influential study, Murphy classified Pss 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, and 128 as wisdoni psalms, but he sensed "wisdom influence* in Psa 25:8–10, 12-14; 31:24–25; 39:5–7; 40:5–6; 62:9–11; 92:7–9; 94:8-15; cf. R. Murphy, "A Consideration of the Classification of 'Wisdom Psalms'," in Congress *Volume:* Bonn, *1962,* VTSup 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 156–67 (reprinted in J. L. Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* [New York: KTAV, 1976], 456–67). Our list derives from the critique of J. L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," in Hayes, ed., Old *Testament Form Criticism,* 250-52, who sees wisdom influence in Pss 32:8–9; 94:8–11; 127; and possibly 104:13–18.

[130]In addition, Psa 127 sounds like Ecclesiastes when it stresses the vanity of human efforts (so Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 252).

[131]This does not mean, of course, that the present canonical book of Psalms has a haphazard, unstructured organization. On the contrary, it reflects purposeful editorial activity; cf. G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter,* SBLDS 76 (Missoula, MT: Scholars 1985).

the presence of several speakers (pronouns "I," "we," "you," etc.), our interpretation must incorporate that fact together with knowledge of its underlying setting. In interpreting wisdom psalms, the reader must determine from each case whether its content reflects original use in public or private prayer, liturgical instruction in worship, or private instruction by wisdom teachers.[132]

4. The unique features of each literary type determine how we should interpret it. For example, we must interpret corporately any psalms spoken by the community rather than individuals (communal complaints, liturgies, songs, etc.). They voice the petitions and praise of Israel as a nation, not those of an individual Israelite. Similarly, we should interpret the hyperbole of love songs ("there is no flaw in you," Song 4:7) as language exaggerated for effect rather than literal application.

5. The student must take into account the structure of a poetic genre and the development of its thought. The student will need to determine its major sections, the main point each makes, and the contribution of each to the message of the whole. (For an example, see our earlier discussion of the nature of poetry).

6. Application must conform to the situation behind each genre. In other words, apply corporate texts to the Christian community and individual texts to the Christian individual. Individual complaint psalms speak to situations of individual suffering. Royal psalms relate best to the modern counterparts of Israel's kings: the leaders of the Christian community. At least initially, the student should resist the temptation to extract devotional content in violation of the text's original context.

7. Contemporary use should coincide with the poem's original purpose, occasion, and speakers. So, for example, the student should reserve wedding songs for weddings and complaints for times of extreme hardship. Similarly, communal poems (communal thanksgiving songs, liturgies, etc.) are best used in corporate worship. (Of course it is permissible to appropriate principles and lessons from them that may apply to individuals, say in private worship, while recognizing the distinction.) We also advise that texts with several speakers be read along that line. Again, the creative use of the processions and rituals implied by some texts might enrich a worship service.

8. Christians believe that Christ is the new David who fulfills the latter's kingship. Thus, we may apply the royal psalms typologically to the kingly role that the NT gives to Jesus as Lord. The OT kings, thus, serve as types that anticipate the reign of their greatest Descendant. Secondarily, and more tentatively, we might also apply appropriate principles of leadership from the royal psalms to church leaders today while recognizing, we insist, the crucial inherent differences between monarchs and church leaders.

[132]This caveat concerning wisdom psalms follows Gerstenberger ("Psalms," 221; *Psalms 1,* 20-21) who, observing that some are prayers, rightly questions whether one should relegate them exclusively to the private, educational sphere of wisdom teachers. He argues that priests may have penned some wisdom psalms as liturgical compositions as a kind of pastoral counseling for public use. Cf. Crenshaw ("Wisdom," 252) who senses a close connection between wisdom psalms and prayer, though not a literary genre of wisdom prayer.

Prophecy

When Israel grievously strayed into idolatry, God sent prophets to announce his future plans for his people. Contrary to common opinion, the prophets' primary task was to proclaim God's word, not to preach repentance.[133] The books of the OT prophets record the words and deeds of those ancient preachers. They also reflect their rhetorical and literary creativity. The prophets mustered a surprising variety of genres to deliver their divine message.

Basic Types of Prophecy

Prophecy of Disaster

The most common genre among the prophets is the ***prophecy of disaster.***[134] In this form, a prophet announces imminent or future disaster either to an individual or to an entire nation. Typically, its structure includes an indication of the situation, a messenger formula ("Thus says the LORD"), and a prediction of disaster. The "indication of the situation" states the problem(s) that occasion the message, the prediction details the disaster to come, and the messenger formula authenticates the word as coming from God.[135] A "therefore" (Heb. *lākēn*) commonly introduces the prediction section.

Often prophecies of disaster have other elements: at the beginning they include a prophetic commission ("Go and say," etc.) and a call to hear ("Hear this word!" etc.); they also give reasons for the disaster introduced by "because of this" (Heb. 'al-' *ʿăšer*) or "for" (Heb. *kî*). A prophecy given by Elijah to King Ahaziah offers a simple illustration of this genre:

Prophetic commission	**Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them,**
Indication of the situation	**"Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?"**

[133] G. M. Tucker, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," in Knight and Tucker, eds., *Hebrew Bible,* 339.

[134] The classic study is C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), who called it the "prophetic judgment speech." Since that term sounds too much like a legal term, we follow the more neutral term suggested by Koch, The *Growth of the Biblical Tradition,* 191–94, 205-206. For a critique of Westermann, see W. E. March, "Prophecy," in Hayes, ed., *Old Testament Form Criticism,* 153-54.

[135] The messenger formula was the standard phrase that identified the source of a message given by a messenger on behalf of someone (Gen 32:4; Exod 5:10; Judg 11:15; 1 Kgs 2:30; et al.>. It functioned much like a signature or official stamp does today. Given that background, Westermann *(Basic Forms,* 98–128) believed that the words of the prophets were essentially "messenger speech." Since the formula introduces content other than messages, however, such an easy identification seems doubtful; so R. Rendtorff, "Botenformel und Botenspruch," *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament,* TBü *57* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 247-53.

Messenger formula	Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says:
Prediction	**"You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!" (2 Kgs 1:3–4; cf. Jer 28:12–14, 15–16; Mic 1:2–7)**

In this example, the indication of the situation subtly suggests the reason for the disaster. By consulting Baal-Zebub instead of Yahweh, Ahaziah implied that Israel had no god or at least that Yahweh was unable to heal his injury. The prediction announces that Ahaziah would pay for that insult with his life. Many prophecies of disaster, however, are structurally more complex than this simple example. Most lack the prophetic commission, while many have other elements: descriptions, commands to invading armies to attack, calls for their victims to mourn, etc. Also, most disaster prophecies are longer, and the order of their component parts may vary considerably.

Nevertheless, by finding the form's essential elements, the careful student will easily recognize the form and, at the same time, will clearly see the additional elements. The interpreter must seek to understand the disaster announced and the reason(s) for it. Notice, for example, the similarities and variations in the following example:

Messenger formula	**This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says:**
Indication of the situation	**"In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.**
Prediction	**You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.' Therefore you will flee! You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.' Therefore your pursuers will be swift! A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill." (Isa 30:15–17)**

Unlike the earlier example, here the indication of the situation comes between the messenger formula and the prediction. Also, compare the twofold repetition of the "therefore" to its single use in the first example. Again, the key is to find the prediction and the indications of the situation, and to observe other significant elements.

Prophecy of Salvation

Prophets also announced restoration for individuals and nations. So the prophecy of disaster has a positive counterpart-to announce hope for the future. In structure, the ***prophecy of*** *salvation* **resembles the disaster prophecy, but its content is** as positive as the latter's is negative. Jeremiah 28 provides a simple example of this

form given by the prophet Hananiah. (Though he proved to be a false prophet, he followed the typical ancient form.)

Messenger formula	This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:
Prediction	
Basic statement	"I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.
Amplification	Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the LORD's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon," declares the LORD,
Emphatic restatement	"for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." (Jer 28:2–4; cf. Isa 2:1-5; Amos 9:11–15 etc.)

As indicated, the structure exactly parallels that of the prophecy of disaster. Similarly, the salvation prophecy may include additional elements, may continue for great length, and may show a variable order of components. As was true of the negative counterpart, the basic goal is to identify the future hope announced.

Woe Speech

The prophets announced doom through another common genre: the ***woe speech.***[136] Its distinguishing feature is the opening interjection "Woe to those who/you who ... " followed by participles describing those addressed. The description details the evil deeds that make them worthy of woe. The woe speech concludes with a prediction of divine punishment, usually without the "therefore, thus says the LORD" introductory formula.

The form's opening interjection and description have raised the question about where it originated in Israelite society. Did the prophets invent it or borrow some pre-existing form? Probably, the woe speech represents the prophets' adaptation of the ancient funeral lament.[137] But these speeches are more than just an ordinary lament for the dead. Rather, they resemble the lament for a murder victim in which the lament condemns the killers for the outrage. If so, one must hear the woe speeches as expressions of prophetic outrage at the sinful behavior they condemn.

[136]See Amos 5:18–20; 6:1-7; Isa 5:8–10, 11-14, 18-19, 20, 21, 22-25; 10:1-3; 28:1–4; 29:1–4, 15; 30:1–5; 31:1–5. For others, see the survey in R. J. Clifford, "The Use of HÔY in the Prophets," *CBQ* 28 (1966): 458–64. For the form, see Westermann, *Basic Forms,* 190-94.

"For the consensus, see Clifford, "The Use of HÔY in the Prophets," 458-64; G. Wanke, "*'ôy* and *hôy,*" *ZAW* 78 (1966): 215-18; W. Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle,* BZAW 125 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972); G. M. Tucker, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," 340; *contra* Westermann, *Basic Forms, 194-99 (woes* derived from practices of curses>; and E. Gerstenberger, "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets," *JBL* 81 (1962): 24963, who argued that the woe was the negative counterpart of the blessing saying ("Happy is the person who ").

In the following example of the woe speech, notice the opening interjection, the description of the doomed addressees and their crimes, and the disaster predicted:[138]

Declaration of woe	Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds!
Explanation: offenses	
Basic statement	At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it.
Amplification	They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.
Messenger formula	Therefore, the LORD says:
Prediction	"I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day men will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: 'We are utterly ruined; my people's possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.' Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot." (Mic 2:1-5)

Prophetic Dirge

Along similar lines, the prophets occasionally recited a ***dirge*** or funeral lament over Israel (for this form, see above under poetry). They addressed the nation as if she were a corpse ready for burial. In other words, they viewed her awful future as a *fait* ***accompli. Amos*** provides a sample of these potent passages:

Call to hear	Hear this word, 0 house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you:
The Dirge	Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land, with no one to lift her up.
Messenger formula	This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
Prediction	"The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel will have only a hundred left; the town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left." (Amos 5:1-3; cf. Isa 14:3–21; Ezek 19:1–14; 26:17–18; 27:32)

[138]Observe, also, that in this case the penalty aptly fits the crime. The criminals who schemed to seize property will lose all access to property because Yahweh will outfox them.

Amos sees Israel as a tragic figure, a virgin who dies unmarried and alone. The prediction says that forces defending Israel will suffer ninety percent casualties. Through the dirge Amos speaks as if this had already happened. What a powerful way to portray the certainty and horror of Israel's imminent national demise!

Prophetic Hymn

The prophets also used genres drawn from Israel's worship practices. Examples of the ***hymn*** appear occasionally in the prophetic books (for hymns, see above under poetry; for hymns in Job, see below). The following short example illustrates how Amos includes brief hymnic pieces that extol Yahweh:

> **He is the one who makes the mountains**
> **and creates the wind**
> **and makes his thoughts known to people.**
> **He changes the dawn into darkness**
> **and walks over the mountains of the earth.**
> **His name is the LORD God All-Powerful. (Amos 4:13,** NCV; **cf. 5:8–9)**

In the previous section (w. **6–12),** Amos announced that Israel should "get ready to meet your God" in judgment (v. 12) since she had turned a **deaf ear** to Yahweh's earlier efforts to **confront** her. The hymnic lines quoted above give the announcement a climactic rhetorical end by painting a vivid picture of Yahweh's majesty.

On the other hand, Isaiah used longer hymn pieces to illustrate the song of praise Israel would sing when Yahweh finally brought her exiled citizens home:

Introduction	**In that day you will say:**
The hymn	**"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;** **make known among the nations what he has done,** **and proclaim that his name is exalted.** **Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things;** **let this be known to all the world.** **Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,** **for great is the Holy One of** Israel **among you." (Isa 12:4–6; cf. w. 1-3; 25:1–8, 9–12; 26:1–19; 42:10–13; 49:13)**

Prophetic Liturgy

The prophets also used various kinds of ***liturgies*** as part of their message (for liturgy, see poetry above). As noted previously, a liturgy is a text used in worship in which two or more speakers participate in response to each other. Isaiah **63:7–64:** 12, for example, contains a lengthy, sad liturgy that asks Yahweh finally to bring his angry punishment of exiled Israel to an end. It involves two speakers: the prophet reminiscing about Yahweh's great past **deeds (63:7–14) and a communal complaint pleading for God's mercy** (63:15–64:12).

Jeremiah 14 **offers** a second example of a communal complaint set in a time of severe national drought. Given the background of communal complaints, the text takes an unexpected turn. Normally, when Israel prayed **for** help during similar **national disasters, she expected** Yahweh to answer **positively—usually** through a **prophet-with a prophecy of salvation. In the following excerpts, observe Israel's complaint and how Yahweh answers it:**

Introduction	**This is the word of the LORD to Jeremiah concerning the** drought:
Description	**Judah mourns, her cities languish;** **they wail for the land, and a cry goes up from Jerusalem.** **The nobles send their servants for water;** **they go to the cisterns but find no water. ...**
Complaint	**Although our sins testify against us, 0 LORD,** **do something for the sake of your name. . . .** **You are among us, 0 LORD, and we bear your name;** **do not forsake us!**
Messenger formula	**This is what the LORD says about this people:**
Message	**"They greatly love to wander;** **they do not restrain their feet.** **So the LORD does not accept them;** **he will now remember their wickedness** **and punish them for their sins." (Jer 14:1–3, 7, 9, 10, 19–22; cf. Joel 1-2)**

There are two things to highlight here. First, notice Yahweh's answer: he flatly denied Israel's petition for relief. Israel expected a prophecy of salvation but received one of disaster **instead.** Second, unlike Isa 63-64, here the liturgy and divine response serve as a prophecy of disaster. They function as an announcement ("the word of the **LORD")** about the drought-it will continue as Israel's punishment. This example reinforces a point we made earlier about interpreting a genre: one must interpret both what it says 'by itself as well as how it functions in the context. Here the liturgy and response say that Israel prayed and Yahweh answered. Introduced by "this is the word of the **LORD,"** it ***functions*** as a prophecy of disaster.

The **book** of Habakkuk offers another variety of liturgy, a "dialogue of complaint" (for complaints, see poetry above). By way of background, scholars believe that normally God answered individual complaints with a prophecy of salvation promising relief **from** the distress. That same complaint-answer structure underlies the opening section of Habakkuk **(1:2–2:4)** with two significant differences.[139]

[139]Though the text's interpretation is problematic, we believe that this section ends at 2:4 rather than 2:5; so K. Elliger, *Das Buch der Zwölf Kleinen Propheten,* ATD, 6th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 38, 43; alternatively, cf. R. L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi,* WBC *32* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 97, 107-108; 0. P. Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 173–85 (though without supporting argument). On the other hand, the woes of 2:5-20 undoubtedly derive from the vision mentioned in 2:2.

Psalmic complaints have a single complaint without any recorded answer from Yahweh, but Habakkuk has two complaints (1:2–4; 1:12–2: 1) and an answer reported for each (15-l 1; 2:2–4). For that reason we call this **subgenre** a dialogue of complaint. Jeremiah also lifted complaints to God, in his case, in response to persecution for his preaching. The "confessions of Jeremiah" record his intensely personal pleas for protection from enemies and vindication of his prophetic ministry. Like Habakkuk, he received direct divine answers to his complaints (Jer 11: 18-23; 12:1–6; 15:10–11, 15–21).[140]

Prophetic Disputation

Occasionally, the prophets employed a rhetorical form called the ***disputation*** (for its importance in Job, see below). In a disputation, the speaker tries to persuade the audience to accept the validity of some **truth.**[141] Disputations comprise most of the book of Malachi, but the prophet Amos provides an apt, short illustration:

Series of Questions	**Do two walk together** **unless they have agreed to do so?** **Does a lion roar in the thicket** **when he has no prey? ...** **Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground** **where no snare has been set? ...** **When a trumpet sounds in a city,** **do not the people tremble?** **When disaster comes to a city,** **has not the LORD caused it?**
Conclusion	**Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing** **without revealing his plan** **to his servants the prophets.**
Lesson	**The lion has roared-who will not fear?** **The Sovereign LORD has spoken—** **who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:3-8; cf. 9:7)**

This example highlights several features that distinguish the disputation from the prophecy of disaster. First, here the prophet himself speaks as a fellow-Israelite, not as the direct voice of Yahweh. Second, the speaker does not announce new revelation;

[140]For other "confessions" without divine answers, see Jer 17:lP18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13; cf. the lament in 20:14–20 and its parallel genre in Job 3. For recent discussion of the "confessions," see N. Ittmann, Die *Konfessionen Jeremias: Ihre Bedeutung für die Verkündigung des Propheten,* WMANT 54 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981); K. M. O'Connor, *The* Confessions *of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters l-25,* SBLDS 94 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

[141]Cf. the groundwork laid by J. Begrich, *Studien zu Deuterojesaja,* TBü *20* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1969), 48-53; C. Westermann, "Sprache und Struktur der Prophetie Deuterojesajas," in *Forschung am Alten Testament,* TBü *24* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1964), 124-34; and the thorough study by A. Graffy, *A Prophet Confronts his People,* AnBib 104 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984).

he simply argues for a point, in this case, that nothing happens without a cause. Third, disputations commonly use rhetorical questions to involve the audience and conclude with a lesson (i.e., "I prophesy because I've heard God's voice of judgment").[142]

Prophetic Lawsuit

Some prophetic speeches draw on ancient Israel's legal practices. In the ***lawsuit speech*** (Heb. ***rîb***), for example, a prophet speaks as if Israel were on trial accused of a **crime.**[143] Hence, one finds references to trial procedures-calls to plead a case, appeals to witnesses, the hearing of testimony, etc.-and legal terms like "case," "accusation," and "indictment." Yahweh seems to play the dual role of both prosecutor and judge. Often, such speeches charge Israel with breach of covenant, e.g., with violating the agreement she entered with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai (Exod 24). For that reason, some scholars have called this form the "covenant lawsuit **speech."**[144] Consider this example from the prophet Micah:

Call to hear	**Listen to what the LORD says:**
Summons to trial	**"Stand up, plead your case before the mountains;** **let the hills hear what you have to say.** **Hear, 0 mountains, the LORD's accusation;** **listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.**
Reason	**For the LORD has a case against his people;** **he is lodging a charge against Israel."**
Yahweh's testimony	
Question	**"My people, what have I done to you?** **How have I burdened you? Answer me.**
Testimony proper	**I brought you up out of Egypt** **and redeemed you from the land of slavery.** **I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.** **My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled** **and what Balaam son of Beor answered.** **Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,** **that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."** **(Mic 6:1–5; cf. Isa 1:2-3; 3:13–15; Hos 4:1-3; Jer 2:4–13; Psa 50)**

[142]For other disputations, see Isa 10:8–11; 28:23–28; Jer 2:23–28; 3:1–5; 8:1, 8-9; Mic 2:6–11; and most of the book of Malachi. For an illuminating exposition of the disputation in Isa 28, see J. W. Whedbee, *Isaiah* and *Wisdom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 51-68. For the disputation in Malachi, see E. Pfeiffer, "Die Disputationsworte im Buche Maleachi," *EvT* 19 (1959): 546-68.

[143]K. Nielsen, Yahweh as *Prosecutor and Judge: An Investigation of the Prophetic Lawsuit (Rîb-Pattern),* JSOTSup 9 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1979). For the thesis that this form influenced the Gospel of John's presentation of Jesus' life, see A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976).

[144]Scholars have debated whether the form originated in a covenantal worship context or in the ordinary law court, While the issue remains unsettled, a recent consensus seems to favor the latter (so Tucker, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," 338).

Obviously, careful interpretation of the lawsuit speech requires that the legal metaphor be taken seriously. Also, the student must closely observe what roles Yahweh and the prophet play in each of the metaphorical legal processes. Finally, the student must decide what purpose each lawsuit serves: does it serve to level charges, to provide evidence to prove guilt, to announce a verdict, or to impose a sentence?

Prophecy Against Foreign Nations

Many prophetic books have lengthy collections of ***prophecies against foreign nations.***[145] Technically, these do not constitute a separate literary genre but employ genres of various kinds. Prominent among them is the "war oracle," a genre that probably goes back to Israel's ancient tradition of holy war.[146] Originally, God gave military leaders the go-ahead for their operations and assured them of victory through a war oracle. For example, in 1 Kgs 20:28 God spoke to Ahab during an Aramean attack against Israel:

> **This is what the LORD says: "Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD."**

In the prophets, however, war oracles have been pressed into service as prophecies of disaster against foreign nations. Thus, they serve a twofold purpose: to announce the enemy's defeat and to reassure Israel that God protects her security. After observing the presence of war oracle motifs in a text, the student must determine how the prophet is using them.

For example, the war oracle in Zech 9:1-8 announces doom for Israel's historic enemies. In succession, the prophet describes awful destruction for Damascus, Tyre, and the Philistine cities (w. l-7). It concludes, however, with a promise concerning Jerusalem (v. 8):

> But I will **defend my house against marauding forces.**
> **Never again will an oppressor overrun my people,**
> **for now I am keeping watch.**

The defeat of her enemies frees Jerusalem from threats, and God's promise of protection guarantees her security. Here the war oracle reassures Jerusalem of a secure future.

[145]See Amos l-2; Isa 13-21, 23, 34; **Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32, 35, 38-39; Joel** 3:1–16; **Obad; et** al. Cf. the studies by J. H. Hayes, "The Usage of Oracles against Foreign Nations in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 87 (1968): 81-92; and D. L. Christensen, *Transformations of the* ***War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy,*** HDR 3 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, **1975).**

[146]**Christensen,** ***Transform&ions of the War*** Oracle, ***18-72, 281.*** This tradition taught that Yahweh, the divine warrior, went out in battle to defeat his (and Israel's) enemies (Exod 15:3; Num 10:35; Josh 10:42; etc.). In addition, the war oracle includes the following subgenres: summons to battle, summons to flight, summons to mourn, battle curses, announcements of victory or defeat, and victory and taunt songs (cf. 15).

That, in turn, lays the groundwork for the following prophecy (vv. 9-13) about the advent of a great king. It ultimately functions, however, to support the appeal for exiled Judeans to return (v. 12). In sum, the war oracle reassures them that a God-given peace has replaced Jerusalem's violent past so they may come home without fear.

Prophetic Vision Report

Old Testament prophets were also known as "seers," probably because they sometimes saw visions (1 Sam 9:9; Amos 1:1; 7:12; Mic 3:6–7; cf. Num 23-24). Thus, some prophetic books include ***prophetic vision reports.***[147] These are autobiographical reports of things the prophet saw in a vision that conveys God's message. The following features make this genre readily recognizable: the words "see" (He b. *rā'â*) or "made to see" (Heb. *rā'â,* hiphil) and the phrase "and behold" (*wᵉhinnēh*) followed by a description of the vision.

Based on variations in content and style, we can distinguish three types of vision reports. The "oracle-vision" features a question-and-answer dialogue between Yahweh and the prophet about something the latter sees that provides the occasion for an oracle. For example, Jeremiah's glimpse of two baskets of figs-one with good figs, the other with bad ones-becomes the occasion for God to contrast the good and bad future fates, respectively, of Israelites exiled in Babylon and those surviving in Jerusalem (Jer 24; cf. l:ll-14; Amos 7:7–8; 8:1-2; Zech 5:1–4; Gen 15). The "dramatic word vision" depicts a scene in heaven that portends some future event on earth that the prophet presumably is to announce. It closely resembles the vocation reports (on which see below) of Isaiah (Isa 6) and Ezekiel (Ezek l-3). For example, the LORD showed Amos the locusts and fiery disaster he was preparing for Israel's imminent judgment (Amos 7: 1-6; cf. 1 Kgs 22: 17-22; Jer 38:21–22). In the "revelatory-mystery vision," an angelic guide dialogues with the prophet about the bizarre symbolic imagery he sees. The purpose of the conversation is to reveal the veiled secrets of God's future plans. So Zechariah conversed with an angel about his vision of a man with a measuring line and learned about plans for Jerusalem to be rebuilt (Zech 2:1–4; cf. 4:1–6; Dan 8; 10–12).[148]

Prophetic Narratives

Two narrative literary types appear in the prophets. Best known, the *vocation reports* narrate the personal experience by which God called and commissioned someone as a prophet (Isa 6; Jer 1; Ezek l-3; cf. Amos 7:14–15; Hos 1:2).[149] Struc-

[147]B. 0. Long, "Reports of Visions Among the Prophets," *JBL* 95 (1976): 353-65; id., ***1 Kings,*** 263–64; F. Horst, "Die Visionsschilderungen der alttestamentlichen Propheten," *EvT* 20 (1960):193–205.

[148]Cf. J. J. Collins, *Daniel,* FOTL 20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 9, who describes Dan 10–1 I as "angelic discourse."

[149]N. Habel "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297-323; B. 0. Long, "Prophetic Call Traditions and Reports of Visions," *ZAW* 84 (1972): 494-500; K. Baltzer, *Die Biographie der Propheten* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975); and W. Zimmerli, "Vom Prophetenwort zum Prophetenbuch," *TLZ* 104 (1979): 481–96. Recently, scholars have moved away from describing them as "call narratives"; for the discussion, see March, "Prophecy," in Hayes, ed., *Old Testament Form Criticism,* 170–72, 176.

turally, they share the following features: a confrontation with God, a commissioning, an objection by the prophet, God's reassurance, and a sign. This genre probably derived from the ancient requirement for ambassadors or messengers to present their credentials to the party to whom they had been sent (see Gen 24:35–48).

In the prophetic books, vocation reports serve a similar purpose: they authenticate the prophet's authority and message by showing that God had indeed sent him. The OT shows two types of vocation reports. Some report a vision of God's court like other vision reports (Isa 6; Ezek 1-3; 1 Kgs 22:19–23). The other type details how someone heard the coming of the word (Jer 1:4–10; Exod 34; Judg 6:11–14).[150]

The second narrative genre in prophetic books is divine ***instruction about symbolic actions*** that the prophet is to perform.[151] Typically, such narratives include: a command to perform an action, a report of the performance, and its interpretation (2 Kgs 13:14–19; Hos 1:2–9).[152] Jeremiah 19 provides an excellent example. The LORD commissioned Jeremiah to take a pottery jug, smash it before Jerusalem's leaders in the Hinnom Valley, and proclaim a message. That action symbolized the crushing disaster that God would soon send against that city. The sight of such symbolic gestures would undoubtedly unsettle its witnesses because they assumed that, like the prophet's words, the actions set Yahweh's future plans in motion (cf. 2 Kgs 13:14–19).[153]

General Principles for Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy

Most Bible readers would agree with the great reformer Martin Luther who said of the prophets:

> They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they *are getting* at.[154]

Probably no part of Scripture mystifies and frustrates readers more than the prophets. Indeed, OT prophecy presents a veritable snake pit of interpretive problems. Many prophetic messages strike the reader as hopelessly obscure. The prophetic books seem to teem with spooky creatures flying or crawling all over the earth,

[150]For a discussion of the genre "vision report," see Tucker, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," 341-42; March, "Prophecy," 170.

[151]See Hos 1, 3; Isa 7:3; 8:1–4; 20:1–6; Jer 13:1–11; 16:1–4, 5-7, 8-9; 32:1–15. Cf. G. Fohrer, "Die Gattung der Berichte über symbolische Handlungen der Propheten," *ZAW* 64 (1952): 101-20; id., *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten*, ATANT 25 (Ziirich: Zwingli, 1953).

[152]There is also a simpler form that has only a command and the interpretation (Isa 8:1–4; Jer 16:2–4) or report and interpretation (1 Kgs 11:29–31; Jer 28:10–11). For even simpler examples, see Isa 7:3; 20:1–6; 1 Kgs 19:19–21.

[153]Tucker, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," 342. The symbolic action of Jesus in cursing the figless tree parallels this example (Mk 11:12–14, 20-21, par.).

[154]Quoted by G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 33, n. 1.

devouring everything in their path. Even when readers understand all the words, a prophetic passage may leave them asking, "But what do they mean?"

At the same time, more ingenious readers claim to find predictions of current events (especially those in the Middle East) hidden behind every obscure word and symbol. With the Bible in one hand and a daily newspaper in the other, they skillfully cross reference the two. Confidently they proclaim some modern leaders to be the goat's fourth horn of Daniel (Dan 8) or Ezekiel's Gog (Ezek 38–39).[155] Such identifications, of course, do enjoy one distinct advantage: the more obscure the prophet, the less ground others have to dispute the interpreter's views!

Interpretation of the prophets, however, is not as impossible or arbitrary as it may seem. A few passages may still doggedly resist our attempts at interpretation, but most can be understood at least to some degree. And however unintelligible, all can certainly give the reader spiritual benefit. Let's consider some principles that can help readers find their way through the quagmire of OT prophecy.

The Nature of Prophecy

An understanding of the nature of prophecy is the foundation for its interpretation. Basically, prophets conveyed messages from God to his people. Prophecy assumes that God has something important he wants people to understand. The ***essence*** of prophecy, thus, is the communication of God's word to humankind through human speakers or writers. In itself, that implies something important about prophecy: God intends that it communicate-not obfuscate. Further, we must remember that pious people preserved and passed on the writings of the prophets, apparently believing them relevant for later generations. So, however bewildering the prophetic writings, we cannot escape the simple truth that, in the Bible's view, they have relevant things to say-even to us.

Traditionally, one describes the ***content*** of prophecy under the terms forthtelling and foretelling. Better known, ***foretelling*** refers specifically to predictive prophecy-the prophets' predictions about the future. This is what comes to mind when most people think of biblical prophecy. They equate prophecy with predictions about the distant future, especially those about Christ and the "end times." Contrary to popular impression, however, very little of OT prophecy is predictive prophecy. According to Fee and Stuart, "Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come [after the NT period]."[156]

Instead, most of it involves ***forthtelling***—messages for a prophet's own audience about their own day or the near future. At times the prophets accused their contemporaries of terrible social and spiritual corruption. Consider Hosea's indictment of his fellow Israelites:

[155]Examples of this approach include T. LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972); and H. Lindsey, The *1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).

[156]Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*. 150.

There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgement of God in the land.
There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
They break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hos 4: lb-2)

At other times, prophets announced that awful destruction was just around the corner. The immediacy and urgency of this message must have scared Jeremiah's audience:

Raise the signal to go to Zion!
Flee for safety without delay!
For I [Yahweh] am bringing disaster from the north,
even terrible destruction. (Jer 4:6)

The fact that most prophecy spoke about the present or immediate future rather than the distant future should encourage Bible students today. No one should avoid studying prophecy out of fear of its obscurity. That the prophets spoke about life in their own day makes it easier for us to understand their message for our day. Indeed, sometimes they sound so painfully contemporary that readers may wish they did *not* understand them!

Finally, we need to be aware of several ***general characteristics*** of prophecy.[157] **This will help us interrelate OT prophecies with their fulfillments in the NT. First, the prophets have a telescopic view of the future. From Denver,** Colorado, the Rocky Mountains appear as a series of distant peaks close together. In reality, the peaks are many miles apart from each other. Similarly, the prophets saw future events as a succession of distant "peaks" (i.e., events) without an awareness of the large time gaps between them.[158] Isaiah 9:6-7 provides a good example:

"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given. . . .
He will reign on David's throne. . . .
from that time on and forever."

Christians believe this text predicts the birth and reign of David's greatest son, Jesus Christ the Messiah (actually, it probably had immediate fulfillment in Isaiah's time, too; cf. chaps. 7-8). According to the NT, the present so-called church age comes between Christ's birth and his future earthly reign. But Isaiah sees the birth and reign of this future Davidic ruler as telescoped, i.e., chronologically close rather than separated.

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[157]Here we draw on the illuminating discussion in T. N. Sterrett, *How To Understand Your Bible* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1974), 140-42.

[158]Fee and Stuart (How to ***Read the Bible,*** 164) provide a good visual illustration of this telescopic concept.

There is a corollary principle related to the prophet's telescopic vision. The prophets understood that history had two major periods-the present age and the age to come-although they did not always make a hard-and-fast distinction between the two. Most prophecies concern the present **age, even those that predict events in the distant future. But introductory phrases like "in the latter days," "in that day," or "days are coming" often identify a prophecy about the age to come (e.g.,** Isa 2:2; 11:10, 11; 24:21; Jer 23:5; 31:31; Zech 14:1; etc.).[159] The point is that the prophets viewed the age to come telescopically as a whole scene without obvious time gaps.

Hence, when we relate such OT prophecies to the NT, we must fit them in to the NT's perspective. According to the NT, the first coming of Jesus introduced the future age to come into the present age. The work of Christ and the Church represents an invasion of that future age of judgment and salvation into the present one.[160] Hence, we must interpret OT prophecies about the age to come in terms of ***the*** historical turning point that Jesus initiated.

Again, while OT prophets saw the coming age as a whole, the NT presents it as having several major phases. Opinions among Christians differ about the number and definition of such phases, but it has at least two periods: the present church age and the period after Christ's second coming.[161] Hence, when plotting the fulfillment of OT prophecies about the future, we must carefully analyze their content to see where they fit in this larger schema.

We must add a second characteristic of prophecy: it may have two fulfillments, one near the prophet's lifetime and one long past it. We know of these multiple fulfillments because the NT reapplies an already-fulfilled prophecy to a later event. For example, God promises David that his son, Solomon, will succeed him as king (2 Sam 7:12–16). In v. 14, God even promises Solomon that "I will be his father, and he will be my son." When Solomon later became king (1 Kgs 1–2), this prophecy found its fulfillment. But Heb 1:5 also applies 2 Sam 7:14 to Jesus, not just as son of David, but as son of God. Sound theology undergirds the idea of such multiple fulfillments—belief that God rules all human history and can bring about both "sons."[162]

Third, NT teaching associates all prophetic fulfillments with Christ's first and second comings. That teaching leads us ***not*** to expect fulfillments in between those two events. Thus, one should not suggest that a certain contemporary event "fulfills biblical prophecy" unless one can also demonstrate that current events also imply the imminent return of Jesus. Lacking the latter, Bible students should treat such alleged fulfillments as speculations, not biblical interpretation.

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[159]There are exceptions to this general rule, however (e.g., Jer 30:3; Amos 4:2; etc.). In the end, only the content of a text can determine which prophetic age it concerns.

[160]On this subject, see G. E. Ladd, ***The Presence of the Future*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

[161]Those whose eschatology is premillennial add a third major historical period: the thousand-year reign of Christ (or millennium) following his second coming, also part of the age to come.

[162]The same principle may help us explain Matthew's application (Mt 1:22–23) of Isaiah's prophecy about Immanuel's virgin birth (Isa 7:14). We recognize, however, the major interpretive problems those texts present, problems outside the scope of this book.

Fourth, many prophecies are conditional.[163] For example, consider the case of the judgment announced by Jonah on the Ninevites. Jonah's message seemed straightforward and unconditional: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:4). But more than forty days came and went without destruction falling on the city. Because the people repented and humbly pled for God's mercy, he compassionately spared the city (3:5–10).

In the case of Jerusalem, Jeremiah made the conditions explicit. If the city would repent, he announced, it would not suffer the awful destruction God had planned (Jer 26:1–6; cf. 7: 1-15; 36:1–7). Sadly, Jerusalem rejected the offer, and two decades later God destroyed the capital (Jer 52). Elsewhere, God explained to Jeremiah the principle that underlies all of God's prophetic dealings:

> **If at** any **time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. (Jer** 18:7–10)

Therefore, those prophecies that concern a particular individual or people receiving a particular blessing hinge on one condition, whether implicit or explicit: a right relationship between the people concerned and God.[164] Similarly, some judgments may be reversible if the individuals involved repent. Except for specific unconditional prophecies discussed below, announced prophecy does not bind God to bring about fulfillment. God sovereignly reserves the right to fulfill or not fulfill it depending upon his own purposes and his expectations of his people.

This implies that readers must interpret predictive prophecy with a certain tentativeness. We cannot be certain that God will fulfill all OT prophecies literally. That does not imply divine unpredictability, as if God arbitrarily changes his mind simply because he "feels like it." Rather, it realistically reckons with the possibility that human infidelity to God may lead him to exercise sovereign options like those in Jer 18 above.

On the other hand, we still regard the prophecies that involve the major milestones in God's plan for history as unconditional. They do not concern a particular individual or people experiencing a particular blessing, nor are they tied to a particular era in history. So regardless of Christian apostasy, we fully expect the return of Christ, God's final triumph over his enemies, and the creation of a new heavens and a new earth. These depend solely upon God's sovereign, unchangeable will for his creation. Unlike conditional prophecies, they are not the means God will use to achieve his historical ends; they represent the ends themselves. With complete confidence Christians may rightly anticipate the future advent of these great events.

[163] Cf. the helpful discussion in J. B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1984), 100-103.

[164] @Similarly, G. V. Smith, "Prophet; Prophecy," *ISBE*, rev. ed., 3: 1002. Green *(How to* Read *Prophecy,* 100-102) even believes-rightly, in our view--that the same condition applies to the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 15; 17). Contrast Sterrett *(How to Understand Your Bible,* 144) who accepts some prophecies as unconditional.

Finding the Fulfillment

Assuming we understand what a prophecy says, what can we say about its fulfillment? Fortunately, the Bible's treatment of prophecy in both testaments suggests some guidelines on the matter. Indeed, the biblical pattern indicates that prophecy finds fulfillment in many ways.[165] As we shall argue, that larger pattern provides us with useful options to apply to our interpretation of prophecy.

As we might expect, prophecies commonly find ***literal fulfillment*** **in subsequent events.** Some prophecies involve immediate predictions whose fulfillment follows a short time later. For example, Elisha predicted that, though cut off from outside supplies by a Syrian siege, Samaria would have inexpensive food by the next day (2 Kgs 7:1-2; cf. 19:20–36). Similarly, Jeremiah predicted that Jerusalem and King Zedekiah would survive a Babylonian siege if they surrendered (Jer 38:17-18). Sadly, they continued to resist Babylon, and a short time later the Babylonians destroyed the city and brutally punished the king (Jer 39:1–7).

Other prophecies find literal fulfillment within their respective biblical periods. So, an unnamed prophet prophesied that Josiah would desecrate the idolatrous altar at Bethel (1 Kgs 13:1–3). Three hundred years later King Josiah did (2 Kgs 23: 15-16). By the same token, Jesus successfully predicted his own death (Mt 16:21; 27) and the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41–44).[166] Then too, some OT prophecies reach literal fulfillment in the NT period. So the preaching of John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus just as Isaiah had said (Isa 40:3–5; Lk 3:3–6), and Jesus announced that his ministry fulfilled the messianic mission foreseen by Isaiah (Isa 61:1, 2; Lk 4:16–21).[167]

The NT also indicates that literal OT prophecies may reach fulfillment in non-literal ways. They may, for example, find **a *figurative* fulfillment.** Recall our discussion of typology above. Consider Jesus' application of Zech 13:7b ("Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered") to the flight of his disciples after his arrest (Mt 26:31). According to Zechariah's prophecy (Zech 13:7–9), God would severely judge Israel by killing both the shepherd (her leader) and his scattered sheep (the people of Israel). Two-thirds of them will die, but God will refine the remaining third and enter into a covenant with them (v. 9).

Obviously, this involves no literal fulfillment. Granted, one may rightly regard Jesus as the shepherd (cf. John 10), and one might even say that God did "judge" him. The problem is that, according to Zechariah, God judged the shepherd for his own sins, while Jesus, completely sinless, suffered God's judgment for the world's sin (cf. Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24–25). Further, when the disciples scattered, God did not kill eight

[165] Here we build on the insights of Sterrett, *How to Understand,* 139–40, 142-43. Cf. also the **more complete discussion in Green,** *How to Read Prophecy,* 83–108.

[166] We assume here, along with many evangelical scholars, that the synoptic gospels were written prior to A.D. 70 and thus record genuine predictive prophecies. For further defense see, inter alia, D. A. Carson, et al., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and D. Guthrie, New *Testament Introduction,* 4th ed. (Downers Grove/Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1990).

[167] Cf. also Mic 5:2 and Mt 2:4–6. For other prophecies fulfilled literally, see the selective list in Sterrett, *How to Understand Your Bible, 142-43.*

of them and bless the remaining four. We conclude, then, that Zech 13:7 found its fulfillment typologically in the death of Jesus and the flight of the disciples.

The NT also shows that other literal OT prophecies have what we call a ***literal/spiritual fulfillment.*** For example, Amos 9: 11-12 prophesied about the restoration of the Davidic monarchy and its rule over Edom and other nations.[168] The context gives the reader no reason to expect anything but a literal fulfillment. In Acts 15: 16-17, however, James says the fulfillment of Amos 9 is the admission of non- Jewish believers to the company of Jesus' followers. He does so by interpreting Amos' prediction of David's future political rule as representing Christ's spiritual rule over non- Jewish Christians. In sum, James sees the prophecy fulfilled in a literal/spiritual way. It is literal in that it happened in history to God's people and spiritual in that it also involves Gentiles.

Similarly, Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant with Israel and Judah, and again we expect only a literal fulfillment from the context (Jer 31:31–34). Now nothing in subsequent OT history fulfills this prophecy, so we might be tempted to expect its fulfillment in the last days. But Hebrews rightly sees the new covenant fulfilled in the Church and sealed by Jesus' atoning death (see 8:8-12; 10:15–17; cf. 1 Cor 11:25). So in this case, too, a literal OT prophecy finds a literal/spiritual fulfillment.

While some interpreters tend to agree with us, they argue that prophecies like Amos 9 and Jer 31 still have a future ***literal*** fulfillment involving the nation of Israel. Though Rom 11 admits some future place for Israel in God's plan, we do not believe the Bible supports this literal view. First, we contend that the NT assumes that such prophecies have already achieved literal fulfillment through Christ and the Church. It leaves no reason to anticipate a second, later fulfillment. Second, to expect the latter implies that God has two separate peoples, Israel and the Church, each serving a different historical purpose and each having separate dealings with God.

But in our view, the Bible teaches that God's plan was to create one people composed of Jews and Gentiles (cf. Isa 19:19–25; Eph 2). He chose the OT nation of Israel as the means to reach and eventually incorporate believers from all nations into his people. The NT clearly teaches that Christ's coming fulfilled Israel's national destiny. In addition, 1 Pet 2:9-10 assumes that the Church in this messianic era now constitutes ***the people of God*** (cf. Gal 6:16; Rom 2:28–29). According to Rom 11, God will graft future Israel, presently a discarded branch, back into his olive tree, presently the Church. In sum, we see no persuasive biblical reason to expect a future literal fulfillment of what the NT says has already occurred, though with an additional spiritual dimension.

Some OT prophecies receive ***unexpected fulfillment*** in the NT.[169] They may not only take on new meaning in time but their fulfillment may also involve a surprise-something that goes beyond the original prophecy. Jesus himself best illustrates this element of surprise. Some pre-Christian interpreters understood the suffering servant of Isa 52-53 to be the Messiah. But the interpretation of OT

[168]For the textual problems, see the NIV footnote and commentaries.

[169]Green, ***How to Read Prophecy,*** 103–105.

prophecy typical of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries did not prepare them for his crucifixion. Taking OT prophecy literally, they expected a conquering Messiah (cf. Isa 9; 11), not a suffering one. So they stumbled over the cross of Christ; meant to be a bridge, it became a barrier to their belief (1 Cor 1:23).

Similarly, in the NT the OT promise of land to Abraham takes on new meaning. For Christians the promised land is not earthly Palestine but "a better country-a heavenly one" (Heb 11: 16; cf. w. 8-l 5). Does this mean that God is unpredictable? Not at all. Enough continuity exists between the original prophecy and its unexpected fulfillment for readers to recognize their connection. Instead, such surprises suggest that God has the right to exceed the expectations of his ancient words. He does so in light of the new historical situation and in accordance with his redemptive purposes for his creation.

Stephen Travis offers a helpful human illustration of this point. He compares God to a loving parent who, knowing his children's expectations, delights in outdoing them. A little girl may expect a doll for Christmas, but the doll she receives—one that walks, talks, weeps, and wets-far exceeds her expectations. She gets what she wanted-a new doll—so continuity connects her expectations with their fulfillment. She does not feel deceived by the difference between them but happily surprised.[170] Likewise, God's fulfillment of some prophecies may exceed the expectations his people have of them.

For readers today this illustration indicates that we should resist the popular tendency to interpret prophecy as if it were a written script that God was obligated to follow. God's purposes certainly do not change, and we may expect him to adhere to much of the prophetic design. But as he has in the past, he may ad-lib some unexpected lines. Hence, as we said earlier, Bible students should interpret prophecy tentatively rather than dogmatically. Our God is a God of surprises, and he may still have some left!

At this point, some readers may ask, how can NT writers interpret apparently literal OT prophecies so nonliterally? We reply with the crucial assumption that, in our view, underlies their interpretation. Indeed, that assumption frames the way we believe readers should interpret prophecy today. Put simply, NT writers believed that Jesus Christ and the Christian Church represent the fulfillment of Israel's God-given mission in history.[171]

The NT writers regard Jesus as the new David (cf. Isa 11: l-5; Jer 23:5–6) and the Church as the new Israel. They do not deny that Israel still exists, nor do they say it has no prophetic future (e.g., Rom 10:1–4; 11). But they stand convinced that Jesus and the Church-with both Jewish and Gentile members-fulfill Israel's prophetic hopes and, hence, constitute God's one, true elect people (see Eph 1–2).[172] That explains why their term for "church" is ***ekklēsia*** ("assembly"), the same word the

[170]S. H. Travis, I ***Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 140.

[171]Here we differentiate ourselves from those Christians (e.g., some dispensationalists) who believe that Israel will literally fulfill OT prophecies. As we indicated, we believe the NT teaches that many have already been fulfilled literally, though with an unanticipated spiritual dimension.

[172]For a treatment of God's true elect people, see W. W. Klein, *The* New Chosen ***People: A Corporate View of Election*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Septuagint used to describe Israel as a spiritual community. That also explains why Paul called believers of all ethnic backgrounds the children of Abraham (Rom 4:11–12; Gal 3:6–9).[173]

Finally, some OT and NT prophecies remain unfulfilled. In our view these pertain to the second coming of Christ and the events at the end of the age. The world, for example, still awaits the idyllic state of perfect harmony that Isaiah foresaw. Nations have not yet given up warfare (Isa 2:4), and lambs still wisely avoid lying beside lions (11:6). We do not believe these have been "spiritually" fulfilled in the Church. Christians have yet to hear the sound of archangel and trumpet signaling the return of Christ (1 Thes 4:13–18) and they still anticipate the great wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19: l-l 1). It does not seem that the presence of the Church sufficiently accounts for the diversity of prophecies to Israel. Surely some are realized spiritually in the Church, but others seem more concretely and ethnically tied to literal, physical Israel. Thus history awaits the day when the people of Israel, who to this day reject Christ, will receive God's mercy and the full realization of all their ancient hopes (Rom 11). Unfulfilled prophecy offers believers great things to anticipate-to borrow a phrase from Jeremiah, "a future with hope" (Jer 29:11, NRSV; cf. Rom 15:4).

Specific Principles for Interpretation-Prophecy

In summary we suggest several basic principles for the proper interpretation of prophecy:

1. The clarity of a text determines the degree of confidence we may hold in its interpretation. The clearer the text, the greater the certainty about what it means. On the other hand, the more obscure a text, the more humbly and tentatively we must approach its interpretation.

2. The Bible itself offers the best guide to the interpretation of prophecy. It indicates which prophecies were fulfilled during the OT and NT periods and suggests patterns for interpreting OT prophecies today.

3. The student should seek the most likely time for the fulfillment of a prophecy in history. Here we must apply a knowledge of biblical history as well as of the NT's teaching about the future. The question is, given its nature, when did/will a given prophecy most likely reach fulfillment? In the OT or NT periods? In the future?

4. Unless the NT indicates otherwise, the student should relate OT prophecies about Israel and Zion to those whose fulfillment the NT specifically teaches. Again, we follow the pattern that the NT writers set out in their use of the OT. In most cases such prophecies find their fulfillment spiritually in the Church. Those that seem more physical in scope may anticipate literal fulfillment.

5. The student should strive to understand a text's major points rather than all of its symbolic details. Ask, for example, what is the purpose of a prophecy (i.e., to encourage perseverance, to warn of coming accountability, etc.)? Also, what does

[173]Limitations of space prevent further developments but see the helpful discussion in Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, 116–20.

it say about the nature of God or about Israel's sin?

6. We recommend that longer prophetic books be read in small sections (i.e., a context of verses, a whole chapter, or several chapters, etc.). God did not intend the prophets to be read through at one sitting. The goal is to understand the major point(s) that each section stresses.

7. As for application, once a section's major point(s) is understood, we suggest that the student should find modern life situations analogous to the one which a prophetic section handles. Ask the question: What does this section say about that analogous situation?

Apocalyptic Prophecy

Thus far we have presented the genres of what we might call "prophecy proper." Though formally diverse, prophecy proper shares two features in common. First, it communicates the "word" of God directly, as if God himself were speaking. The so-called messenger formula, "Thus says the LORD," introduces Yahweh's own speeches to his people (given, of course, by the human prophet). Second, it presupposes that God works within ordinary human history. So, prophecy proper announces the coming of God's judgment or salvation through the actions of human armies (e.g., the Assyrians, Babylonians, or Persians). Statistically, prophecy proper encompasses most of the OT prophetic material.

But the OT also includes a second major type of prophecy called ***apocalyptic*** (Gk. ***apokalypsis***, "revelation"; cf. Rev 1: 1).[174] Though the line between prophecy proper and apocalyptic often blurs, several general features set the latter apart. Basically, apocalyptic describes prophecies in which God "reveals" his hidden future plans, usually through dreams or visions with elaborate and at times strange symbolism or numbers. The form of apocalyptic (i.e., dreams, visions, symbols) makes its communication less direct than the spoken "word" of prophecy proper. This explains in part why it is such an interpretive challenge.

More important, apocalyptic has a unique view of God's relationship to human history. Rather than work within it, the apocalyptic God radically intervenes from outside it. Behind this lay a profound religious crisis among the Israelites. The events of human history had plunged them into such despair that they doubted whether God still controlled it. In reply, apocalyptic held out hope of God's sovereign intervention beyond history, an intervention so radical as to usher in a totally new era. Daniel 7-12 and Revelation offer the best biblical examples of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic influence is also evident in the "Little Apocalypse" (Isa 24–27), Ezek 38-39, and Zech 9-14 (cf. Mt 24; Revelation).[175]

[174]We owe this helpful distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic to Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, 31, 49–67.

[175]Technically, the term apocalyptic denotes a type of literature, a historical movement, and a view of history. For a convenient survey of genres unique to apocalyptic literature, including apocryphal apocalypses, see J. J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, FOTL 20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 2-24. For a discussion of apocalypticism as a movement, see P. D. Hanson, "Apocalyptic Literature," in Knight and Tucker, eds., *Hebrew Bible*, 46588.

Principles of Interpretation-Old Testament Apocalyptic.

The apocalyptic genre presents unique challenges to the interpreter. The following principles of interpretation will help readers meet those challenges.[176]

1. Set a modest goal: do not try to understand everything but as much as possible about what a text says. Apocalyptic probably presents some of the Bible's most difficult passages to interpret. Even Daniel himself found one such vision "beyond understanding" (Dan 8:27).

2. It is best to take the symbolism and numbers seriously but not literally. Symbolism and imagination fascinated ancient peoples more than statistical accuracy. For example, it is significant that Daniel sees four beasts rather than, say, four grapes in Dan 7. They symbolize four kingdoms who threaten to ravage the world (v. 17). But we need not make anything out of the fact that the first one is a lion, the second a bear, and so on. By the same token, the various groups of "sevens" in Dan 9:24–27 probably represent long and short periods of time rather than groups of actual seven-year periods. We recommend that readers consult a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia about biblical symbols and numbers to understand their symbolic significance. [177]

3. Read OT apocalyptic in connection with NT apocalyptic like Mt 24 (par) and Revelation. The latter will either indicate the fulfillment of the former prophecies or will supplement their predictions.[178]

4. Observe the prophet's pastoral concern for his audience. As we noted above, the roots of apocalyptic lie in a crisis of Israel's faith in God's control over history. Its primary purpose, therefore, is to encourage suffering saints. For example, Daniel repeatedly stresses that the "saints" (i.e., Israelite believers) will survive their present hardships to enjoy ruling history's final kingdom (see 7:18, 21-22, 27; 8:25; cf. 12: 14). He does so to encourage Jews suffering under foreign domination.

5. Ultimately, the student needs to move beyond the detail to determine the main points. The key question is: What is the text about as a whole? So however one makes sense of Daniel's beasts and weeks, his point is that God has planned an end to human history-and the agony of his people. Similarly, Zechariah stresses the vindication of Jerusalem and Judah before all her historical enemies (e.g., Zech 12-14).

6. Applications should derive from the text's main points. Implicitly, Daniel and Zechariah call their readers to persevere through lengthy persecution. So they also call Christians today to the same faithfulness to God in the face of social opposition if not outright oppression.

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[176]**Cf. the principles for interpreting symbolism and numbers in Green,** *How to Read Prophecy,* **74-81.**

[177]E.g., **articles like "Biblical Numbers." One may also consult commentaries on Daniel; cf. J. Goldingay, Daniel, WBC 30 (Dallas: Word, 1989); J. G. Baldwin,** *Daniel,* **TOTC (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1978).**

[178]For **help, see A. B. Mickelsen,** *Daniel and Revelation* **(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).**

Wisdom

Our earlier discussion of the wisdom psalms introduced ancient Israel's educators, the so-called wisdom teachers. Here we survey the genres of the OT "wisdom literature," the larger category that includes the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.[179] As we might expect, these extremely diverse books yield a great variety of genres. Readers must remember that the roots of wisdom thought lie in creation theology. A person acquires wisdom not by receiving divine revelation but by recording observations about what works or fails to work in daily life in the world created by God. Based on creation, wisdom provides an indirect, limited form of revelation. Its principles are tentative because they may be overruled by the mysterious freedom of God (e.g., Job) or by the teaching of other direct revelation. This suggests an important point: interpret wisdom literature as "probable truth" that, like the mysterious creation to which it corresponds, works most of the time-but not always.

Types of Wisdom Literature

Proverbs

Probably the best known form of wisdom literature is the ***proverb:*** "a concise, memorable statement of truth" learned over extended human experience.[180] Grammatically, a proverb is written in the indicative mood and thus makes a simple declaration about life as it is. Imagine, for example, the many cases observed over centuries that produced this proverb:

> A quick-tempered man does foolish things,
> and a crafty man is hated. (Prov 14:17)

Proverbs show great variety in form and content. "Descriptive proverbs" state a simple observation about life without reckoning with exceptions or applications:

> One man gives freely, yet gains even more;
> another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
> (Prov 11:24; cf. also 15:23; 17:27–28; 18:16)

On the other hand, a "prescriptive proverb" does more than observe something significant about life. It states its truth with a specific aim to influence human behavior. For example, Prov 19:17 surely invites obedience when it says,

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[179]**In the Apocrypha, the wisdom books are Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. For an overview, especially of wisdom's understanding of reality, see G. von Rad,** *Wisdom in Israel* **(Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1972); and J. L. Crenshaw,** *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* **(Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). What follows draws heavily on Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 229-39.**

[180]Ryken, *How to Read,* **121. Cf. H.-J. Hermisson,** *Studien zur Israelitischen Spruchweisheit,* WMANT *28* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: **Neukirchener, 1968); and R. Murphy,** *Wisdom Literature,* FOTL **13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,** 1981), **4, who classifies the proverb as a subtype of "saying."**

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward him for what he has done.
(see Prov 14:31; 15:33; 22:22–23)[181]

It is the specific promise of benefit, often by God's intervention, that distinguishes the prescriptive proverb from its descriptive counterpart. By extending that promise, it subtly appeals for reader obedience.

Some proverbs make their point by using comparisons. "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred" (Prov 15:17) lauds the importance of love in the home (cf. 16:8, 16, 19; 17:1; 21:9; etc.). Such comparisons seek to underscore the superiority of certain character traits or personal conduct over others. Numerical proverbs, by contrast, cleverly drive their truths home by using the formula x / x + 1 in the title. For example:

There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden. (Prov 30:18–19)

In this case, three is "x" and four is "x + 1."[182] The title introduces the subject-things too amazing to understand-while the subsequent list enumerates four examples. The greatest emphasis, however- t h e ***truly*** amazing thing-falls on the last item ("the way of a man with a maiden"). The previous ones merely serve to heighten the wonder or disgust over it. In such cases, proper interpretation must focus, not on the entire list, but on the final element and how it differs from or even surpasses the others.[183]

The most common proverb is the "antithetical proverb," the form that dominates the large collection in Prov 10-l 5. By painting a stark contrast, such proverbs attempt to commend wise conduct highly and to make foolishness completely unappealing. Since antithesis is the key to this form, proper interpretation requires the reader to focus on the contrast presented. First, isolate the two traits or types of people that the proverb sets side-by-side. Then, decide which of the opposites the proverb commends and why.

For instance, note these two examples:

[181]For **our "descriptive" and "prescriptive" proverbs Murphy** *(Wisdom Literature,* 4–6) **prefers the terms "an experiential (or observational) saying" and "didactic saying," respectively.**

[182]This **formula occurs in texts both within and outside of the wisdom literature (Amos 1:1:2-2:8; Prov** 30:15b–16, **21-23,** 29–31). **Also, other** schemas **occur: one/two** (Job 33:14–15; **cf. Psa 62:11-12); two/three (Sir** 26:28; 50:25–26); **six/seven (Prov** 6:16–19; **Job** 5:19–22; **and nine/ten (Sir** 25:7–11). **For an Akkadian example of six/seven, see the "Dispute between the Tamarisk and the Date Palm,"** *ANET,* **593 (lines 17-18).**

[183]There **are several lists of two (Prov** 30:7–8; **Job** 13:20–22) **and four items (Prov** 30:24–28; **Sir** 25:1–2) **that share the feature(s) stated in the title. Evidently, this form aims to treat the title's subject comprehensively by giving several illustrations of it. Cf. Murphy,** *Wisdom Literature,* **180.**

A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension,
but a patient man calms a quarrel. (Prov 15:18)

An anxious heart weighs a man **down,**
but a kind word cheers him up. (Prov 12:25)

The first example compares quick-tempered and patient people; it commends patience over an ill temper. The reason, of course, is that fiery people cause dissension while patient ones bring calm. The second example contrasts an anxious heart with a kind word. It commends the latter as the soothing antidote for the former.[184]

Principles of Interpretation-Proverbs

We start with a word of caution about how to apply proverbs properly.[185] Put simply, proverbs teach probable truth, not absolute truth. By nature proverbs are not absolute promises from God that guarantee the promised outcome if one follows them. Rather, they point out patterns of conduct that, if followed, give one the best chance of success. In other words, they offer general principles for successful living rather than a comprehensive "legal code for life." Further, proverbs place a higher premium on etching themselves on one's memory than on theoretical accuracy. That is, their primary goal is to state an important, simple truth about life in easy-to-remember terms. Hence, they do not intend to cover every imaginable circumstance.

Consider this example: "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Prov 14:23). This proverb teaches that success always hinges on good effort, not on good promises. But the principle does not include other factors that might hinder success, despite one's best efforts-economic recessions and company bankruptcies, for example. As a result, to interpret proverbs properly, we must balance our understanding of each one, first, in light of other proverbs in the Bible, and, second, in light of other scriptural teachings.

But what about those proverbs that our own experience seems to contradict? For example, Prov 13:4 promises:

The sluggard craves and gets nothing,
but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

Obviously, the proverb commends diligent work over lazy daydreaming. But how does it square with reality today? Hardworking Christian farmers in places like the Philippines and Peru barely eke out a living, much less find their "desires ... fully satisfied." Poor soil, inhospitable climate, and political conflict all conspire against

[184]Lest **we leave the mistaken impression that proverbs only occur in Proverbs, we note in passing that they also appear in sections of Ecclesiastes** (4:6, **13;** 5:10–12; 7:1–12; 9:11–12, **17-18;** 10:1–**2, 6, 8-9;** 11:4; **et al.). For NT examples, see Mt** 11:30; **Gal** 6:7; **Jas** 3:6 **(so Ryken,** *How to Read,* 121–22).

[185]Here **drawing on the helpful comments of Fee and Stuart,** *How to Read the Bible,* 199–203.

them. Has God failed to keep his "promise" in their case? In response, we must highlight several factors that readily apply to other proverbs as well.

First, as we noted above, a proverb expresses a truth observed to work in most cases. It may be limited to the sage's personal experience and certain specific contexts. It does not deny that exceptions occur; it merely omits them from consideration. Second, we must take care not to interpret a proverb by modern Western standards of desires. The proverb does not refer to nice homes, new cars, ski trips, and ocean cruises. Probably, it envisions rather simple desires-a small house, enough food (by ancient standards!), and a happy family. Third, the reality of a fallen world must factor into our interpretation (cf. Gen 3:17–19). Sadly, the world struggles with the results of Adam's rebellion. Poor soil, poor climate, and poor politics are some of its symptoms. Thus, though the proverb may be true in most cases, our fallen world may prevent its full realization.

Instruction

Israel's wisdom sages did not limit themselves to the indicative **mood. They also spoke in the imperative mood in the genre *instruction.*** Instruction may be simply a brief exhortation such as Prov 8:33: "Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it." The "sayings of the wise" (Prov 22: 17–24:22) contain another variety of the short instruction. Each instruction consists of a prohibition ("Do not ... ") supported by a motive clause ("for" or "because ..."). Sometimes this shorter type makes explicit the truth urged indirectly by other proverbs:

> **Do not exploit the poor because they are poor**
> **and do not crush the needy in court,**
> **for the LORD will take up their case**
> **and will plunder those who plunder them.**
> **(Prov 22:22–23, directly prohibiting what 14:31 implies; cf. 16:3 and 20)**

As this example illustrates, the purpose of instruction is to persuade the hearer to adopt or abandon certain conduct or attitudes. The frequent motive clauses (e.g., "for the LORD will take up their case ... ") give the reasons for compliance, making the teaching all the more persuasive.[186]

On the other hand, instruction may take a longer form, for example, the series of lengthy instructions that constitute the heart of **Prov 1–9.**[187] The wisdom teacher urges his "son(s)" at length (e.g., 1:8; 2:1; 4:1; 7:1; etc.) to follow the way of wisdom. An unusual feature of these instructions is that they occasionally include

[186]Crenshaw, **"Wisdom," 235. Commands and prohibitions (i.e., instruction) also appear in Ecclesiastes (cf. 5:1-2;** 7:16–17, **21-22;** 8:1–4; **9:7-10;** 10:20; **Il:l-2, 6,** 8–10).

[187]According **to Murphy's structural analysis** *(Wisdom Literature,* 49),1:8–19; **2:1-22; 3:1-12,** 13–**24, 25-35; 4:1-9, 10-27; 5:1-23;** 6:20–35; **7:1-27;** 8:1–36; **9:1-18. For additional background on Prov** 1–**9, including the possible influence of Egyptian wisdom and Israelite prophecy on the collection, see pp.** 50–52.

a unique **subgenre** called the ***wisdom speech.***[188] Here they personify wisdom as a woman who openly proclaims her message in the public **streets and squares** (1:20–**33; 8:1-36; 9:1–6; cf. Folly as a woman** [9:13–17]; **Job** 28).[189]

Principles of Interpretation-Instruction

The following principles of interpretation are based on the literary format of the instruction genre:

1. The student should carefully observe this literary form. Note that **its commands** or prohibitions present absolute demands for obedience not tentative **suggestions** for consideration. Readers must respond to them with seriousness.
2. The student must approach wisdom speeches as if listening to a woman passionately pleading with passing crowds to follow her advice. That very passion underscores the seriousness of her advice-how crucial for people to obey it, and how menacing is the danger that stalks those who do not. We should hear the passage as an urgent plea, not as an abstract treatise.
3. Having read the passage, the student might capture its form and content by completing this sentence: "This shouting woman urges me to. ..."

Example Story and Reflection

The wisdom books also contain two somewhat autobiographical genres. In an ***example story, the*** writer narrates a personal experience or other illustration from which he has distilled an important truth to pass on. Formally, example stories often open with formulas like "I saw and considered ..." or "I passed by ..." followed by the story proper. They conclude with a statement concerning the moral to be drawn. Proverbs 24:30–34 illustrates this genre:

Opening	**I went past the field of the sluggard,** **past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;**
Example Story	**thorns had come up everywhere,** **the ground was covered with weeds,** **and the stone wall was in ruins.** **I applied my heart to what I observed** **and learned a lesson from what I saw:**
The Moral	**A little sleep, a little slumber,** **a little folding of the hands to rest—**

[188]Appealing **to Egyptian parallels, Crenshaw ("Wisdom,"** 248–49) **classifies these as hymns in praise of wisdom. In our view, however, they are best seen as speeches since, Egyptian analogies notwithstanding, they lack the obvious traits of hymns.**

[189]For **a discussion of the theological connection between Lady Wisdom in Proverbs, the** *logos* **of Jn 1, and wisdom in** Col1:15–20, **see** LaSor, **et al., Old** *Testament Survey, 550-551.*

and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.[190]

The second autobiographical genre is the ***reflection.***[191] In a reflection the writer reports personal musings and conclusions about a truth, often citing first-hand observations, example stories, and lengthy thought. Though loosely structured, reflections have the following formal features: (1) opening formulas like "I saw and considered ..." **or "I** passed by ...**";** (2) the quotation of proverbs, use of rhetorical questions, or citation of example stories; and (3) a concluding moral.

The reflection dominates the book of Ecclesiastes (e.g., **1:12–2:26**) though with a less obvious structure than the above example. Section after section opens with "I have seen" or **"I** looked and saw" (**1:14; 3:16; 4:1; 5:13; 6:1;** et al.). Then, mixing prose and poetic musings, example stories, and proverbial quotations, the writer wrestles with the futility of life. Finally, at intervals, he draws the morals from his observations (**2:24–25; 3:22; 5:18–20**).

Principles of Interpretation-Example Story and Reflection

Based on the format of the example story and reflection we suggest the following guidelines for interpretation:

1. The key to interpreting the example story and reflection is to determine how their components support the concluding moral. For example, the reflection in **Eccl 4:7–12** extols the value of human companionship. The example story of a rich but lonely single man (v. 8) poses the problem-how miserable to be alone. The lengthy discourse (w. 9-12) illustrates the moral-that life is better when two people share it than when one lives alone (w. 9-12).

2. The student should pay particular attention to the concluding morals because they express the writer's main point. The example **from** Prov 24 above, for example, concluded that laziness ends in economic disaster. The writer warns of the dangers of laziness and, by implication, praises hard work.

3. Applications of an example story or reflection need to flow from the concluding moral. So **Eccl 4** challenges believers to cultivate friendships, for God has ordained them to make human life less miserable. For Christians, a local church community provides good opportunity for this.

[190]Cf. **Murphy,** *Wisdom Literature, 130,* 176. **For other examples, see Prov** 4:3–9; 7:6–27; **Eccl** 4:13-16; 9:13–16; **cf. Psa** 37:25, 35-36.

[191]The **term "reflection" follows Murphy,** *Wisdom Literature,* **130, 181; but cf. Crenshaw ("Wisdom,"** 256–58) **who prefers the term "confession" or "autobiographical narrative." Scholars generally believe this autobiographical style originated in Egypt where examples abound (so Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 256).**

Disputation Speeches

A massive literary masterpiece, the book of Job incorporates many **genres.**[192] Setting aside Job's narrative framework (Job l-2; **42:7–17**), the rest of the book consists of the genre ***disputation. As we*** noted above, in a disputation a speaker seeks to persuade the audience of some truth. In prophetic examples (see above) we hear only the prophet's side, but Job reports the arguments of both Job and his friends.[193] Specifically, we hear the lengthy ***disputation speeches*** in which the speakers debate the cause of Job's suffering. In the end, however, the **LORD's** dramatic, irrefutable speeches (chs. **38–39, 40–41**) reduce Job to humble acquiescence (**42:1–6**).

Occasionally, the book's disputation speeches incorporate literary forms from Israel's worship into their argument. In Job 16, for example, Job sounds like a psalmist when he voices a ***complaint*** **or** passionate cry of despair (for this see above under poetry). He describes the attack of his enemy-God himself-and affirms his innocence:

Surely, 0 God, you **have** worn me out;
you have devastated **my** entire household. ...
My **face is red with weeping,**
deep shadows ring my eyes;
Yet my hands have been free of violence
and my prayer is pure. (Job 16:7, 16–17)

Then Job **lifts** a petition-a pained cry for justice through an advocate pleading his case in heaven:

0 earth, do not cover my blood;
may my cry never **be laid to rest!**
Even **now my witness is in heaven;**
my advocate is on high.
My intercessor is my friend
as my eyes pour out tears to God;
on behalf of a man he pleads with God
as a man pleads for his friend. (Job 16:18–21)

[192]So far, attempts to define the genre of the book as a whole have not won a consensus. Murphy (*Wisdom Literature,* 16–19) conveniently lists the following options: dramatization of a lament (C. Westermann), a judicial process (H. Richter), paradigm of the answered lament (H. Gese), and comedy (J. W. Whedbee). Among possible ancient Near Eastern parallels, Job most closely resembles a work called the *Babylonian Theodicy (so* Crenshaw, "Wisdom," 253-54; Murphy, *Wisdom Literature,* 10). For the text, see *ANET,* 601-604; for a careful comparative analysis, see Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context, 184-87.*

[193]After Job's **opening soliloquy** (ch. 3), **we hear Eliphaz** (chs. **4-5, 15,** 22), **Bildad** (chs. **8, 18,** 25), **Zophar** (chs. **11,** 20), **and the latecomer Elihu** (chs. **32-37). In between, Job offers his rebuttals** (chs. **67, 9-10, 12-14, 16-17, 19, 21, 23-24, 26,** 27–28), **closing with a climactic soliloquy** (chs. 29–31). **Crenshaw ("Wisdom,"** 253–54) **prefers the term "dialogue" (Germ.** *Streitgespräch*), **but we believe** "disputation" better captures the argumentative nature of the book's dialogue (so Murphy, ***Wisdom Literature, 175-76).***

In the end, however, Job despairs that, barring an answer from God, death is his only future:

> **If the only home I hope for is the grave,**
> **if I spread out my bed in darkness, ...**
> **where then is my hope?**
> **Who can see any hope for me?**
> **Will it go down to the gates of death?**
> **(Job 17:13, 15; cf. 30:1–31)**

In terms of interpretation, complaints remind the reader of the speaker's frame of reference: acute affliction suffered unjustly and the assumption that an appeal to God might bring rescue. This background helps underscore why Job's fate is especially bitter: God himself, not his human peers, is Job's implacable enemy; and, rather than rescue Job, God remains silent.

Also, disputations include a ***hymn* or *hymnic* elements.** They are recognized by their lengthy description of things that the LORD does on an ongoing basis (in Hebrew, primarily participles). **Observe this psalmic song** of **praise to** Yahweh's greatness:

> **He moves mountains without their knowing it**
> **and overturns them in his anger. ...**
> **He alone stretches out the heavens**
> **and treads on the waves of the sea.**
> **He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion,**
> **the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.**
> **He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,**
> **miracles that cannot be counted. (Job 9:5, 8-10; cf. also 5:9-16; 11:7–12; 12:13–25; 25:2–6; 26:5–14.)**

From Israel's worship practices also comes the *avowal of innocence,* a statement by which an individual attempts to prove his innocence. For example, he may voluntarily take on himself an oath of horrible consequences to be suffered if guilty.[194] Job does this as the capstone of his impassioned, closing soliloquy (Job 31):[195]

> **If I have walked in falsehood**
> **or my foot has hurried after deceit ...**
> then **may others eat what I have sown,**
> **and may my crops be uprooted. ...**

[194]Cf. Psa 7:3–5. **Alternatively, the speaker may simply deny any guilt through a series of "I did" or "I did not" statements (see Psa 17:3–5; 26A-6; Jer 15:16–17). The repetition of emphatic denials gives the avowal its persuasive power. This type of avowal is not found in Job (but see 9:29–31). For oaths, see F. Horst, "Der Eid im Alten Testament,"** *Gottes Recht: Studien zum Recht im Alten Testament,* **TBü 12 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1961), 292-314; H. J. Boecker,** *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament,* **WMANT 14, 2d ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1970), 34-41.**

[195]Murphy (*Wisdom Literature,* 38) **compares it to "a final statement before a judge."**

> **if I have kept my bread to myself,**
> **not sharing it with the fatherless ...**
> **if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing,**
> **or a needy man without a garment ...**
> **if I have raised my hand against the fatherless,**
> **knowing that I had influence in court,**
> **then let my arm fall from the shoulder,**
> **let it be broken off at the joint.**
> **(Job 31:5, 8, 17, 19, 21–22)**

Job lists the conditions ("If I . . . ")-the alleged guilt-then the dire punishment to follow if those conditions apply.

Principles of Interpretation-Job

The following principles for interpretation apply to the various genres found in the book of Job:

1. Since disputation speeches dominate the book, the student should determine what truth(s) dominates each speaker's persuasion.

2. The book's narrative framework identifies Job as the hero. He is the most righteous man alive (1:8); in the end God sides with Job against his opponents (42:7–9) and doubly restores his losses (42: 10-17). Thus, the student should pay particular attention to Job's self-defense and beware that the seemingly good advice of his companions often reflects a position diametrically opposite from God's.

3. When other genres support the disputation speeches, we need to analyze why the poet included them and what they contribute. For example, from the occasional use of hymns it would be misleading to read Job as a kind of musical play in which the debaters periodically break into song! In the above example, by portraying God's irresistible power, the hymnic section provides evidence--evidence made more powerful by its musical form—to support the preceding line, "Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?" (v. 4b). In the end, Job drew the obvious inference: such power threatens to overwhelm any human who attempts to argue with it (w. 14-20).

4. Job's avowal of innocence (chap. 31) provides a crucial interpretive clue to understand the book. By forcefully affirming his innocence, Job denies that his own guilt has caused his suffering. Chapters l-2 seem to confirm this claim by portraying Job's righteousness and God's recognition of it. In the psalms, avowals of innocence support the psalmist's plea for God to issue a legal verdict in his favor.[196] Thus, the form also implies the goal of Job's avowal, which is to receive legal vindication from God.[197]

[196]Psalm 7:3–5 **provides an excellent example. For a discussion of Psa 7 and its legal background, see R. L. Hubbard, Jr., "Dynamistic and Legal Processes in Psalm 7,"** *ZAW* 94 (1982): 267–80.

[197]Job **frequently uses motifs drawn from Israel's legal system (e.g., Job** 9:14–16; 9:29–10:1; 18:18–21; **etc.), though not major legal genres. Hence, one does welt to read such sections in light of that legal background.**

5. In light of the above, the student must decide from God's soliloquy and **Job's responses** (chaps. 38:1–42:6) whether Job is truly innocent and what the book teaches about the cause and purpose of his (and our) suffering. In this regard, we suggest that the book's lesson is that the ultimate root of some human suffering lies **in the mysterious, hidden plans of God for his people.**

6. The book's ending provides a crucial clue to the interpretation of the whole book. God vindicates and rewards **Job and criticizes the arrogance of his friends. Job encourages believers to trust God for similar, ultimate vindication from unjust suffering, whether it comes in this life or the next.**

Conclusion

This survey shows that the OT is a fertile literary garden. Its major species are narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, and wisdom. But an abundant variety of genres flourish within these. Some reflect the rich inheritance the people of Israel received from **their cultural ancestors in the ancient Near East, while others derive** from **Israel's own creative cultural life. Our goal has been to cultivate in our readers "literary competence"-the ability to read a text in light of its own background and purpose. We have suggested principles of interpretation keyed to the nature of each genre and trust these will be helpful in the pursuit of accurate understanding of the OT.**

CHAPTERNINE

Genres of the New Testament

The Greek word ***euangelion*** (gospel) means "good news." Before the NT was written, the word often referred to news such as the announcement of a military victory. In the NT the term refers to the good news of the message proclaimed by Jesus. Mark may well have been the **first** person to use the term in this way (cf. Mk **1:1,** 14-15; **8:35; 10:29; 14:9). After Matthew,** Mark, Luke, and John had allwritten their accounts of the life of Jesus, Christians came to refer also to those narratives as Gospels. But **the** older sense still lingered on so the people who first began to collect the four Gospels together entitled them "The Gospel according to so-and-so." Each document reflected the one **unified** message **from** Jesus, which was now also about him and witnessed in four **different accounts.**[1]

The Genre **of the Gospels**

Noncanonical documents **also** came to have the label "gospel" attached to them. But none of these followed the same genre as the four canonical Gospels. Some, like the **Coptic** Gospel of Thomas, were not narratives but collections of numerous sayings allegedly **from** Jesus, loosely strung together with almost no connections between them. Others took narrative form but focused only on one small portion of Jesus' life, such as his childhood (e.g., The Infancy Gospel of Thomas)

[1]Cf. **esp.** R. P. Martin, New *Testament Foundations, 2* vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:20–29.

or his death and resurrection (e.g., the Gospels of Peter and Nicodemus). Still others resembled extended treatises on Jesus' postresurrection teaching for his disciples (e.g., the Gospels of Philip and Mary). Most of these documents clearly came from unorthodox factions of early Christianity, usually related to Gnosticism. They contain various teachings or beliefs that are legendary and/or incompatible with the claims of the canonical Gospels.[2]

So in the earliest centuries of Christianity the word "gospel" was not used primarily to refer to a literary genre in any formal sense. It is obvious, however, from even a cursory study of the four Gospels that these books all have much in common both in form and in content. Therefore we will classify them together and seek to identify their genre more closely.

Throughout most of the Church's history, Christians have thought of the Gospels as ***biographies*** of Jesus. But in the modern era this identification has been widely rejected. After all, Mark and John say nothing about Jesus' birth, childhood, or young adult years. Luke and Matthew include selected incidents related to his birth and one episode about his teachings in the temple at age twelve, but otherwise they too are silent. On the other hand, all four Gospels devote a disproportionately large space to the last few weeks and days of Christ's life. What is more, the main events of Jesus' ministry appear in different order in the different Gospels, and rarely are we told how much time elapsed between any two events.

As a result, modern scholars have looked for other generic labels to apply to the Gospels. A few have identified them with well-known genres of Greco-Roman fiction. Some have called the Gospels ***aretalogies:*** **accounts** of episodes from the life of a "divine man," usually embellishing and exaggerating the feats of a famous hero or warrior of the past. Some have applied the language of playwrights to them, associating the Gospels with ***comedies*** (stories with a triumphant ending) or ***tragedies*** (stories in which the protagonist is defeated, despite having shown signs of greatness). A few link these books with ***parables, seeing an*** entire Gospel as a metaphorical discourse designed both to reveal and to conceal. And occasionally, despite their similarities, one or more Gospels are treated as representing a different genre from the others. Matthew, for example, has been viewed as a ***midrash*** of Mark and Q (material common to Matthew and Luke not found in Mark): an interpretive retelling of sacred tradition in which straightforward history is elaborated and embellished with various fictitious additions in order to communicate important theological beliefs. More commonly, John is set apart from the three "Synoptic" Gospels as more ***drama than*** **history or** biography.[3]

Problems exist with each of these suggestions, however, so that none has commanded a consensus. The most common view of modern scholarship suggests that

[2]The two main collections of noncanonical works in which these various gospels appear are E. Hennecke, New ***Testament Apocrypha,*** vol. 1, rev. and ed. W. Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1990) and J. M. Robinson, ed., The ***Nag Hammadi Library (New*** York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[3]For a more detailed description and critique of each of these views, with bibliographic references to representative advocates, see C. L. Blomberg, ***The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*** (Leicester and Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1987), 44-49, 235–40; on John, cf. id., "To What Extent Is John Historically Reliable?" in ***Perspectives*** *on John,* ed. R. Sloan and M. Parsons (NABPR, forthcoming).

the four evangelists in essence created a new genre when they composed their Gospels.* But a growing minority is reaffirming the possibility of linking the Gospels with Hellenistic ***biography.*** Earlier readers were thrown off track because ancient conventions for writing biography in the ancient Greco-Roman world did not always correspond to modern standards. Hellenistic biographers did not feel compelled to present all periods of an individual's life or to narrate everything in chronological order. They selected events carefully in order to teach certain moral lessons or promote a particular ideology, and they frequently focused on a person's death because they believed the way people died revealed much about their character. Luke's prologue (Lk 1:1–4), in fact, closely resembles the introductions to the historical writings of ancient Jews, Greeks, and Romans such as Josephus, Herodotus, Tacitus, Arrian, Dio Cassius, and Sallust.[5]

Of course, if a gospel is about Jesus, by that criterion it will differ from other Hellenistic biographies. Robert Guelich offers a judicious survey of modern proposals concerning gospel genre and concludes with his own:

> ***Formally,*** **a gospel is a narrative account** concerning the public life and teaching **of a significant person that is composed of discreet [sic] traditional units placed in the context of Scriptures. ...** ***Materially,*** **the genre consists of the message that God was at work in** Jesus' life, **death, and resurrection effecting his promises found in the Scriptures.**[6]

This seems best to us, too. "Formally," then the Gospels have parallels in other literature; "materially" they prove uniquely Christian. Perhaps it is best, therefore, to call them ***theological biographies.***

Implications for Interpretation

Historical ***Trustworthiness***

There is a widespread belief that only a small portion of the canonical Gospels preserves accurate historical information about the words and deeds of Jesus and his companions. This has led to the development of ***tradition criticism*** and its "criteria for authenticity" for tracing the growth of the Jesus-tradition. In this view the tradition ranges from fairly authentic sayings and factual narratives to the more complex combinations of history and legend or myth found in the final form of the

[4]See, most recently, L. W. Hurtado, "Gospel (Genre)," in ***Dictiona y of Jesus and the Gospels,*** ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 276-82; and J. A. Baird, ***A Comparative Analysis of the Gospel Genre*** (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991).

[5]On the Gospels as biographies, see esp. D. E. Aune, ***The*** New ***Testament in Its Litera y Environment*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 17-76; and R. A. Burridge, ***What Are the Gospels?*** SNTSMS 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On Lk 1:1–4, see T. Callan, "The Preface of Luke-Acts and Historiography," ***NTS*** 31 (1985): 576-81.

[6]R. Guelich, "The Gospel Genre," in ***The Gospel and the Gospels,*** ed. P. Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

canonical gospels. For many scholars, only the earliest stage or most authentic material is normative for Christians today.[7] Others postulate varying degrees of normativity based on the layer and the tradition to which a given verse or text can be assigned.[8] Norman Perrin's and Dennis Duling's widely used textbook speaks for many when it summarizes the only historically trustworthy portions of the Gospels as those that deal with Jesus' baptism, proclamation of the kingdom, exorcism, challenging social barriers, gathering disciples and sharing meals with them, arrest and trial by the Jews, crucifixion by the Romans, and a handful of other teachings and deeds.[9]

Now to be sure, the Gospels must not be forced, anachronistically, to measure up to modern conventions for writing history or biography. Instead, they must be evaluated according to the standards of their day.[10] They employ frequent paraphrase rather than direct quotation (neither Greek nor Aramaic used quotation marks or felt a need for them). Readers today encounter much interpretation, abbreviation and digests of long speeches and narratives, topical as well as chronological arrangement of accounts, and careful selection of material to fit a writer's particular theological emphasis. But once all this is recognized, the Gospel materials actually measure up quite well by the most valid criteria of authenticity.

So, for example, we should not be surprised when Mark and Luke report that the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism declared "you are my son whom I love" (Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22), while Matthew's account has "This is my Son whom I love" (Mt 3:17). Matthew has probably just reworded Mark to emphasize that the heavenly voice spoke not only for Jesus' benefit but also for the crowd's. Or again, Matthew and Luke differ as to which of Satan's temptations of Jesus they place second and which third—jumping off the temple to be rescued by the angels or worshipping Satan to receive all the kingdoms of the earth (cf. Mt 4:1–11 with Lk 4:1–13). But Luke does not use any chronological connectives in his account, only the Greek words ***de*** (but) and ***kai*** (and). Luke has probably placed the second temptation last so that the climax of Jesus' temptations, as with his ministry overall, would end with Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem, a motif that Luke stresses.

Sometimes the differences between parallels prove more substantial. At first sight, Mt 10:37 appears to tone down Lk 14:26 drastically. Luke writes, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple."

[7]The classic and perhaps most skeptical twentieth-century work that sought to trace *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* was the book by R. Bultmann with that title (New York: Harper & Row, 1963 [Gm. orig. 1921]). The best example of a work treating the earliest stages of the tradition as most normative is the far less skeptical book by J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology,* vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

[8]E.g., J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), parcels out the Gospel traditions into four strata. The later the stratum, the less likely he believes it to be historical and the less significant for determining the permanent relevance of Jesus for Christians (see esp. 426).

[9]N. Perrin and D. C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 411–12.

[10]On which, see esp. C. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History,* ed. C. H. Gempf (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 63–91.

But Matthew has, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." Matthew's paraphrase is nevertheless a fair interpretation of what Jesus' harsher sounding statement in Luke meant. In Semitic language and thought "hate" had a broader range of meanings than it does in English, including the sense of "leaving aside," "renunciation," or "abandonment." "I prefer this to that" was often stated as "I like this and hate that."[11]

Another famous "alleged" contradiction between Gospels involves the story of raising Jairus' daughter. In Mk 5:21–43 Jesus is summoned to Jairus' home twice, once before and once after the child has died. Matthew 9:18–26 reports only one summons—at the beginning of the passage in which Jairus says the child has already died. By contemporary standards of reporting this would be an inaccuracy, but in light of ancient tendencies to abbreviate and "telescope" such reports significantly (combining separate stages of an episode into one), no one would likely have charged Matthew with falsifying his report.

We could offer many other illustrations.[12] All of these types of changes are natural and common in ancient biographies and should cause no concern. But it is quite a different matter to allege that entire sayings or narratives in the Gospels were created out of whole cloth and do not correspond in any recognizable fashion to what Jesus said and did.[13] Such claims go far beyond what the evidence actually suggests.[14]

Reading Horizontally and Vertically

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart helpfully summarize the task of interpreting the Gospels' unique blend of history and theology with the concepts of thinking horizontally and vertically.[15] Because many of the teachings and actions of Jesus are narrated in more than one gospel, the serious student should consult a synopsis or harmony of the Gospels that prints parallel accounts in parallel columns.[16] Then the student can ***read and think horizontally***—across the page—and compare the ways in which the different Gospel writers treat a certain passage. Often the distinctive emphases of a given evangelist appear most clearly in those portions of an episode that

[11]F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 76; G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 178–79.

[12]On the general historical trustworthiness of the gospels, with numerous additional examples of resolutions of alleged contradictions among parallels, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability,* esp. 113–89.

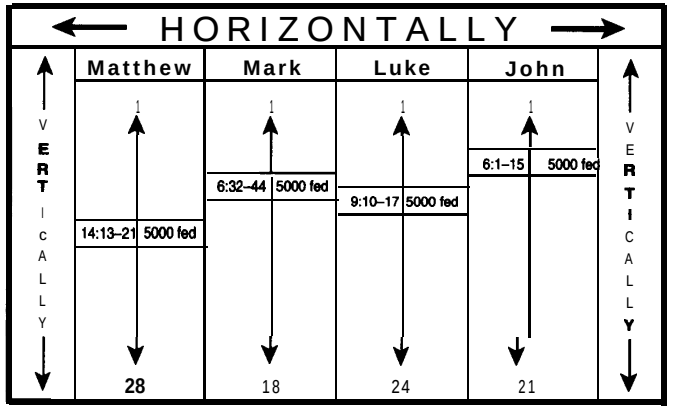
[13]The most famous recent example involves the findings of the "Jesus Seminar," collected together into *Five Gospels, One Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Say?,* ed. R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover (Sonoma: Polebridge, forthcoming).

[14]Cf. R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986); I. H. Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

[15]G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 110–16.

[16]The most complete edition with perhaps the most attractive layout, yet remarkably affordable, remains K. Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (New York: UBS, 1982). It is also available in Greek/English and Greek only editions. See, further, the bibliography.

he alone has chosen to record. The student should apply this procedure to individual passages, to major sections of narrative, and to the Gospels as complete units. Thus, for example, the reader will discover that Matthew's version of the parable of the wicked tenants uniquely stresses the transfer of God's kingdom from Israel to the Church (Mt 21:43), a theme that reappears throughout his Gospel (e.g., 8:10-12; 11:20–30; 13:10–12; 22:1–14; 25:31–46; and 10:5–6 vs. 28:18–20). In the resurrection narratives, only Mark highlights the fear and misunderstanding of Jesus' followers (Mk 16:8), a motif he, too, distinctively underlines elsewhere (e.g., 4:13; 4:40; 6:52; 8:21; 8:33; 9:14–29; 10:35–45). And a reading of all of Luke discloses his particular interest in showing Jesus as the fiiend of sinners and outcasts in Jewish society-most notably Samaritans, Gentiles, tax-collectors, prostitutes, poor people, and women. See, for example, the otherwise unparalleled stories of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), Mary and Martha (10:38–42), the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the nine Jewish and one Samaritan Leper (17:11–19), and the Pharisee and tax-collector (18:9–14). Interpretation and application of a given passage in the Gospels should stress the particular emphases of the Gospel in which the passage occurs, rather than blurring its distinctives by immediately combining it with other parallels. God chose to inspire not a harmony of the Gospels but four distinct ones, and we should respect his choice rather than undermine it by our interpretation.[17]



[17]It is still widely believed that Mark was the first Gospel written, that Matthew and Luke both relied on Mark as well as other sources including "Q" (other material common to Matthew and Luke), and that John was not as directly dependent on any of the other canonical writings. This approach to "source criticism" means that Matthew's and Luke's differences from Mark and from each other are more likely to be significant than Mark's or John's differences from either Matthew or Luke or each other. But these views have increasingly been challenged. The methods we encourage here do not depend on any one particular source-critical hypothesis. Readers interested in pursuing the debate should compare, e.g., R. H. Stein, *The* Synoptic *Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), who defends Markan priority, with B. Orchard and H. Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics* (Macon: Mercer, 1987), who believe Matthew came first, Luke second, and Mark third. For good, recent, concise overviews of the distinctive theologies of each of the evangelists, see the four articles in *Themelios* 14/2 (1989). For detailed studies. see n. *22* below.

May we assume the first readers of an individual Gospel would have recognized these distinctives before they had the other written Gospels with which to compare them? Yes, we may, because a common body of information about Jesus circulated by word of mouth (often called the ***kerygma,*** from the Greek for "proclamation"). Thus Christians among one Gospel's readers would have easily recognized some of the ways in which that Gospel differed fi-om the "standard" kerygma. This also means that the Gospel writers could assume that the people to whom they wrote already had a fair amount of prior knowledge about Jesus and the Christian faith (cf. also Lk 1:4). So it is appropriate in thinking horizontally to use one Gospel to interpret another, so long as one does not mask the distinctives of each. For example, by comparing Mt 27:56, Mk 15:40, and Jn 19:25, it is reasonable to deduce that Zebedee's wife's name was Salome and that she and Jesus' mother, Mary, were sisters. Jesus would then have been cousins with his two disciples John and James. This information, if true, might well have been widely known in early Christianity so that no one Gospel writer felt a need to spell it out. But we cannot prove any of this. Any application of the stories of Jesus' death that focused more on these possible relationships than on the actual information in the Gospels would be misguided.

Thinking vertically should, therefore, take priority over thinking horizontally. By this we mean that any passage in the Gospels should be interpreted in light of the overall structure and themes of that Gospel irrespective of the nature of any parallel accounts that appear elsewhere. In other words, it is more important to read down the columns of a synopsis than across them. Frequently the Gospel writers group passages topically or thematically rather than chronologically. If we overlook these connections we risk reading in a false interpretation. For example, Luke places the story of Jesus' preaching in the Nazareth synagogue at the beginning of his description of the Galilean ministry (Lk 4: 16–30), even though chronologically it happened much later (cf. Mk 6:1–6a; Mt 13:53–58). This is probably because he sees the episode as programmatic of the nature of Jesus' ministry and the response it would receive. Luke 4:14b–15 makes it clear that much time had already elapsed since Jesus began preaching in Galilee. Luke 5:1–l 1 moves (backward in time) to the calling of some of the disciples (cf. Mt 4:18–22; Mk 1:16–20) with the temporally indefinite introduction "while the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God . . ." (v. 1). But the modem reader, accustomed to strict chronology in biographies, could easily make the mistake of assuming 4: 16–30 took place before 5 : l-l 1 and conclude that Jesus called his disciples as a result of his rejection in Nazareth!"

Similar examples occur throughout the Gospels. Matthew 8-9 present ten of Jesus' miracles fi-om various stages in his ministry. Luke 9:51–18:14 is probably not the "travel narrative" or "Perean ministry" it is so often labeled; rather, it is a thematically structured collection of Jesus' teachings all spoken "under the shadow of the cross," which he knew would soon end his life (9:51).[19] Mark 2:1–3:6 groups

[18]On Luke 4:16–30, see esp. W. W. Klein, "The Sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:14–22)," in *Christian Freedom,* ed. K. W. M. Wozniak and S. J. Grenz (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986),153–72.

[19]Cf. esp. C. L. Blomberg, "Midrash, Chiasmus and the Outline of Luke's Central Section," in Gospel *Perspectives III,* ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983),217–61.

together a series of pronouncement and conflict stories (on which, see below). In fact, thematic groupings in the Gospels are so common that it is best not to assume that two episodes that appear next to each other are in chronological order unless the text actually says so (by specifying, e.g., "After this ..."). And English Bibles may not always help because they sometimes translate Greek words for "and" or "therefore" as "then" or "now."

In other instances, even when passages occur in chronological order, the Gospel writers seem likely to have included and omitted material because of thematic parallels or contrasts. Thus Mk 8:31–9:32 presents, in turn, Jesus' predictions of his coming suffering, his transfiguration, and the failure of his disciples to exorcise a demon. In so doing Mark appears to juxtapose the theme of Jesus' imminent death with a foretaste of his coming glory and to contrast Jesus' sovereignty and authority with the disciples' weakness and misunderstanding. Or again, the sequence of three parables in Mt 24:43–25:13 graphically illustrates the point of 24:36 that no one can know when Christ will return. He may come back entirely unexpectedly (24:44), or sooner than people think (24:48), or much later (25:4). Even as straightforward a chronological account as Matthew's infancy narrative (Mt l-2) seems more interested in excerpting those events that show Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23) and as the true king of Israel (as against Herod the usurper) than in presenting anything like a comprehensive survey of the events surrounding Jesus' birth.[20]

Thinking horizontally and thinking vertically amounts to studying the Gospels along the lines of modern ***redaction criticism.*** Redaction criticism is best defined as the attempt "to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analyzing the editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed by him in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand (see Lk 1:1–4)."[21] When we compare parallel accounts and find a particular evangelist's distinctives and then see those same themes emphasized throughout that Gospel, we may feel rather confident that we have discovered a key point the gospel writer wished to make. To be sure, redaction criticism has been widely abused, turning "distinctives" into "contradictions," but this is a problem with its practitioners not with the method itself.[22]

[20]Cf. especially C. L. Blomberg, "The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew l-2," *B773* 21 (1991): 145-50.

[21]R. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Richmond: John Knox, 1977), 142-43.

[22]See esp. D. A. Carson, "Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool," in *Scripture and Truth,* ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19831, 119-42. The most well-balanced studies of the distinctive theologies of the synoptic evangelists appear in the Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives series: R. T. France, Matthew: *Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); and I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian,* 2nd. ed. (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). Equally useful on the Fourth Gospel is S. S. Smalley, John: *Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978). Evangelical commentaries particularly sensitive to the theological outlines of the Gospels include C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992); W. L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); I. H. Marshall, *The* Gospel of *Luke,* NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); and G. R. Beasley-Murray, John, WBC 36 (Waco: Word, 1989).

The Gospels' First Audiences

Thinking about the theological emphases and distinctives of each Gospel leads naturally to a consideration of the people to whom they were originally addressed. Presumably, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each highlighted different aspects of the life of Christ mainly because those aspects were particularly relevant to the individuals and congregations to whom they were writing. Redaction criticism has expended much effort in trying to reconstruct the situations of these early Christian communities. This enterprise is by nature more speculative than that of comparing parallels to determine theological distinctives. Probably, certain parts of each Gospel were included simply because they formed part of the common kerygma or because they were important for all Christians (or interested "inquirers") irrespective of their specific circumstances at the moment.[23]

Nevertheless, numerous proposals about the evangelists' original audiences seem probable. For example, Mark's emphasis on the disciples' fear and misunderstanding was most likely intended to reassure and encourage a Gentile-Christian audience, possibly in Rome, as imperial persecution against Christians intensified. This hypothesis dovetails with the meager external evidence we have concerning the composition of Mark. If Jesus' disciples were prone to failure yet still able to be used mightily by God, Christians feeling weak and inadequate in another time and place could take heart, too. Preachers and teachers today may thus choose to focus particularly on Mark as they seek to encourage beleaguered Christian communities.[24]

Similarly, John uniquely plays down the status of John the Baptist (1:19–28, 29-34; 3:22–39). Now Acts 19:1–7 describes a strange group of "disciples" in Ephesus, the traditional location of the churches to whom the apostle John later wrote, who knew only of John the Baptist and not of Jesus. Later Christian writings (most notably the third-century Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions) speak of a second-century sect in the same area that worshipped John. Quite plausibly, the Fourth Gospel's information about the Baptist was designed to temper any improper exaltation of John, at the expense of worshipping Christ, which might have crept into Ephesian churches. And if it was wrong to glorify the human leader of whom Jesus had said, "among those born of women there is no one greater than John" (Lk 7:28), then surely it is inappropriate to exalt human leaders of God's people in any age. Contemporary Christians might choose, therefore, to highlight the Fourth Gospel's portrait of John the Baptist when struggling against church leaders who direct too much attention to themselves and too little to Christ.[25]

[23]Good, recent studies of the possible nature of the communities to which the four Gospels were addressed appear in: G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992); M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), l-30; P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts,* SNTSMS 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and G. M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[24]See especially E. Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986).

[25]Cf. further R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple (New* York: Paulist, 1979), 69-71.

Recognizing that the disciples in the Gospels represent believers in any age also helps us avoid certain hermeneutical errors of the past. For example, medieval Catholicism sometimes argued that Jesus taught a two-tiered ethic. His more stringent demands, such as vows of poverty, were reserved for fulltime Christian workers like priests, nuns, or monks-the religious elite. The contemporary Russian church sometimes struggles with the view, made understandable by decades of persecution, that the Great Commission (Mt 28:18–20) was intended only for the apostles and not for all believers. Dispensationalists, particularly in the U.S., have sometimes maintained that because Jesus' disciples were Jewish one cannot assume his instructions to them also apply to Gentile Christians. But Scripture provides no support for any of these contentions, and the vast majority of Christian interpreters of all theological traditions down through the centuries have rightly rejected them.

Key Theological Issues

As discussed earlier, every text must be interpreted in light of its historical background and literary context. Those parts of Scripture that contain numerous writings by the same author (notably with the epistles of Paul) or multiple accounts of the teaching of one individual (as with the Gospels) must be interpreted in light of larger theological contexts. To interpret the Gospels correctly in view of the basic message of Jesus' teaching, we must correctly understand two theological issues: Jesus' views on the Kingdom and the nature of his ethic.

The Kingdom of God.

The central theme of Jesus' teaching is the announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom refers more to a power than to a place, more to a reign than to a realm. "Kingship" perhaps better captures this sense of "authority to rule." But interpreters continue to debate to what extent Jesus believed that God's kingship had actually arrived during his lifetime and to what extent he saw it as still future. Others differ over whether God's rule concentrates on empowering his people or on redeeming the cosmos. A related question asks whether the Christian's primary task is to encourage personal transformation or social reform. A correct understanding of the relationship of the Kingdom to the Church and to Israel also seems vital.

Space prevents consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of each major position adopted on these questions. Suffice it to say we agree with a fair consensus of interpreters who believe that the Kingdom of God arrived in part at Christ's first coming but awaits its full consummation at his return (cf. e.g., Mk 1:15; Mt 12:28; Lk 17:20–21 with Mt 6:10; 25:1–13; and Acts 1:6–8). This is the view often known as *inaugurated eschatology*.[26] Like an inauguration at the beginning of a president's

[26]This term is associated especially with the numerous writings of G. E. Ladd. Perhaps his best work on the Kingdom is *The* Presence *of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

term of office, Jesus inaugurated God's Kingdom at the beginning of his reign, even though much more awaits fulfillment. Because he could personally preach to only a handful of the world's population, Jesus' priority during his lifetime was to gather around himself a community of followers who would live out the principles of God's Kingdom. These followers, as they made new disciples, could eventually demonstrate God's will for all the world concerning human life in community and society.

Personal conversion-repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord-alone prevents eternal punishment and separation from God; so it must take priority over social transformation (Mk 1:15; Mt 9:2; Lk 9:23–27; Jn 3:16). But challenging sinful, systemic structures forms a crucial part of God's purposes for his world as well and must not be neglected (Lk 4: 18-19; 7:22–23; Mt 8: 17). The Kingdom does not equal the Church. The Church is the group of believers in all ages over whom God reigns, who demonstrate to the world the presence of His Kingdom. Nor was the Kingdom something offered exclusively to Israel, rejected, and then replaced by the Church. What Jesus referred to as the mystery of the Kingdom was not a shift from Israel to the Church but the surprising fact that the Kingdom of God had arrived without the irresistible power many had expected.[27]

Andrew Kirk ties together these strands of thought with a comprehensive formulation of Jesus' kingdom priorities:

> The Kingdom sums up God's plan to create a new human life by making possible a new kind of community among people, families, and groups. [It combines] the possibility of a personal-relationship to Jesus with man's responsibility to manage wisely the whole of nature; the expectation that real change is possible here and now; a realistic assessment of the strength of opposition to God's intentions; the creation of new human relationships and the eventual liberation by God of the whole of nature from corruption.[28]

All these aspects must be kept in mind when one interprets Jesus' teaching and actions, including those in which Jesus does not necessarily mention the Kingdom explicitly.

Consider, for example, the beatitudes of Mt 5:3-12 and Lk 6:20–26. It is probably significant that both versions begin and end with present tense blessings ("yours is the kingdom of God"), but sandwiched between these are future tense promises ("you shall be satisfied"). People who live in the way Jesus describes in the beatitudes (poor, mourning, meek . . .) are spiritually blessed in the present through life in Christ and his Church, but they can expect full compensation for their suffering only in the life to come. Or again, a correct understanding of Kingdom theology prevents driving an improper wedge between Mt 5:3 ("Blessed are the poor in spirit") and Lk 6:20 ("Blessed are you poor"). Those who are blessed are both the materially and the spiritually poor. The probable Hebrew concept underlying the Greek

[27]In addition to Ladd, cf. esp. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Cf. more briefly, I. H. Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age: The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," *Themelios* 11 (1985): 5-15.

[28]A. Kirk, *The Good News of the Kingdom Coming* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983), 47.

term used here is that of the *'ānāwim*—the pious poor "who stand without pretense before God as their only hope."[29]

So, too, when we read in Mt 6:33 and Lk 12:30 to "seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness and all these things [adequate food, drink, and clothing] shall be yours as well," we must avoid two opposite misinterpretations. One error assumes that Jesus has guaranteed health and wealth (or even a minimally decent standard of living) for all who put him first in their lives. Many faithful believers throughout church history and particularly in the Two-thirds World today simply do not experience these blessings. And it is almost diabolical to accuse all such believers of having insufficient faith. On the other hand, we dare not so spiritualize the text that it no longer makes any demands on God's children to help their destitute brothers and sisters in material ways. In Mk 10:29–30 Jesus promises his followers who give up their homes for the sake of discipleship that they will receive "houses" and "lands" "a hundredfold now in this time" as well as eternal life in the age to come. In other words, Jesus anticipated that his followers would share material possessions with each other![30]

Perhaps the simplest summary of Jesus' theology of the Kingdom is the slogan "already but not yet." Christians struggling with faltering ministries or difficult personal circumstances, as well as those currently experiencing many victories and triumphs, need consistently to temper their despair or enthusiasm by reminding themselves of both halves of this slogan. Does Jesus' perspective suggest that some Christians should go into politics to help change the world? Yes, and he promises they can often expect to have a positive effect, although they may never know to what extent. Should a believer pray for healing from illness? Of course, and sometimes God will answer positively but always on his terms, though often he chooses to work through human frailty instead (1 Cor 12:8–9). Can Christians expect victory over sins that keep plaguing them? Yes-at least in some measure, usually over a substantial period of time, but painful relapses may recur and God guarantees ultimate victory only on the other side of eternity.

The Ethics of Jesus

Understanding Jesus' kingdom theology enables interpreters to make good sense of his ethical demands. Interpreters have regularly puzzled over their stringency. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Sermon on the Mount. Did Jesus seriously expect his followers to view hatred as murder, lust as adultery, never to retaliate when abused, and actually to love their enemies (Mt 5:21–48)? We have already noted the ***traditional Catholic*** response: only select disciples are expected to follow these more austere rules. ***Lutherans*** often viewed Jesus' ethics as "law" (rather than "gospel") meant to point out the hopelessness of our sinful condition and drive us to our knees in repentance and faith in Christ. Against both these views note that Jesus addressed his words to all his disciples as well as to the crowds of

[29]R. A. Guelich, *The* **Sermon on** *the Mount* (Waco: **Word,** 1982), **75.**
[30]Guelich, *Sermon, 373.*

would- be followers who flocked to hear him (Mt 5 : 1). ***Anabaptists*** frequently took these commands as seriously applying to public life and to all people on earth, so they renounced all violence and became pacifists. But Jesus nowhere teaches that his Kingdom principles should form the basis for civil law. ***Nineteenth-century liberals*** often preached a "social gospel" of human progress and moral evolution apart from the personal transformation of conversion to Christ, but twentieth-century world-wide warfare squelched much of their optimism. ***Existentialists see*** in Jesus' teaching precedent for decisive calls to ethical action without viewing any of his teaching as absolute. ***Dispensationalists*** have traditionally reserved Jesus' Kingdom ethic for the millennial age and have not found it directly relevant for Christians now. But this requires a greater disjunction between Israel and the Church than Scripture allows. Jesus' choice of twelve disciples, for example, almost certainly was deliberate, to match the twelve tribes of Israel and portray the community of his followers as the new locus of God's saving activity.[31]

None of these approaches, furthermore, does justice to the interpretive framework of Jesus' inaugurated eschatology. Most of Jesus' teachings apply to all believers in all situations, unless Scripture itself clearly imposes certain limitations. When Jesus concludes the section of the Sermon on the Mount alluded to above, he declares: "Be perfect [whole, mature], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect [whole, mature]" (Mt 5:48). This remains the standard or ideal of discipleship for all Christians. We will not attain wholeness in this life, but we can arrive at a measure of maturity. Jesus' standards should be our constant goal ("already but not yet"). His ethic is for ***all*** believers, not just a select few. But inasmuch as his ethic is also primarily for ***believers, we*** dare not impose it on those outside the faith. We cannot expect unbelievers to follow or appreciate God's will, though (through common grace) we are sometimes pleasantly surprised when they do. We must not try to coerce an unregenerate world to conform to his standards, though we who live in democracies surely ought to use all legal measures available to foster an ethical society.[32]

Occasionally, however, contextual material in the Gospels themselves clearly limits the application of certain teachings of Jesus. For example, some of the severe restrictions Jesus placed on the Twelve when he sent them out on their first mission (Lk 9:3-5) were later rescinded (22:35–38). The command to the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor (Lk 18:22) could not have been intended for all disciples because shortly afterwards Jesus praises Zaccheus for giving (only!) half of his possessions to the poor (19:8). Then he tells a parable praising two servants who wisely invested their master's money for his benefit rather than giving it away (19: 1 l-27). Likewise, the statement about divorce and remarriage in Mt 19:9 could not have had every possible exception in view when Jesus declared

[31]The **fullest survey of interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount is C. Baumann,** *The* **Sermon on** *the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* **(Macon: Mercer, 1985). A briefer sketch, but with very helpful perspectives on Jesus' ethics more broadly, is R. H. Stein,** *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* **(Philadelphia: Westminster,** 1978), 88–1 **11.**
[32]The **best detailed unfolding of Jesus' ethics from the perspective of inaugurated eschatology is A. Verhey, The** *Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* **(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).**

that all who divorce "except for marital unfaithfulness" and marry another commit adultery, for Paul later felt free to add a second exception based on a new situation Jesus did not face in his lifetime-an unbelieving spouse wishing to leave a Christian partner (1 Cor 7:15–16).[33] But apart from a definable hermeneutical principle, it is irresponsible exegesis to assume that a certain teaching of Jesus does not apply to us in our current circumstances.

The Forms Within the Gospels

As already noted for the OT, different literary genres (entire works) have different interpretive principles, and individual forms (smaller self-contained units of material) must often be treated in unique ways. In the Gospels, the three most prevalent and distinctive forms that merit special attention are the parable, the miracle story, and the pronouncement story.[34]

Parables

The stories Jesus told, such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Sower, rank among the most famous and popular parts of all Scripture. Modern readers often express surprise to learn how differently these parables have been interpreted in the history of the Church. Until this century, most interpreters treated the parables as detailed allegories, assuming that most or all of the individual characters or objects in a parable stood for something other than themselves, namely, spiritual counterparts that enabled the story to be read at two levels. So, for example, in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32), the ring that the father gave the prodigal might represent Christian baptism; and the banquet, the Lord's Supper. The robe could reflect immortality; and the shoes, God's preparation for journeying to heaven.[35]

Seldom, however, did two allegorical interpretations of the same parable agree, and what a particular detail was said to represent often seemed arbitrary and even anachronistic (neither Christian baptism nor the Lord's Supper had yet been instituted when Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal). At the end of the nineteenth century, the German

[33]The last of these examples is the most controversial. But see C. L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3–12," *TrinJ* n.s. 11 (1990): 161-96.

"Form criticism has, of course, attempted to do much more than simply analyze constituent literary forms within the Gospels so as to interpret them rightly. E.g., it has often attempted to reconstruct the oral history of those forms. See esp. E. V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). But the analysis of forms has been its most objective and successful enterprise, and the only one that concerns us here. For a more up-to-date survey and critique of the method, see C. L. Blomberg, "Form Criticism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* 243–50. For further on the variety of forms in the gospels see J. L. Bailey and L. D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament,* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 91-183.

[35]The fullest history of interpretation, including these examples, is W. S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A Histo y of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1979). For a crucial update covering the last decade and a half, see C. L. Blomberg, "The Parables of Jesus: Recent Trends and Needs in Research," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research,* ed. C. A. Evans and B. D. Chilton (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

liberal Adolf Jülicher wrote a massive expose of these inconsistencies and proposed a diametrically opposite alternative. He argued that parables are in no way allegories, and no detail may be said to "stand for" anything else. Rather, they make only one point apiece, as they teach rather general truths about spiritual realities. Thus the entire story of the Prodigal can be reduced to the lesson of "the boundless joy of God's forgiveness." The richness of detail merely adds realism, vividness, and local color.[36]

Twentieth-century interpreters have increasingly sought ways to swing the pendulum back from Jiilicher without returning to the allegorical excesses of his predecessors.[37] Most rejected his rather bland moralizations and tied the central truths of the parables more directly to Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom. Many recognized that the parables often break the bounds of realism and shockingly subvert conventional expectation. Thus, no ancient, Oriental, well-to-do head of household would have run to greet a wayward son (a most undignified action) or interrupted him before he completed his speech of repentance, but God goes to greater extents than human fathers in trying to seek and save the lost. Because the majority of the parable (like parables more generally) draws on ordinary experiences of life to illustrate analogous truths about spiritual life, the unrealistic portion stands out all the more in comparison.

A growing minority of interpreters once again regards as appropriate a limited amount of allegorical interpretation. It is hard to make any sense of Jesus' story of the Prodigal without assuming that the father in some sense represents God (or even Christ); that the prodigal stands for all the wayward and rebellious (like the tax-collectors and "sinners" of 15:1); and that the older brother represents the self-righteous hypocrite (like the Pharisees and scribes of 15:2). The literary context of a parable must be consulted, ***contra*** Jiilicher and many contemporary existentialists, as a reliable guide to the meaning of the parable itself. At the same time, few have been willing to abandon the quest for one central truth per passage. But with respect to that issue, we return to the Prodigal Son. Is the main point the possibility of repentance for even the most rebellious? Or is it an emphasis on the lavish forgiveness God offers all his children? Or is it perhaps a warning against imitating the hard-heartedness of the older brother?[38]

[36]A. Jiilicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu,* 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 2:362. **That no one has published a translation of Jiilicher in English is one of the strangest omissions of modem biblical scholarship.**

[37]**The two most significant twentieth-century studies of the parables have been C.** H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* **(London: Nisbet, 1935); and J. Jeremias,** *The Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972 [Ger. orig. 19471). Dodd's defmition of a parable became a classic: "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (p.16). But Jeremias reminded us that underneath the Greek *parabolē* lay the Hebrew *māshāl,* which had a very broad semantic range including "figurative forms of speech of every kind: parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, jest" (20).

[38]Two of the most helpful recent writers who have recognized allegory and multiple points in the parables are Ryken (see esp. his *How to Read,* 139-53, 199–203) and K. Bailey (see esp. his *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19831-2 vols. bound as one).

A way forward may be found through an appreciation of the parables as narrative fiction. Longer examples of this genre (novels or short stories) regularly communicate meaning through their main characters. They encourage readers to identify with one or more of these characters and experience the plot of the story from their various points of view. When we analyze the parables in terms of main characters, we discover that approximately two-thirds of Jesus' stories are ***triadic*** in structure. That is, they present three main characters (or groups of characters). More often than not one is a master figure (king, master, father, shepherd) and two are contrasting subordinates (servants, sons, sheep). Consider, for example, the bridegroom with his two quite different groups of bridesmaids (Mt 25:1–13), the shepherd with his one lost and ninety-nine safe sheep (Lk 15:3–7), or the sower with his three portions of unfruitful seeds/soil versus his one fruitful section (Mk 4:3-9). In other cases the characters or groups of characters relate differently, but still there are three (the man who was robbed and beaten, the pair of clerics who ignore him, and the Samaritan who helps him, Lk 10:29–37). Or we may consider the king, the servant for whom he forgives an enormous debt, and that servant's underling who does not receive cancellation of even a paltry sum (Mt 18:23–35).

In about one-third of the parables, the narrative proves shorter and the structure simpler. Sometimes they contrast two characters without a master figure-wise and foolish builders (Mt 7:24–27), Pharisee and tax-collector (Lk 18:9–14). Or a master and one subordinate may appear, as with the parable of the unprofitable servant (Lk 17:5–8). In still other instances, such dyadic structures give way to monadic ones. Here only one character appears-as in the parables of the mustard seed and leaven (Lk 13:18–21), the tower-builder and the warring king (Lk 14:28-33), and the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44–46).

In light of our illustrations of the problems of interpreting the Prodigal Son, it seems reasonable to suggest that readers should consider each parable from the perspective of each of the main characters. The three major suggestions for the "one point" of Lk 15:1 l-32, in fact, result from doing precisely this. A focus on the prodigal teaches about repentance; following the father's actions reveals God's lavish love and forgiveness; and attending to the older brother warns against hardheartedness. All three of these points reflect part of the parable's meaning.[39]

It seems that many interpreters have already unconsciously adopted this approach. Robert Stein, for example, sums up the "one" point of the parable of the Great Supper (Lk 14:16–24) as follows:

> **It is** impossible in reading this parable not to interpret the guests and their replacements as representing the attitudes of the Pharisees/scribes/religious leaders and the outcasts of Israel **... the parable was not allegorical, because it posits only one main point of comparison. The point is that the kingdom of God has come and that those who would have been expected to receive it (the religious elite) did not do so, whereas the ones least likely to receive it (the publicans,** poor, harlots, etc.) **have.**[40]

[39]For all the details of the approach we are suggesting here, see C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990).

But this "point" is actually articulated in three independent clauses. Stein's interpretation seems perfectly correct, but it is inaccurate to call it one point and thereby to deny a certain allegorical nature to the parable.

Of course, there may be ways of combining the two or three points of dyadic and triadic parables into one simple sentence. Where this can be done it is probably desirable to do so, in order to illustrate the thematic unity of the passage and the relationship between the various lessons learned from reading the story through the eyes of its different characters. Thus, from the parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28–32) we might deduce three lessons from the three characters as follows: (1) like the father sending his sons to work, God commands all people to carry out his will; (2) like the son who ultimately disobeyed, some promise but do not perform rightly and so are rejected by God; and (3) like the son who ultimately obeyed, some rebel but later submit and so are accepted. Then a possible way of combining these three points emerges: "Performance takes priority over promise." This formulation helps preachers and teachers communicate the message of the parable in a much more memorable form! One might harmonize this short proposition with the longer series of three points by speaking of one main point with three subpoints or by equating the short summary with the parable's "plot" and the longer sentences with its various "points of view."

Not all of the parables, especially some of the longer more complex narratives, yield a simple, unified lesson as easily. It is arguably better, then, to preserve a more detailed and possibly cumbersome formulation than to compose a pithy summary that risks losing some of the message of the text. So, for example, with the Good Samaritan, interpreters should strive to preserve all three strands of meaning that have often been perceived. From the example of the priest and Levite comes the principle that religious status or legalistic casuistry does not excuse lovelessness; from the Samaritan we learn that we must show compassion to those in need; from the man in the ditch emerges the lesson that even an enemy is a neighbor. Or, in the case of the parable of the Wicked Tenants, there may even be four key characters or groups of characters, teaching us: (1) God is extremely patient in waiting for his rebellious people to do his will; (2) a day will come, however, when that patience is exhausted and he will destroy those who remain rebellious; (3) his purposes will not then be thwarted for he will raise up new, obedient followers; and (4) this turning point will occur at the time of the Jews' rejection and crucifixion of Christ (Mk 12:1–12).

Although there are other important things we could say about parables, one point is crucial. As metaphorical discourse, parables create an impact through their choice of imagery and narrative form, which is largely lost when one tries to communicate their meaning with one or more propositions. Against the so-

[40]R. H. Stein, An *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 89; cf. S. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 29, on the sower. Both texts nevertheless remain excellent introductory works for studying parables.

called new hermeneutic (see chapter 2), it is both possible and important to "translate" parables into propositional language. Otherwise, modern readers may not understand their meaning at all![41] But with the new hermeneutic, it is equally appropriate and helpful to consider retelling a parable in modern garb to recreate the effect it would have had on its original audience. After two millennia of domestication, these texts sometimes communicate the exact opposite of what Jesus originally intended. Today even the most biblically illiterate Westerner "knows" that a Samaritan is compassionate and that Pharisees are "bad-guys." But this is precisely ***not*** what any first-century Jew would have thought—Samaritans were the hated half-breeds and Pharisees the most popular of the religious leaders. To have the proper impact on a typical conservative American congregation in the 1990s, a preacher ought to consider retelling the story with the man in the ditch as a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, the priest and Levite as two upstanding local pastors, and the Samaritan as a fundamentalist Muslim terrorist (or perhaps an atheist black feminist!). Such preachers who have particularly racist, sexist, or nationalist congregations ought also to consider if faithfulness to the Bible in this fashion might cost them their jobs and if they are prepared to pay this price![42]

Miracle Stories

Another unique "form" in the Gospels is the miracle story. Since the Enlightenment, all but the most conservative of interpreters have tried either to rationalize or to demythologize these stories. The older, rationalist approach sought to explain the apparently supernatural events of the Gospels as scientifically natural ones. The feeding of the 5000 involved the large crowd sharing small crumbs of bread in anticipation of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist. Jesus appeared to walk on the water because he was wading out on a sandbar just beneath the water's surface.

By the mid-nineteenth century this approach was generally rejected as misguided. Scholars viewed the miracle stories as myths-fictitious accounts designed to glorify and exalt Jesus and promote his divinity. In the twentieth century, form critics and existential theologians developed the idea of demythologizing-seeking the theological message of a miracle-story that could still be believed and applied in a scientific age that had disproved the supernatural. In other words, they looked for what was left when the "myth" was removed. Thus, while Jesus may not have miraculously healed people of illnesses or exorcised demons, he did, nevertheless,

[41]The best and fullest exposition of the parables from this perspective of the new hermeneutic is B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). But it needs to be read in light of the massive methodological critique by A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

[42]The inspiration for the "contemporization" of the Good Samaritan comes from Fee and Stuart's similar example *(How to Read, 133).* Bailey *(Peasant Eyes,* 48) comments from the perspective of a Western missionary in the Middle East that in twenty years he has not had "the courage to tell to the Palestinians a story about a noble Israeli, nor a story about the noble Turk to the Armenians."

enable people to embrace psychosomatic wholeness and to reject all manifestations of evil that threatened their personal well-being.[43]

Science, of course, has never disproved the supernatural. Because of the uncertainties inherent in Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, quantum physics has left twentieth-century scientists far more cautious in pronouncing the impossibility of God's existence and direct intervention in human history. Meanwhile, evangelical Christians never have abandoned their belief in biblical miracles as historical events.** Ironically, however, much conservative ***application*** of the Gospel miracles has differed little from more liberal demythologizing. Conservatives do not reject the miraculous; they merely relegate it to Bible times! ***Jesus*** may have supernaturally stilled the storm, but ***we*** are said to be foolish to expect him to intervene in the affairs of weather today. When in the mid-1980s evangelist and politician Pat Robertson claimed he helped veer a hurricane away from the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. through prayer, he was ridiculed by at least as many fellow evangelicals as by others. (We do not intend to support Robertson's claim here, but only to highlight the point we are making.) Instead, we are told, the correct application of this miracle-story is that Jesus "stills the storms of our lives," enabling us to be at peace in the midst of crises. The distinctively supernatural element of the account remains irrelevant!

Interpreters from numerous theological traditions increasingly recognize a better approach.[45] The miracle-stories in the Gospels function first of all ***christologically*** to demonstrate who Jesus was, and then ***salvation-historically*** to corroborate his claims that the kingship of God was breaking into human history. Thus, when Jesus exorcised one demoniac, he declared, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12:28). When John the Baptist sent messengers from prison to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah who was to come, he told them to tell their master "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised" and "blessed is the person who does not fall away on account of me" (11:5–6). The storm-stilling miracle, therefore, shows Jesus as exercising divine prerogatives. Like Yahweh himself in the OT, Jesus is Lord of wind and waves (cf. Jonah l-2 and Psa 107:23–32). The Gospel accounts agree that this miracle forced Jesus' disciples to raise the question of his identity (Mt 8:27; Mk 4:41; Lk 8:25). And while this particular miracle does not occur in John, the Fourth Gospel consistently affirms

[43]For a survey and critique of various approaches to the miracles in view of the Enlightenment, see esp. C. Brown, ***Miracles and the Critical*** **Mind** (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). H. E. G. Paulus and D. F. Strauss are often cited, respectively, as the nineteenth- century giants of the rationalistic and mythological schools of interpretation. In the twentieth century, R. Bultmann's program of demythologizing stands out above all others.

[44]Some of the best recent scholarly defense appears in D. Wenham and C. Blomberg, eds., *Gospel Perspectives VI, The Miracles of Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

[45]Cf. esp. H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); L. Sabourin, The *Divine Miracles Discussed and Defended* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1977); and R. Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracle (New* York: Paulist, 1988).

miracles to be "signs" (evidences of Jesus as Son of God) meant to bring people to belief in Christ (e.g., Jn 2:11; 7:31; 10:25; 20:31).[46]

Some of the more unusual miracle stories suddenly make sense when interpreted in light of the rule of God that Jesus' person and work introduced. Turning water into wine symbolized the joyful newness of the Kingdom against the old constraints of Judaism (Jn 2: l-l 1); cursing the fig tree provided a vivid object lesson of the destruction of Israel if she persisted in rejecting her Messiah (Mk 11:12–14, 20-25); and Jesus' walking on the water disclosed his identity to his disciples—Yahweh himself. Mark's enigmatic word "He was about to pass by them" should probably be taken in the sense of "He was about to reveal himself to them," (6:48; cf. God's self-revelation to Moses in Exod 33:22; 34:6) so that Jesus' subsequent announcement, "It is I" (more literally "I am"-Greek *egō eimi*—v. SO), forms an allusion to the divine name revealed to Moses in Exod 3:14.[47]

Contemporary application of Gospel miracles should thus be more evangelistic than pietistic. Jesus' stilling of the storm should make people ask who such a man was and is-with the correct answer being the divine Messiah. And in an age when reports of apparently supernatural healings, exorcisms, and even occasional "nature" miracles are increasingly common, we may risk quenching the Spirit by refusing to pray for the risen Christ to repeat the miraculous in our day-not primarily to benefit believers but to help in converting the unsaved. Not surprisingly, many of the most dramatic modern-day miracles are occurring precisely in those parts of the world that have long been dominated by non-Christian and even occult beliefs and practices. Although the Kingdom broke into this world decisively in first-century Israel, the process of establishing God's rule in all the world has been a gradual, intermittent one that remains incomplete. We must always guard against counterfeit miracles, to be sure. But Christians today can expect to apply the Gospel miracle stories in valid ways by praying for similar manifestations of God's power in Jesus' name to demonstrate his deity and his superiority over all other objects of worship.[48]

Pronouncement Stories

A third important and distinctive Gospel form has been variously labeled: apophthegm, paradigm, pronouncement story, conflict story, and chreia. All of these terms have their own history and have been used to refer to slightly differing groups of texts. But "pronouncement story" is the most common and self-explanatory term.

[46]At the same time, John is quick to point out that people should not have to have signs in order to believe. Cf. esp. 4:48 and 20:29.

[47]For these three examples and related ones, see esp. C. L. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," in *Gospel Perspectives VI*, 327–59.

[48]Although their writings (and ministries) sometimes err to the side of expecting miracles too often, J. Wimber and K. Springer (*Power Evangelism* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 19861) helpfully discuss several of these points. A well-balanced statement of contemporary application of the miracles appears in L. B. Smedes, ed., *Ministry and the Miraculous* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987).

Common in the Gospels, it designates a short, self-contained narrative that functions primarily to introduce a key climactic saying (or pronouncement) of Jesus. These pronouncements are usually proverbial in nature. As proverbs (see above), they inculcate wise generalizations in the form of concise memorable phrases and should not be interpreted as absolute truths. Most of them highlight the radical newness of Jesus' message and ministry that quickly aroused the opposition of Jewish readers; hence, they are also called "conflict stories." Some resemble the Greco-Roman literary form "chreia": "a brief statement or action with pointedness attributed to a definite person" designed to epitomize a key aspect of that individual's life or teaching.[49]

Mark 2:13–17 offers a classic example of a pronouncement story. The call of Levi builds to a climax with Jesus' final pronouncement against his Pharisaic critics: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 17). Obviously these are generalizations; healthy people did at times need physicians for preventative medicine, and Jesus did occasionally minister among those who considered themselves righteous, which is probably what the Greek *dikaioi* here means (cf. Lk 14:1–24). But both of these situations were exceptions and not the rule. At the same time, Jesus' claims challenged (and still challenge) conventional ideas of ministry. Neither in Jesus' day nor in ours do most religious people consider preaching and healing among the outcasts of society to be priorities. Not surprisingly, Mark includes this pronouncement/conflict story in a series of five (Mk 2:1-12, 13-17, 18-22, 23-28; 3:1–6) that concludes with the ominous note, "then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (3:6). This story, finally, captures concisely the heart of Jesus' mission and message-seeking and saving the lost despite increasing opposition. Another series of pronouncement stories appears in Mk 11 and 12–11:27–33; 12:13–17, 18–27, 28–34, and 35-37. In each case we should focus on the climactic saying, avoid turning it into a timeless truth, and recognize its radical challenge to the religious status quo.

Other Forms

Numerous other forms have been identified in the Gospels. Many of these have OT parallels- legal maxims, beatitudes and woes, announcement and nativity stories, calling and recognition scenes, farewell discourses, and so on.[50] Most figures of speech are prevalent in the Gospels. In fact, some estimate that Jesus couched

[49]Cf. especially A. J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries: The Form and Function of the Conflict Stories in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) and *Pronouncement Stories, Semeia 20* (1981); and B. L. Mack and V. K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989)—in which see p. 11 for the quotation.

[50]Two useful treatments of all the constituent literary forms in the Gospels are Bailey and Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament, 89-188;* and K. Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1984). Berger covers all New Testament forms and genres with a comprehensive categorization of individual texts,

over 90 percent of his teaching in poetic or figurative language. This would appeal to the crowds and prove easy to remember.[51] Although we cannot go into more detail here, the student who masters the principles we have outlined can proceed with confidence to interpret the majority of the accounts and passages in the Gospels.[52]

The Genre of Acts

As might be expected, Acts-the second volume of Luke's two-part work—bears a strong resemblance to the Gospel genre. Acts 1:1 harks back to the Gospel of Luke in a way that suggests its prologue (Lk 1:1–4) applies to both parts. If "theological biographies" best captures the essence of the Gospels, then "theological history"-a narrative of interrelated events from a given place and time, chosen to communicate theological truths-best characterizes Acts.[53] Instead of focusing on one main character as in a biography, Acts broadens its scope to present key episodes in the lives of several early church leaders. Still, the title "Acts of the Apostles" is misleading because ten of the Twelve disappear soon after the opening chapters. Most of Luke's narrative centers around Peter and Paul; subordinate characters such as the deacons, Stephen and Philip, garner the next greatest amount of attention. The "Acts of the Holy Spirit" might be a more descriptive title inasmuch as Luke sees the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and his subsequent filling of believers as the key to the birth and growth of the fledgling Christian community.

As they do with the Gospels, many interpreters of Acts succumb to false dichotomies between theology and history. On the other end of the spectrum, conservative students of Acts have been preoccupied with archaeology and other kinds of research, hoping to substantiate the historical trustworthiness of Acts. But in successfully doing so, they have often lost sight of the theological emphasis foremost in Luke's mind.[54] Liberal scholars have often proved more sensitive to Luke's theological insights, but in so doing they have unnecessarily alleged that he contradicts the other evangelists, the epistles of Paul, and historical facts.[55] A third quite recent approach plays down both Luke's theology and historical accuracy in favor of emphasizing those features of Acts that would have proved entertaining and adventuresome for ancient audiences. This approach views Acts akin to a popular novel

[51] Cf. the helpful survey in Stein, *Method and Message, 7-33.*

[52] Of more detailed studies, perhaps the most helpful for beginning students are S. McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); and G. M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

[53] Cf. I. H. Marshall, "Luke and His 'Gospel,'" in *The* Gospel and *the Gospels, 273432;* W. C. van Unnik, "Luke's Second Book and the Rules of Hellenistic Historiography" in Les *Actes des Apôtres: traditions, redaction, theologie,* ed. J. Kremer (Gembloux: Duculot, 1979), 37-60. History in antiquity was consistently ideologically motivated; cf. further A. W. Mosley, "Historical Reporting in the Ancient World," *NTS* 12 (1965–66): 10-26; and M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

[54] The classic example is W. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895); more recently, cf. Hemer, *Acts.*

[55] The prime example is E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

or historical romance that includes many details simply to enhance its readers' enjoyment and delight.[56]

Implications for Interpretation

We believe that it is possible (and desirable) to adopt all three of these perspectives as part of the genre of Acts without pitting any one against the others. The cumulative evidence for the historicity of Acts-its wealth of detail about people, places and customs-is too overwhelming to be ignored.[57] But, as in his Gospel, Luke did not compile history for history's sake; rather, he compiled it to teach his readers what he believed God was accomplishing in the world and what God was commanding believers to do in and through the events he narrated. Like the authors of the other "acts" (*praxeis*) of the Greco-Roman world (including later apocryphal "acts" of various apostles of more dubious historical worth),[58] Luke wrote in a lively and entertaining way. So we must not assume that every minor detail necessarily conveys theological import. For example, the story of Paul's sea journey and shipwreck in Acts 27 is rich in nautical detail and high adventure that seems to serve no other purpose than to heighten the drama and suspense.

Thinking Vertically

It is likely that Luke composed Acts much as he did his Gospel: by combining information from shorter written accounts of various events with what he had learned by word of mouth, often from eyewitnesses. In addition, in several places his writing shifts from third- to first-person plural narrative ("we" did such and such), which suggests that on those occasions he was personally present for the events he described.[59] But Luke has thoroughly reworked and integrated his material into a coherent whole. Thus, it is highly speculative in Acts to undertake either source criticism or that brand of redaction criticism that requires comparison between the canonical form and earlier sources.[60] If we had parallel books of Acts as we have parallel Gospels, it might well be a different matter, but we do not. So we cannot create a synopsis to enable us to ***think horizontally.***

On the other hand, we have a wealth of data to enable us to ***think vertically.*** The overall outline of Acts is clearer than the outline of any of the four Gospels. We see Acts 1:8 as theologically programmatic for Luke's purposes. He wishes to narrate selected episodes related to the geographical and cultural expansion of Christianity

[56] See esp. R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

[57] See esp. the massive presentation of the supportive data throughout Hemer, *Acts.*

The collection of apocryphal acts appears in E. Hennecke, New *Testament Apocrypha,* vol. 2 (London: Lutterworth; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).

[59] See esp. C. Hemer, "First Person Narrative in Acts 27-28," *TynB* 36 (1985): 79-109, against the view that this is merely a fictitious device.

[60] Scholarly speculations nevertheless abound. A survey and sane analysis appears in J. B. Polhill, Acts, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 32–39.

in order to present the Gospel as a message for all peoples. Thus he begins his story by describing virtually all of the first followers of Jesus as Jews who lived in the political and cultural capital of Israel, Jerusalem. But the story ends a mere thirty or so years later with the gospel firmly planted in Rome, the political and cultural center of the empire that dominated Europe and the Middle East in the first century. And in that short span of time, Christianity had been transformed from an almost exclusively Jewish sect to a predominantly Gentile, empire-wide religion.

In six instances, Luke marks off what appear to be major divisions in his narrative that punctuate this expansion of Christianity (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Each of these summary statements refers to the word of the Lord as growing and spreading. So a very plausible outline of Acts might well look like this:

I. The Christian Mission to Jews (1:1–12:24)
- **A. The Church in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7)**
- **B. The Church in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (6:8–9:31)**
- **C. Further Advances in Palestine and Syria (9:32–12:24)**

II. The Christian Mission to Gentiles (12:25–28:31)
- **A. First Missionary Journey of Paul and the Jerusalem Council (12:25–16:5)**
- **B. Wide Outreach through Paul's Two Other Missionary Journeys (16:6–19:20)**
- **C. To Jerusalem and then to Rome (19:21–28:31)**[61]

To correctly interpret a particular episode in Acts, therefore, we should first of all correlate that episode to its place in Luke's unfolding outline and developing themes. This will help us to see Luke's primary purposes and to avoid secondary elements in the episode that he did not intend to resolve. Two excellent examples appear in chap. 8. The two main episodes of this chapter involve: (1) the conversion and baptism of the Samaritans, with their ring leader Simon **Magus (8:5–25),** and (2) the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza **(8:26–**39). In light of modern debates about water baptism, baptism in the Spirit, and eternal security, readers of Acts today usually raise such questions as: Why didn't the Spirit come immediately when the Samaritans believed Philip's preaching? Was Simon **Magus** ever really saved, and, if so, did he lose his salvation? Is it significant that Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch as soon as the chariot in which they are riding passes a sufficiently large **body of water?**

Although all of these are legitimate questions, probably none was in Luke's mind as he penned this chapter of Acts. This passage occurs in the section of his outline that concentrates on how the gospel began to leave exclusively Jewish territory. Thus, the two most striking features of Acts 8 become the reception of Philip's message first by Samaritans and then by a *eunuch, both* considered ritually unclean by orthodox Jews. The main applications of Acts 8 for Christian living today, therefore, should not center on the timing of the arrival of the Holy Spirit and its effects, nor

[61]R. N Longenecker, "Acts," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* 9 (1981), *234,* with a few modifications.

on debates about how much water one needs for baptism, or how quickly it should follow on conversion. Rather, these texts should call all Christians today to determine who the Samaritans and eunuchs are in our world. Christian ministry must not neglect today's "untouchables" or outcasts-AIDS victims, the homeless, unwed mothers, and the like.

Thinking vertically also involves treating ***Luke-Acts* as one unit.** Identifiable redactional or theological emphases in Luke's Gospel will probably recur in Acts and should be given special attention. The theme of Jesus' compassion for outcasts identified above certainly fits in this category. So, too, does Luke's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and of prayer in believers' lives.[62] Thus, we should not pass lightly over those texts in which the church in a given community gathers and prays for God's guidance, seeking to be "of one accord" (1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12). In an age when many Christians strongly voice their desire to imitate the "New Testament church," very few follow a process of decision-making that seeks unanimity or near-unanimity through prolonged prayer meetings of an entire body of believers. **Yet** that is the consistent pattern of Acts!

By comparing Luke and Acts we are also able to discern structural or thematic parallels even apart **from** any comparison of Luke with the other Gospels. Frequently, the disciples in Acts closely imitate some facet of our Lord's life as described in **Luke.** Consider, for example, some of the first Christian miracles. The story of Aeneas (9:32–35) very closely resembles Jesus' healing of the paralytic in Lk 5:17-26, right down to the very wording, "get up and take your mat. ..." Raising Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36–43) uncannily **parallels** Jesus raising Jairus' daughter in Lk 8:40–42, 49–56. In fact, the Aramaic commands to the two dead women probably varied **by only one** letter—***Talitha cum* ("little girl, arise") and *Tabitha cum* ("Tabitha, get up")!**

Or compare the closing chapters of Luke and Acts. The Gospel ends with a long and detailed focus on Jesus' passion and death. In fact, Lk 9:51 **introduces the theme of Jesus journeying toward Jerusalem and the cross earlier than does any other Gospel. Acts, too, slows** down its narrative substantially to focus on Paul's final, fateful journey to Jerusalem and the sufferings and imprisonments that await him there, in Caesarea and in Rome. Luke may or may not have been writing after Paul's eventual death, but he certainly sees parallels in the closing stages of the lives of both Jesus and Paul. These kinds of similarities between Luke and Acts suggest that Luke saw the life of a faithful disciple as often imitating that of Christ, both in its spiritual power and in the necessity of suffering.[63] What was true for Paul should therefore be true for us. Unfortunately, the combination of these themes is not often found in contemporary Christianity; those who successfully emphasize the one usually tend to play down the other.

[62]Cf. A. A. Trites, "The Prayer Motif in Luke-Acts" in ***Perspectives in Luke-Acts, ed. C.*** H. Talbert (Danville: AABPR, 1978), 168-86.

[63]C. H. Talbert, "The Way of the Lukan Jesus: Dimensions of Lukan Spirituality," ***PRS9 (1982): 237-49.***

The Significance of Pentecost

Proper interpretation of Acts also requires an appreciation of the significance of the events of Acts 2. This marks the crucial turning point between the age of the Mosaic covenant and the age of the new covenant, which was made possible by Jesus' atoning death, vindicating resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of the Father (Acts 1: l-l 1). Careful exegesis necessitates a mediating view between, say, the extremes of traditional dispensationalism and unqualified covenant theology. In other words, the student must avoid interpretations that exaggerate either the continuity or the discontinuity between the two ages.[64] Luke's understanding of Peter's speech concerning the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:14–21; cf. Joel 2:28–32) strongly suggests that a new, previously unavailable spiritual empowerment will henceforth characterize the lives of Jesus' followers. For example, the baptism and indwelling of all believers by the Spirit (2:38–39; cf. 1 Cor 12:13) and the phenomenon of tongues (2:5–12; 10:44–46; 19:4–7) mark a significant break from OT times. Though they do not recognize it immediately or without conflict, these first Christians come to believe that Jewish and Gentile believers alike no longer need observe laws of the OT apart from their fulfillment in Christ (10:1–1 1: 18; 15: l-29). Thus, one must be careful, for example, not to assume that Acts 1:22–26 offers a model for how Christians should make decisions. Although "casting lots" was a common and proper practice in the OT era (cf. Lev 16:8; Num 26:55; Neh 10:34), it never reappears in the NT. Indeed, the giving of the Spirit that immediately follows this episode probably is meant to replace methods such as lots for Christian decision-making.[65]

On the other hand, interpreters must guard against driving too great a wedge between the days before and after Pentecost. Though we may not cast lots today, we should not accuse the first disciples of having erred when they practiced this method. The notion that Paul was God's true choice for Judas' replacement rather than Matthias finds no exegetical support in any NT text.[66] And the concern for prayer and unity that preceded the use of lots clearly continues on beyond Pentecost.

In not exaggerating the discontinuity between old and new ages, the student must also beware of minimizing the positive value of Acts on the grounds that it reflects a transitional period between covenants.[67] Of course, Acts does describe transitions. Where the disciples had not yet fully come to appreciate their freedom in Christ, we must be cautious about imitating their behavior, as, for example, when the Hebraic

[64]Dispensationalism has taken great strides away from the excesses of past generations toward a more "centrist" position. Covenant theology, too, has made similar though often not as significant overtures. A helpful volume contrasting state-of-the-art perspectives of both camps is Continuity and *Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments,* ed. J. S. Feinberg (Westchester: Crossway, 1988).

[65]D. J. Williams, *Acts* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), *17.*

[66]*Contra* G. C. Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles (New* York: Revell, 1924),19-20.

[67]As classically in dispensationalism (see, e.g., M. R. de Haan, *Pentecost and After* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964], 8), but as widely practiced by others, too.

Jews in Jerusalem insist that Paul continue to support the sacrificial cult (Acts 2 1: 17–26).[68] But such caution comes from sensitivity to Luke's own clues as a narrator as to what God approved and what he did not. As with many sections of OT historical narrative, students need to look for hints in the text itself concerning what it presents as a good, bad, or neutral example. Narrative often teaches more indirectly than didactic literature, but that makes it no less normative, once we correctly discern the text's original intent.[69] At the very least, then, the reader must guard against seeing Acts 2 1: 17-26 as too positive a model inasmuch as the whole plot backfires (w. 27-36).

But this does not hold true for Luke's descriptions of early Christian "communism." Though some argue (usually staunch capitalists!) that the experiments in communal sharing of 2:44–45 and 4:32–37 were misguided failures, Luke appears instead to present them as positive models. The results he describes are worded as follows: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (2:47) and "much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them" (4:33b–34a).[70]

If it is wrong to exaggerate the transitional nature of Acts, it is equally misguided to identify turning points within the book after which the message of salvation is no longer offered to Jews. Of course, on several occasions Paul turns fi-om Jews to Gentiles because of the repeated rejection and hostility he receives from the Jewish people (13:46–48; 18:5–7; 19:8–10; 28:23–28). But the very fact that he repeats this pattern several times, as he moves from city to city, prevents us from alleging that any given episode indicates a more general strategy of abandoning the Jews in favor of an exclusively Gentile mission. Even the final turning fi-om Jews to Gentiles in Rome, with which Acts ends (28:23–38), does not justify any conclusions about appropriate evangelistic strategy elsewhere. After all, in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders-which he presents as a model for the ministry of subsequent Christian leaders (20: 18-35)-Paul emphasizes proclamation "to both Jews and Greeks" (v. 21). And 19:10, 17–18 make clear that even after Paul shifted preaching venues in Ephesus, Jews continued to hear the gospel and to believe.[71] These observations thus rule out all of the older, more extreme forms of dispensationalism that viewed as normative for Gentile Christians only those parts of the NT that occurred after one of the alleged turning points in Acts.

Acts as Narrative

We have already stated that narrative often teaches more indirectly than didactic literature without becoming any less normative. Thus, we reject Fee and

[68]On the whole theme of "The Law in Luke-Acts," see the article so-titled by C. L. Blomberg in *JSNT* 22 (1984): 53–80.

[69]See esp. L. Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 45-106.

[70]On this theme, cf. esp. R. J. Cassidy, *Society* and *Politics* in *the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

"Cf. esp. R. C. Tannehill, "Rejection by Jews and Turning to Gentiles: The Pattern of Paul's Mission in Acts," in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives,* ed. J. B. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 83–101.

Stuart's highlighted maxim that "unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way."[72] Though they do not intend it as such, this restriction implicitly contradicts 2 Tim 3: 16 and fails to grasp the key purposes of narrative literature. We have already illustrated in some detail how parables, for example, often contrast characters whose behavior is meant to be imitated or avoided. Sometimes a parable's context makes that point clear (e.g., Lk 10:37;18:1;13:3–5). This suggests that in other cases we should draw similar conclusions. Nevertheless, one must proceed much more cautiously when direct commands are absent. How then should we proceed to interpret Acts? Primarily, we need to study the entire book to determine if specific events form a consistent pattern throughout or *if* the positive models Luke presents vary from one situation to another. The former will suggest that Luke was emphasizing a normative, consistent principle; the latter, that applications may change from one time and place to the next.

Examples abound. Gamaliel's advice to the Sanhedrin concerning the Twelve ("Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is fi-om God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.") generously granted the disciples their freedom (Acts 5 : 38-39). But when Paul encountered "magical" religion in Ephesus (comparable to what we would call the "occult"), he employed a different logic: strongly exhorting people to abandon such practices and to burn the scrolls containing incantations (19:17–20). Today, Islam is the largest and most powerful non-Christian religion in the world. Historically, Christians have largely ignored it, but in 1500 years it has hardly gone away. So while God in his sovereignty graciously used Gamaliel's "logic" to help the disciples, we dare not imitate it in every instance.

Models of church government and organization in Acts disclose an even more bewildering variety of forms. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians all legitimately point to passages in Acts to support their views of church structure and leadership. In 6: 1-6 the entire congregation chooses the apostles' helpers. In 13: 1–3 a select group of church leaders chooses Barnabas and Saul for their missionary ministry. And in Acts 20:17–38 Paul resembles a "bishop" who convenes all the Ephesian "elders" for instruction. Each of these models in turn draws on various Jewish or Greco-Roman precedents. Luke views all of these models as appropriate applications of leadership principles under various circumstances in various cultures.[73] To apply them today, one needs to look for analogous circumstances in our cultures. It is probably not mere coincidence that a decision affecting everyone in a local congregation was discussed by all, that one limited to the personal ministries of church leaders was dealt with by that smaller group, and that general instruction for people in several congregations came from one who had authority over all of them.

On the other hand, sometimes patterns of ministry and mission remain constant throughout Acts. A good example is Luke's understanding of the filling of the Holy Spirit. Every time believers are filled with the Spirit-and this happens

[72]Fee and Stuart, ***How to Read, 97.***

[73]E.g., the Greek *ekklēsia* ("assembly" of citizens), the Jewish synagogue elders, and the Roman territorial magistrates.

repeatedly to the same person or group (2:4;5:8, 31; 9:17;13:9)—they are enabled to proclaim the Word of God boldly or to do mighty works in Jesus' name. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes different results of the Spirit's filling: praising and thanking God and submitting to other believers (Eph 5:18–21). But these descriptions are complementary rather than contradictory. A proper doctrine of Scripture will not allow Acts to be subordinated to Paul simply because the one is narrative and the other didactic literature. Neither will it permit Paul to be subordinated to Acts because of an inherent preference by some for the phenomena of Acts (such as speaking in tongues).[74]

Probably the most important examples of consistent patterns within Acts relate to Luke's main theme-the expansion of the Gospel from Jewish to Gentile territory. Amid the great diversity of sermons that Peter and Paul preach throughout the pages of Acts, we can discern a common kerygma. The first Christians consistently focus on the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus as the core of their proclamation. Because of who Jesus was and what he did, all people must now repent in order to receive forgiveness of sins. To be sure, this message can be found elsewhere in the NT but, even if it were not, its consistent appearance in Acts would make it normative.[75]

Even the diversity within the sermons in which this kerygma appears points to another consistent feature of early Christian preaching: concern for contextualization of the gospel. When preaching to Jews, Peter and Paul appeal to the fulfillment of Scripture (2:14–39;3:12–26;13:16–41). When addressing the Stoics and Epicureans, Paul explains to them their "unknown god" (17:22–31). When he speaks to the superstitious believers in mythology in Lystra, Paul appeals to the testimony of the creator as found in rain and harvest (14:14–18). In each case these preachers sought to establish common ground with their audiences in order to gain the greatest possible acceptance of their message. In each case, too, they made sure to include a distinctive witness to the true and living God, usually explicitly in terms of the person and work of Christ. Christians in all ages can learn much about cross-cultural ministry fi-om these models and would do well to emulate them.[76]

[74]Generally well-balanced in this respect is R. Stronstad, ***The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*** (Peabody: Hendrickson, **1984).**

[75]The classic study of the core kerygma is C. H. Dodd, ***The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments (New*** York: Harper and Row, ***1951).*** Cf. the discussion in G. E. Ladd, ***A Theology of the New Testament*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, **1974),328–44**.

[76]A particularly helpful study of the patterns of ministry and preaching throughout Acts is M. Green, ***Evangelism in the Early Church*** (London: Hodder and Stoughton, ***1970). The*** speeches of Acts have generated extensive scholarly debate with regard to their historicity. The ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, has been uncritically cited as Luke's exemplar to prove both substantial trustworthiness and substantial fabrication! It is not clear that there is one Thucydidean view of reporting speeches. He apparently followed memory and eyewitness sources carefully at times and on other occasions made up speeches while striving for historical verisimilitude. See S. E. Porter, "Thucydides 1.22.1 and Speeches in Acts: Is There a Thucydidean View?" ***NovT 32*** (1990): 121-42. On the speeches of Acts the most thorough and balanced study is now C. H. Gempf, "Historical and Literary Appropriateness in the Mission Speeches of Paul in Acts" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1988). But for those who believe in the authority of the final form of Scripture, irrespective of its prehistory or tradition criticism, few hermeneutical issues hinge on the solution to this debate.

The Genre of the Epistles

Implications for Interpretation

General Considerations

At first glance, genre criticism of the epistles would seem to have little to say. An epistle is a letter. The NT letters are less literary, formal, and artistic than many classical Greek treatises but still generally longer, more carefully structured, and more didactic than typical personal correspondence.[77] As writings from apostles and other early church leaders to various Christian communities and individuals, the epistles primarily teach theology and offer ethical instruction. From one point of view, then, the interpreter's task is easier here than anywhere else in Scripture. It would seem that we must believe the doctrine the epistles promulgate and obey the commands they promote. For example, a survey of Romans reveals Paul's concern to teach God's plan of salvation: from humanity's universal sinfulness (1:18–3:20), to justification in Christ (3:21–5:20), to sanctification by the Spirit, and glorification in the future (Rom 6-8). Key ethical topics include holistic transformation of body and mind (12:1–2), faithful use of spiritual gifts (12:3–8), Christian love and submission (12:9–13:14), and exercising or restraining one's freedom (14:1–15:13). Little wonder many people have come to faith in Christ and grown in their walk with him simply by reading Romans-without a hermeneutics textbook!

A more careful analysis, however, reveals complexities in the epistles. Though the most deliberately and directly didactic of all the NT genres, epistles are also the most "occasional." In other words, the authors wrote the epistles for specific occasions to address individual audiences who were facing unique problems. Interpreters must reconstruct those original "occasions" and purposes as precisely as possible in order to separate timeless principles from situation-specific applications. The same readers who found Romans so straightforward may puzzle quite a bit more when they come to 1 Cor 11 regarding Paul's instructions about men's and women's head coverings and the proper observance of the Lord's Supper. Few Christians today seem to pay any attention to what people do or do not wear on their heads in church or to how long their hair is, and few churches, if any, offer their communicants enough wine for anyone to worry about getting drunk. In fact, many prefer to substitute nonfermented juice for alcohol.[78]

While this problem of separating universal principles from context-bound or culturally limited applications is more thoroughly discussed in a later chapter, it is a particularly acute problem for the interpretation of epistles. Sometimes the historical

[77]For details of ancient letter writing, cf. esp. J. L. White, *Lightfrom Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); and S. K. **Stowers,** *Letter Writing in* **Greco-Roman** *Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

[78]C. Kraft recounts the provocative story of his missionary work in Nigeria in which new believers could not understand why Western Christians "obeyed the Biblical commands against stealing but not those about head-coverings" *(Christianity in Culture* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979], 138).

context enables the interpreter to determine how to proceed; sometimes the text of the epistle itself offers clues. For example, the text on the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:27–29) permits Christians to draw general principles applicable to situations in which drunkenness poses no danger. Whenever one eats or drinks "in an unworthy manner" (v. 27), one profanes the body and blood of Christ. The problem with the Corinthians' gluttony and drunkenness was, foremost, that it deprived others of getting enough to eat and drink (v. 21). So whenever members of a Christian congregation disregard each other's needs, they are not prepared to partake of the Lord's table. Notice that this application differs considerably from the common but mistaken notion that people should refrain from communion when they personally feel "unworthy." The Greek term is an adverb, not an adjective-we must not eat "unworthily."

These last examples illustrate one further general hermeneutical consideration for the epistles: they must be located as specifically as possible in a particular historical context. Fortunately, at least with the Pauline epistles, a close reading of a given letter from start to finish usually discloses specific details about that letter's audience and relevant circumstances.[79] Comparison with information in Acts often yields additional data,[80] and the study of other ancient writers' descriptions of the various cities in which the apostolic churches were situated may help to round out the picture.[81] Thus, we can learn much about Paul's opponents in Philippi from references in the letter itself (Phil 1:15–18; 3:2–11). We may appreciate the superstitious, pagan attitudes Paul had to contend with in Galatia by reading background material in Acts (cf. Acts 14:11–13 with Gal 3:1). And we can understand why Paul wrote extensively about sexual morality in 1 Corinthians (5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:1–40) when we learn from other historical sources that the massive temple to Aphrodite, which towered over the city of Corinth from a nearby cliff-top, had at one time employed over 1000 "sacred prostitutes"-male and female!

Of course, not all of the epistles can be so easily set in their historical contexts. Galatians, for instance, polarizes interpreters who debate whether it was written to North or South Galatia, and whether it is to be dated "early" or "late" (i.e., before or after the Apostolic Council of Acts 15). The comparison between Acts 14 and Gal 3 made above works only if an early date and Southern provenance are correct.[82] Hebrews and most of the **so-called general epistles (James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude) do not tell us nearly as much about their destinations or dates. And several of the letters ascribed to Paul (most notably Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastorals-1 & 2 Timothy and Titus), as well as those of James, Peter, and Jude, have often been viewed as pseudonymous (i.e., written in the name of an**

[79]Recall our detailed instructions above for researching historical background issues.

[80]Once the general trustworthiness of Acts is shown to be probable (on which see above).

[81]Cf. especially S. E. Johnson, *Paul: the Apostle* and *His Cities* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1987); and R. Brownrigg, *Pauline Places: In the Footsteps of Paul Through Turkey and Greece* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).

[82]For a good concise defense of these conclusions, and for an explanation of the issues at stake, see D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 290–94.

apostle or other leading Christian figure by someone else), perhaps dating from a generation or more after the lifetime of that individual.[83]

This issue of ***pseudonymity,*** therefore, deserves a few comments here. Authorship can make quite a difference in how one interprets, say, 1 Tim 2:8-15. For various reasons many scholars deny that Paul could have written the Pastorals. Instead, they view these three letters as the product of a disciple of Paul a generation later who wrote when the Church was becoming more institutionalized and chauvinistic. By that time, Christians had allegedly lost sight of the totally egalitarian positions of Jesus and Paul (cf. esp. Gal 3:28) and were lapsing back into the bad habits of the surrounding culture. Such a view, then, allows Christians to disregard the prohibitions in 1 Tim 2:12 against women teaching or having authority over men in church.

More liberal scholars have freely embraced pseudonymity when they perceived "contradictions" between the theologies of various epistles attributed to the same writer or noted marked changes in style or ethos. On the other hand, more conservative scholars have traditionally rejected pseudonymity as incompatible with the inspiration or authority of Scripture. If an epistle begins, "Paul, an apostle . . . ," they would argue, no one but Paul could have written it.

Neither of these approaches, however, can withstand close scrutiny. The linguistic and theological differences among the epistles have been overblown. Given the limited amount of material we have from any one Scripture writer, and given the different styles authors will adopt for different circumstances, we doubt that a modern reader could ever conclusively say that the person whose name appears in the opening verse could not have written a given epistle.[84]

But neither must we read such verses uncritically. No one today protests that the ***Congressional Record*** errs when it attributes to a particular senator a speech that was written by one of his aides and possibly was never delivered on the Senate floor! We understand the literary convention. Nor do readers of an autobiography of a famous public figure accuse its publishers of fraud when they discover in the preface that a ghost writer actually made the celebrity's memoirs legible. We must ask, therefore, whether or not pseudonymity would have been an accepted literary convention within first-century Christianity. The proliferation of popular intertestamental Jewish writings suggests that pre-Christian Judaism may have come to accept this device. The battle with Gnostic and other heretical Christian writings, from the mid-second century on, demonstrates that later Christians regularly rejected it. But what of the first century? The jury is still out; the evidence is meager on both sides.[85]

[83]As in most standard critical introductions to the New Testament, e.g., H. C. Kee, *Understanding the New Testament,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983).

[84]For detailed demonstration with respect to the Pastorals vs. the undoubted letters of Paul, see J. A. Libby, "A Proposed Methodology and Preliminary Data on Statistically Elucidating the Authorship of the Pastoral Epistles" (M.Div. Thesis, Denver Seminary, 1987).

[85]For opposing evangelical perspectives, cf. D. Guthrie, New *Testament Introduction,* 4th ed. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990),1011–28 (against pseudonymity); with D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and* Canon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) (for it>.

The most likely way to advance the discussion would be to show that a particular epistle conforms to a demonstrably pseudonymous genre. Of recent hypotheses, the most persuasive comes from Richard Bauckham, who relates 2 Peter to the consistently pseudonymous ***testamentary*** genre.[86] To Bauckham, 2 Pet 1:15 presents this epistle as "Peter's" final instructions to his followers shortly before his death. But, he observes, this is precisely the function of testaments written a generation or more later by a follower of a great individual, telling readers of that day what he believed the person would say if he were present. On this view, Peter's audience, knowing full well that Peter was long dead, would not have accused the epistle's author of any deception but would have recognized the attribution of authorship as a key to the letter's genre. Even as late as A.D. 200, Tertullian could explain that "it is allowable that that which pupils publish should be regarded as their master's work" (***Against Marcion*** 4:5). But, of course, testaments could be written by people in their own names as well, and not every feature of 2 Peter conforms to the genre; so even Bauckham's case must be declared only "possible" rather than conclusive. More importantly, this type of theory of pseudonymity does not in any way diminish the authority of the epistle; it remains just as normative for believers irrespective of authorship.

Specific Considerations

To interpret the NT epistles correctly we need to compare them with other Greco-Roman letters of antiquity. A fairly typical structure, which even first-century students were exhorted to follow, began with a salutation (identification of author, recipients, and some kind of greeting) and a prayer or expression of thanks for the well-being of the recipients. Then one proceeded to the body of the epistle, which set forth the major reason(s) for writing. If the writer had advice or exhortation to give, this came after the body. A closing farewell rounded out the document.[87]

Understanding these conventions enables the interpreter to recognize what is typical and atypical in the NT epistles. The opening prayers and thanksgivings, while obviously more theological than an average "secular" letter, in fact performed what all writers considered a common courtesy. On the other hand, when Galatians has no thanksgiving (had Paul written one, it would have come between 1:5 and 6), and when 1 Thessalonians has two (1 Thes 1:2–10; 2: 13–16), readers should sit up and take notice. Paul stresses the severity of the Galatians' lapse into legalism by ignoring standard conventions and plunging directly into the heart of his complaint against them. Conversely, Paul has more words of sustained praise for the Thessalonians than for any other apostolic congregation. So it is not surprising that he should include an unconventional, added section of thanksgiving.

Greco-Roman letters may also be divided into various subgenres. Au epistle like 1 Thessalonians illustrates the "parenetic" or ***exhortational letter.*** All the praise

[86]R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter, WBC 50* (Waco: Word, 1983), 131-63.

[87]For a helpful discussion see C. J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul, 3rd* ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1991), *59-71.*

that Paul lavishes on the Thessalonians fits the strategy of this kind of writing. He gives them some very pointed moral instruction in 4:1-12 (particularly on sexual and business ethics), and he corrects crucial points of theology in 4:13–5:11 (regarding Christ's second coming). But he tactfully prepares his readers for this exhortation by establishing his friendship with them and by emphasizing how well they are progressing and how little they really need any further instruction.[88]

A second subgenre is the *diatribe:* a conversational method of instruction in which hypothetical objections from opponents were considered and answered. Most of Rom l-11 fits reasonably well into this classification. So when Paul frequently discusses how someone tight reply to his presentation of the gospel (Rom 2:1, 9; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 7:7), one must not assume that such objectors were necessarily present in the Roman church. More likely, Paul was anticipating the type of response his letter might elicit and answering those charges before they ever arose.[89]

Still another subgenre of epistle is the letter ***of introduction or recommendation,*** designed to introduce the bearer of the letter to its recipients and then requesting a certain favor. Often the writer of the letter was a close friend or relative of the recipient(s), who was promising to return the favor in some way. Philemon is an excellent example of this genre. Paul asks Philemon to welcome home his runaway slave Onesimus without punishing him, promises to pay any damages Philemon incurred, and reminds Onesimus of the debts he owes Paul. The entire epistle is a masterpiece of tact and persuasion as Paul steers a delicate course between pleading and demanding. Since the letter of recommendation was a well-established genre of writing, Philemon could have been expected to comply with Paul's requests.[90]

Genre criticism of the epistles is so recent a discipline that many of its proposals are still quite new; scholars have not yet had time to evaluate them in detail. But many of these proposals, while not as clear cut as the examples of 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philemon, seem to hold out significant promise for honing our hermeneutical approach. So 2 Corinthians is likely an ***apologetic letter of self-commendation,*** a well-known Greco-Roman form of rhetorical self-defense. Although Paul recoils at the vacuous rhetoric of his opponents in Corinth, he, nevertheless, crafts a carefully structured and highly rhetorical response.[91] Chapters 10–13 are particularly steeped in irony and a kind of legitimate boasting of which rhetoricians particularly approved.[92] Recognizing Paul's strategy prevents a misreading of 1 Cor 2:1-5. Paul does not reject all the standards of "secular" wisdom of his day; he merely rejects anything that intractably opposes the gospel of the cross of Christ. Through the Spirit's power he happily employs effective rhetorical

[88]Cf. A. J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

[89]S. K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981).

[90]D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 211-12; Stowers, *Letter Writing,* 155.

[91]L. L. Belleville, "A Letter of Apologetic Self-Commendation: 2 Cor. 1:8–7:16," *NovT* 31 (1989): 142-63.

[92]Cf. esp. C. Forbes, "Comparison, Self-Praise and Irony: Paul's Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric," *NTS* 32 (1986): l-30.

devices to persuade his audiences of his views. Good Christian communication in any age should do the same.

Philippians has often been viewed as disjointed, even as a composite product of several epistles gathered haphazardly into one scroll. But more likely, this epistle actually illustrates the structure of the ***family fetter,*** combining, in sequence: an address and greeting (1:1–2), a prayer for the recipients (1:3–11), reassurance about the sender (1:12–26), a request for reassurance about the recipients (1:27–2:18), information about the movement of intermediaries (2:19–30), an exchange of greetings with third parties (4:21–22), and a closing wish for health (4:23). Paul then departs from convention and adds a polemic against false teachers (3:1–4:1) and various other exhortations and thank-yous (4:2–20). The Philippians have just sent him money, for which he expresses his gratitude, but they have also come under attack, which causes him distress. Because these two sections deviate from the norm, they would have stood out and received the most attention. Paul probably departed from the standard form of a family letter precisely to highlight these two special concerns.[93]

Another way of subdividing epistles considers the kinds of rhetoric they employ. The ancient Greeks and Romans distinguished three major categories: ***judicial (seeking*** to convince an audience of the rightness or wrongness of a past action), ***deliberative*** (trying to persuade or dissuade certain individuals concerning the expediency of a future action), and ***epideictic*** (using praise or blame to urge people to affirm a point of view or set of values in the present). A full-blown rhetorical address would contain all of the following features, though often one or more sections might be missing:

exordium	stated the cause and gained the audience's attention and sympathy
narratio	related the background and facts of the case
propositio	stated what was agreed upon and what was contested
probatio	contained the proofs based on the credibility of the speaker; appealed to the hearers' feelings and/or logical argument
refutatio	refuted opponents' arguments
peroratio	summarized argument and sought to arouse hearers' emotions.[94]

Many of the NT epistles reasonably approximate this structure. As a basis for outlining NT epistles, it can help the student understand how each part of a letter is functioning. For example, 2 Thes 2:1-2 would seem to form the thesis or *propositio*(n) around which all of the letter is built-the day of the Lord is not as immediately at hand as some in the church have been led to think.[95] Galatians 3: 1–4:31 gathers together the proofs *(probatio)* for Paul's proposition concerning justification by faith in 2: 15-21. These reveal the diversity of arguments an ancient

[93]Cf. further L. Alexander, "Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians," *JSNT* 37 (1989): 87-101.

[94]G. A. Kennedy, New *Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 24.

[95]F. W. Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians,* JSNTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 56-57.

writer or speaker might employ to try to persuade. They also suggest strategies that we may still use effectively today. These include arguments **from** undeniable personal experience (the Galatians' reception of the Spirit, 3: l-5 vs. their previous non-Christian lives, 4:8-11); from Scripture (Gen **15:6;** Deut **27:26;** Hab **2:4;** Lev **18:5;** and Deut **21:23** in Gal **3:6–14**); from common human practice (in making covenants, guarding prisoners, and granting inheritances, 3: 15-l **8, 2** l-22; 4: **1–**7); **from** Christian tradition (particularly in baptism, **3:26–3:29**); from friendship **(4:12–20);** and from an analogy (with the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant, **4:2** l-3 1) .[96]

Determining the rhetoric of an epistle often proves more difficult when two or three kinds are mixed together. Almost all NT letters function deliberatively because a primary purpose was to tell believers how to act or how not to act. Still, one may be able to distinguish an emphasis, say, between 2 and 3 **John.**[97] Third John seems primarily epideictic-"the elder" praises Gaius for his Christian lifestyle and hospitality. Although he encourages him to continue faithfully, Gaius does not need to be persuaded of the correctness of his behavior. But in 2 John, the elder employs primarily deliberative rhetoric, advising "the elect lady" on the correct course of action in light of the heretics who have seceded from her community. We, too, do well to know our audiences-when to praise and when to persuade. Faithful Christians do not need more sermons that tell them why they should do what they already know is right; in an age of abundant motivation by guilt we could do with a little more praise! Conversely, in more evangelistic contexts, in an increasingly secularized and paganized world (or church), we dare not assume that the logic of basic Christian beliefs or morals is widely understood or accepted. We need to contend for it with carefully thought-out arguments.

Rhetorical analysis can also demonstrate the unity of epistles previously thought to be composites. We have already observed this with Philippians and 2 Cor l-7 above. A third example is Romans. Some scholars identify the long list of greetings in chapter 16 as a misplaced appendix, perhaps belonging instead at the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. More plausibly, Romans uses epideictic rhetoric and the **subgenre** of an ***ambassadorial letter.***[98] That is to say, Paul paves the way for an anticipated visit to Rome by commending his understanding of the gospel to the church there and by explaining the purposes of his travels. It is in his best interests to establish a good hearing for his message by referring to individuals in the Roman Church with whom he is acquainted. As with Priscilla and Aquila, this probably took place when they had met or worked together elsewhere in the empire.

[96]H.-D. Betz, *Galatians,* Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 19–22; we have modified some of his labels.

[97]Cf. D. F. Watson, "A Rhetorical Analysis of 2 John according to Greco-Roman Convention," *NTS* 35 (1989): 104–30; with id., "A Rhetorical Analysis of 3 John: A Study in Epistolary Rhetoric," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 479–501.

[98]R. Jewett, "Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter," *Int* 36 (1982): 5–20.

Distinctives of Hebrews and the "General Epistles"

Hebrews and three of the general epistles-James, 1 John and Jude-vary **from** traditional letter genres: Hebrews does not begin like a letter, James does not end like one, and 1 John has neither a salutation nor a closing. Hebrews describes itself as "a word of encouragement (or exhortation)" (Heb **13:22**). Since this phrase occurs elsewhere in the NT only in Acts **13:15** where it designates a sermon, Hebrews may well have been designed as a written sermon or homily. Among other things, this means that the numerous warnings against apostasy **(2:1–4; 3:7–4:11; 6:4–12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29)** are most likely not hypothetical. The writer of Hebrews seriously believed that some in his congregation were in danger of abandoning their profession of Christian faith, and he wanted to warn them against **it.**[99]

Perhaps the most significant recent study of the genre of a non-Pauline epistle is Peter Davids' analysis of James as a complex ***chiasmus*** (for this device, see above). Three themes stand out: trials and temptations, wisdom and speech, and wealth and poverty. James 1 introduces each of these themes twice, while chaps. 2-5 present them in greater detail in inverse order.[100] Even if this outline requires modification at points, it refutes two widely-held notions about the letter. First, James is not simply a collection of teachings loosely strung together, like the book of Proverbs or other ancient wisdom literature. Second, James' main concern is not faith vs. works, though that has been the primary preoccupation of commentators ever since Martin Luther. Though this concern is significant, James' indictment of a faith that produces no works **(2:18–26)** is actually subordinate to the larger and more crucial topic: the appropriate use of one's material resources (see **2:14–17**). Opponents of "lordship salvation" and promoters of "the American way of life" would do well to ponder at greater length the implications of **2:15–16** in the context of the rhetorical question of v. 14 (which anticipates the answer, **no**).[101]

First John neither begins nor ends like a letter. Of several proposals that have been made, perhaps the best designates this document a ***deliberative homily.***[102] Like Hebrews, it resembles a sermon more than a letter. Like other forms of deliberative rhetoric, it was designed to persuade. In this case, John calls the Ephesian churches to side with him and embrace true Christian doctrine and practice over against the false teachers who promoted heresy and ungodliness, and who had begun to split the church **(2:19).** If John had any outline in mind as he wrote, it has defied the

[99]On the genre and exegesis of Hebrews, see esp. W. L. Lane, *Hebrews, WBC 47A* & B (Dallas: **Word, 1991).**

[100]P. H. Davids, ***The Epistle of James,*** NIGTC (**Exeter**: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

"'According to James, those who profess to be Christians but continue to ignore fellow believers living in abject poverty around the world (to say nothing of the rest of the poor!), when they have the ability to share with them, prove thereby that their professions are vacuous. To James, such people are not saved and remain in danger of eternal damnation if they do not change their ways. On lordship salvation, cf. the brief but helpful study by J. F. MacArthur, Jr., "Faith according to the Apostle James," *JETS 33* (1990): 13-34. On James and material possessions see esp. E. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James (New* York: Crossroad, 1990).

[102]Aune, *The* New *Testament in Its Literay Environment, 218.*

best attempts of commentators to discover it. But perhaps he was composing instead a series of meditations around the themes of "the tests of life"—in Jesus as fully human and fully divine, obedience to God's commandments, and love for one another-so that we should not try to impose more structure than was ever intended.[103]

Jude may well illustrate the more distinctively Jewish genre and interpretive techniques of *midrash (see* Chapter 5),[104] though without introducing any fictitious details. Verses 3-4 state Jude's purpose in a nutshell: "I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. . . ." Verses 5-19 do not argue the case but merely present a series of illustrations of what this condemnation will be like. Here Jude draws heavily on Jewish Scripture and tradition. He likens the false teachers to three OT exemplars and then interprets these comparisons (w. 5-10). Then he repeats the process with three more OT *types (w.* 11-13). Turning to intertestamental sources, he cites and interprets the "prophecy" of 1 Enoch (w. 14-16). Arriving finally at the NT age, Jude recalls and comments on the prophecies of the apostles (w. 17-19). The effect was powerful, rhetorically, even if it seems troublesome to the modern reader. The harshness of Jude's polemic was actually mild by the standards of his day.

Genre criticism of the epistles remains so new that few handbooks or guidelines exist for the beginning student. So how are we to know how to classify or outline the epistles in light of ancient rhetoric? Until commentaries, NT introductions, and surveys begin more regularly to incorporate genre and rhetorical analysis, students should proceed cautiously.[105] Familiarity with studies like those of Aune (*The* New *Testament in Its Literary Environment)* and Stowers (Letter *Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity),* who discuss other Greco-Roman letters and epistolary theorists, will give one a feel for the possibilities and pitfalls that remain.'" The student needs to ask questions such as: is this writer encouraging, persuading, praising, or blaming? where is his main proposition? how does he introduce it, develop it and defend it? Soon the task will not seem quite as intimidating.[107]

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[103]R. Law, *The Tests of Life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909).

[104]Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter, 3-6.*

[105]A trend is definitely growing. See, in addition to literature already cited, D. J. Moo, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 14–16; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians, WBC 41* (Dallas: Word, 1990), c-cxix; C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians,* NIGTC (Exeter: Pastemoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), *45-52;* and P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 11-14.

[106]In addition to the literature already cited, see esp. A. J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary 7heorist.s* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); and B. L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[107]The studies of various individual epistles cited in the footnotes above should prove very useful. In addition, for epistles not already discussed in our illustrations, cf. L. L. Belleville, "Continuity or Discontinuity: A Fresh Look at 1 Corinthians in the Light of First-Century Epistolary Forms and Conventions," *EvQ* 59 (1987): 15-37; H. Hendrix, "On the Form and Ethos of Ephesians," *USQR* 42 (1988): 3-15; G. E. Cannon, *The* Use *of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon: Mercer, 1983), 133–74; B. Fiore, *Personal Example in the Socratic and Pastoral Epistles* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986); and W. L. Schutter, *Hermeneutic and Composition in 1 Peter* (Tiibingen: Mohr, 1989).

Individual Forms in the Epistles

Form criticism of the epistles is not nearly as common as that of the Gospels. For the most part, NT letter writers did not rely on existent materials nor did they use self-contained forms. But important exceptions do occur. Perhaps the four most significant forms for a study of hermeneutics are creeds or hymns, domestic codes, slogans, and virtue and vice lists.

Creeds or Hymns

In several places in the epistles, short, paragraph-length sections of a letter present key summaries of doctrine, usually of Christology, in a fashion that resembles ancient poetry, hynmody, and confessions of faith. Scholars generally agree, therefore, that the epistle-writers borrowed and/or modified units of material that were already well-known and valued in the worship of the early church. Commonly cited examples in Paul include Phil 2:6–11; Coll:15–20; and 1 Tim 3:16. Peter perhaps used confessional forms in at least three instances: 1 Pet 1:18–21; 2:21–25; and 3:18–22. Criteria for recognizing these creeds include the presence of a carefully structured poetic style (rhythm and parallelism) that suddenly intrudes into ordinary prose; a self-contained unit of thought introduced with a relative pronoun as a rationale for various instructions; unusual language and vocabulary; and concise statements of doctrine listed sequentially.[108]

Of course this all involves a substantial measure of speculation, but where proposals of hymns or creeds seem reasonable, several implications follow. We may discern information that reflects what the Church over a fairly wide area probably deemed important in some of its earliest years. We may acknowledge liturgical aspects of early Christian worship, possibly including the discovery of baptismal liturgies.[109] And at times we may make educated guesses about distinctions between tradition and redaction. For example, Phil 2:6–11 falls relatively neatly into two stanzas concerning the condescension (w. 6-8) and exaltation (w. 9-11) of Jesus. Each of these in turn may subdivide into three strophes of three lines each, each line containing three stressed syllables. But one phrase breaks this symmetry: "even death on a cross" (end of v. 8). When we recognize that the cross formed the center of Paul's preaching (1 Cor 2:2), it seems plausible that Paul incorporated into his letter a preexistent Christian hymn or creed to which he added one crucial line[110]—the line he wanted to stress.

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[108]For an even more detailed list, see M. Barth, *Ephesians,* I (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 7-g.

[109]A good introduction to the topic of prePauline tradition in the epistles appears in Martin, *New Testament Foundations,* 2:248–75. On pre-Petrine material, see especially J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude,* BNTC (London: A & C Black, 1969), 11-26, and ad loc. for passages cited.

[110]E. Lohmeyer *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2,5–11* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1928). Numerous other analyses of Phil 2:6–11 caution against valuing this one too highly, but it still seems to us quite plausible. The most influential English language study of this passage, which agrees that the end of v. 8 is Paul's key addition to an existing hymn, is R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* SNTSMS 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

The Domestic Code

Numerous ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman sources contain sections of instruction for individuals in a relationship of authority or submission. Often these instructions focused on relationships within the extended household: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. Scholars thus refer to these materials as "domestic" or "household" codes, following Luther's use of the German term *Haustafeln.* Colossians 3: 1841, Eph 5:22–6:9, and 1 Pet 2: 13–3:7 form three clear examples of this form. Probably the most significant discovery that emerges from a comparison of canonical and extra-canonical *Haustafeln* concerns the radical nature of the NT's views about the subordinate partner in each relationship. Modern readers debate at great length to what extent Christian wives, children, slaves, and even citizens should still submit to those people and institutions traditionally seen as authorities over them. But few if any ancient readers would have concentrated on this. They would have taken submission for granted but would have been shocked to read of the strict limitations imposed on the authority of husbands, parents, and masters. Perhaps if the church today paid more attention to obeying these latter commands, the former ones would not seem so oppressive."[111]

Slogans

First Corinthians offers interpreters a relatively unique challenge. In this NT epistle the writer states that he is responding to a specific set of questions and controversies (posed both orally and in writing) from the church (1:1 1; 7: 10). Hence, the outline of 1 Corinthians reads like a checklist of Paul's answers to these various problems: for example, on incest (5:1–12), lawsuits (6:1–11), sexual immorality more generally (6:12–20), marriage and divorce (7:1–40), and so on. In the process, Paul will quote a view, held by some at Corinth, that he wishes to dispute. He can endorse these "slogans" up to a point but must substantially qualify them. This approach has been referred to as Paul's "yes-but" logic. In at least three instances these slogans are so clear that translators of the NIV felt confident enough to introduce quotation marks (6:12; 6:13; and 10:23). Obviously, Paul himself could not have taught that "everything is permissible for me" (6: 12) without substantial qualification!

In other instances we may not feel quite so confident, but the hypothesis of a Corinthian slogan remains probable. Given the likely influence of a quasi-or proto-Gnostic influence at Corinth, it is reasonable to interpret 8:1 with the NIV margin as "We all possess knowledge, 'as you say.'" Also 7:1 likely introduces a slogan, again as in the NIV margin: "'it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.'" Origen (ca. A.D. 200), for example, already considered this a slogan. In

[111]On NT *Haustafeh, see* esp. D. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981); and J. E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafeln* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972).

fact, all of chap. 7 falls into place once one recognizes that Paul is responding to an ascetic wing of the church that was overly zealous about celibacy. Paul's main point throughout, then, becomes: "Don't change your state in life or be too eager to preserve it, just to avoid having sex." Notwithstanding various exceptions that he discusses, Paul basically tells the Corinthians that married couples should not deprive each other of sexual favors (w. 2-7); that widows and widowers should consider remaining unmarried only if they can do so without self-destructive lusting (w. 8-9); that divorce is not a legitimate way to avoid sex (w. 10-16); and that it is good for those who have never married to consider celibacy, though marriage is not a sinful option (w. 25-38). Personally, Paul clearly prefers celibacy, but he also recognizes that only a limited number of believers have been gifted for this lifestyle. So he acknowledges some validity to the pro-celibacy advocates in Corinth but substantially qualifies their enthusiasm. The "occasional" setting of 1 Corinthians accounts for Paul's tone and emphases, and helps readers to understand better how the same apostle could sound so enthusiastic about marriage in Ephesians (5:25–33), a letter, interestingly, that was likely intended for a much wider audience.[112]

These various Corinthian slogans share several common features: they are short and concisely worded (as slogans typically are); they reflect views with which Paul can agree in part, but which prove significantly misleading if interpreted as absolutes; and they represent a common perspective found in the form of ancient Greek philosophy that eventually developed into Gnosticism. Recognition of these common features may enable interpreters to evaluate other proposals for slogans in 1 Corinthians. One of the most popular in the last two decades, though apparently never seriously advocated before this century, involves 14:33b–35. Proponents of this view understand Paul's comments about women being silent and in submission as another aberrant Corinthian view, which w. 36b–38 then reject. But w. 33b–35 satisfy none of the criteria just noted. They are not concise or proverbial. If w. 36 38 form Paul's response, then he does not endorse w. 33b–35 even in part. And the perspective attributed to the Corinthians would be the opposite of the more egalitarian thrust of proto-Gnosticism. There still are numerous ways to account for w. 33b–35, including some that support a modern feminist agenda, but the proposal that these verses form a slogan is probably the least likely of all.[113]

Vice and Virtue Lists

A final example of common forms within the NT epistles consists of lists of qualities or actions that typify morality or immorality from a Christian perspective. Jews and pagans often compiled similar lists. Examples from the NT include Rom 1:29–31; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–23; Jas 3:17–18; and 2 Pet 1:5–7. Comparison

[112]This assessment of 1 Cor 7 and of slogans elsewhere in the epistle is heavily indebted to G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 266–357.

[113]In our opinion the most convincing exegesis is that of J. B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981), 185-94. Cf. W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), 239-55.

with extrabiblical parallels again reveals the NT distinctives as well as one or two principles of hermeneutics. For example, homosexual acts were regularly condoned in the ancient Greek world. Paul's uniform condemnation of them (Rom 1:24–32; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) would have stood out and caused offense then as it often does today. But faithfulness to the gospel requires that these sins be labeled as such in any age. First and last items on a list often prove the most important, but the subsequent order of items may indicate no particular hierarchy."* So we should probably take "love" as the preeminent fruit of the Spirit and the highest goal of the life of faith (Gal 5:22; 2 Pet 1:7; cf. 1 Cor 13) and recognize that "wisdom" must be morally pure above all else (Jas 3: 17).

Key Theological Issues for the Pauline Epistles

As noted above, when a writer has written as many different books over a period of time as did Paul, distinctive theological questions arise. The two most pressing are: (1) Is there a unifying center of Pauline theology? and (2) Does Paul's theology "develop" from one period of time to another so that he changes his mind on any significant issue?

The Center of Pauline Theology

Because of Luther's influence, most Protestants acknowledged that Paul's foremost concern was to stress "justification by faith" over all forms of "works-righteousness." Over time, however, certain planks in Luther's pladorm eroded. For example, Paul was not struggling as a Jew with a guilty conscience, increasingly more frustrated with his inability to please God through good works. Quite the contrary, he thought that he was "blameless" under the Law (Phil 3:6) and "advancing in Judaism beyond many" of his age (Gal 1 :14).[115] The debate over Rom 7:14–25 continues to rage, but one conclusion seems clear: Paul does not there describe a battle he felt before his conversion. Either this details his post-conversion perception of what had previously occurred, or more likely, is a description of the struggle he continued to experience as a Christian between his old and new natures.

Luther's "center," however, generally held firm though an occasional voice would propose a different, though often complementary, unifying theme (reconciliation or being "in Christ").[116] Sometimes a scholar or two would question whether Paul's theology was even consistent enough to have a unifying center.[117] But largely through

[114]Bauckham, **Jude, 2** *Peter,* **172-93.**

[115]See **esp. K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,"** *HTR* **56 (1963): 199-215.**

[116]Cf **respectively, R. P. Martin,** *Reconciliation: A Stud' of* ***Paul's*** *Theology* **(Atlanta: Knox, 1981); and W. D. Davies,** *Paul and* ***Rabbinic*** *Judaism,* **4th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress,** 1980), **221-22.**

[117]E.g., **H. Liidemann,** ***Die Anthropologie*** *des* ***Apostels Paulus*** *und ihre* ***Stellung*** *innerhalb seiner Heilslehre* **(Kiel: Universitats Buchhandlung, 1872). Among current scholars, see esp.** H.Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* **(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).**

the writings of E. P. Sanders and his followers since 1977, a quite new look on Pauline theology has taken center stage.[118] Many scholars today contend that first-century Judaism was not characterized by "merit theology" or works-righteousness, so that Paul's main contrast with Judaism cannot be faith (or grace) vs. works. Rather, Jews believed in "covenantal nomism." Obeying the Law saved no one, but obedience kept one within the exclusive covenant community God had established with Israel. Accordingly, Paul's radical challenge to Judaism was his (to the Jews) radical universalism: the message that one could come to God in Christ apart from the Torah. In this view, Paul's complaint with Jewish practices such as circumcision, the dietary laws, or the Sabbath ordinances was that most Jews had turned them into "badges" of national pride and identity; they were not trying to save themselves by performing these rituals. The incorporation of Gentiles into the Church on equal terms with Jews thus replaces "justification by faith" as a unifying core of Paul's thought.

Obviously, the way one interprets much of what Paul wrote will depend on how one assesses this kind of debate over his theological center. The major critical commentaries by C. E. B. Cranfield and J. D. G. Dunn on Romans, for example, consistently come to quite different conclusions because Cranfield is aligned more with the older consensus, while Dunn enthusiastically advocates the "new look."[119] Probably the truth lies somewhere between the two.[120] The point of introducing the debate here is simply to remind interpreters again that much depends on the theological grids they presuppose when they approach a text. While we have made this point more generally elsewhere, it is acute for the epistles of Paul, since nowhere else in Scripture do so many different documents come from the same writer. If a minor point of one document is turned into a major point for all, or vice-versa, interpretation will be skewed.

Is There Development in Paul's Writings?

The proliferation of Pauline epistles leads to the second theological problem. Does Paul ever change his mind or "progress" in understanding on a particular issue? Evangelicals have typically rejected this idea where it implied contradiction within the NT even while regularly appealing to "progressive revelation" to account for God's clear policy changes between the old and new covenants. But what of Paul's harsh words against Peter and the Judaizers in Gal 2:11–21 when compared with his policy of bending over backwards to be "all things to all people" in 1 Cor 9:19–23? And doesn't he believe in 1 Thes 4: 13-18 that he will live to see Christ's return, whereas later he recognizes he might die first (2 Cor 1:8–1 1)?

The possibility of development in Paul cannot be excluded simply by an appeal to a high view of Scripture. Not only does revelation progress between the testa-

[118]See **esp.E. P. Sanders,** *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* **(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); id.,** *Paul, the* ***Law,*** *and* ***the Jewish*** *People* **(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).**

[119]C. **E. B. Cranfield,** *A Critical and* ***Exegetical*** *Commentary on the* ***Epistle*** *to the Romans, ICC,* 2 vols. **(Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1975-79); and J. D. G. Dunn,** *Romans, WBC* 38A & B (Waco: **Word,** 1988).

[120]See **esp. S. Westerholm,** *Israel's* ***Law*** *and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent* ***Interpreters*** **(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).**

ments, but a prophet of the Lord may reverse his message completely in a matter of minutes based on a new word from God (cf., e.g., 2 Kgs 10:1–6). But having said this, we believe the case for development in Paul remains unproven. Better explanations in each case account for the data that have given rise to hypotheses of development. For example, Gal 2 and 1 Cor 9 differ because at Galatia the eternal lives of Paul's hearers were at stake. Any attempt to earn salvation through works only damns a person, so Paul resists the idea adamantly. To the Corinthians, however, he talks about morally neutral practices that establish common ground in order to win the gospel a good hearing. Actually, a unity underlies the two passages: Paul will do whatever it takes, without being immoral or unethical, to bring people to saving faith through the grace of Jesus Christ. In the case of 1 Thes 4 and 2 Cor 1, interpreters have probably misunderstood Paul's earlier comments. The "we" of 1 Thes 4: 15 does not necessarily include Paul. Grammatically, the phrase "we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord" simply means "whichever Christians are still alive. . . ."[121]

On the other hand, one may fairly speak of a development in Paul between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In 1 Thes 4: 13-5: 11 Paul warns the Thessalonians against fearing that Christ's return would be overly delayed. In 2 Thes 2:1-12 he cautions them not to think that it has already taken place. Quite possibly, 2:2 indicates that they had overreacted to his first letter.[122] But no contradiction divides these two epistles; he simply affirms that one must maintain a crucial balance between assuming the Second Coming is too near or that it is too distant. Each proposal concerning "development" in Paul must, therefore, be evaluated on its own merits. Can it be articulated without resulting in a necessary contradiction in Paul's thought? Does it fit the best interpretation of each of the key texts involved? Does it make best sense of the historical contexts in which the various documents were written? Only after we answer these questions can we make confident pronouncements.

The Genre of Revelation

Even the great Reformer, John Calvin, admitted his uncertainty about what to do with the book of Revelation. He did not write a commentary on it even though he completed volumes on almost all the rest of the NT. Interpreters through the ages have shared Calvin's perplexity, and many of the writers of popular commentaries and guides to its prophecies might have done better to follow in his footsteps! Still, genre criticism can help the careful student sift the more likely from the less likely interpretations among the maze of opinions that compete for attention. Perhaps the most important key is to recognize that Revelation combines parts of three distinct genres: epistle, prophecy, and apocalyptic.

[121]On the issue of development as well as on other major hermeneutical issues for Paul's writings, see esp. T. R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

[122]I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 24, 187.

Revelation as an Epistle

Revelation 1:4 states clearly that this book was written to seven churches in Asia Minor. Chapters 2-3 contain seven mini-letters with commendation and/or condemnation for each church. Thus, Revelation includes various characteristics of epistles. For example, interpreters will need to try to reconstruct as accurately as possible the historical circumstances of each church.[123] Most of the details of the letters to the seven churches make better sense when read against this background. For example, ancient Laodicea was well-known for its material wealth, the medicinal ointment it produced, and its woolen industry. But the pathetic state of its church led John to encourage believers there to purchase spiritual wealth, "white clothes to wear . . . and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see" (2: 18). As was mentioned briefly in an earlier chapter, archaeology has shed light on the water supply of Laodicea. The city depended on water that came through aqueducts from either the cold mountain streams near Colossae or the natural hot springs near Hierapolis. Either way, the water was notorious for being disgustingly lukewarm by the time it arrived in town. So John calls the church there not to resemble its water supply but to be either refreshingly cold or therapeutically hot. The common view that "cold" here means "clearly opposed to the gospel" or "completely insensitive" is almost certainly the exact opposite of what John meant![124]

Sometimes we are not able to determine the original meaning of John's allusions so easily. The white stone of 2:17 might have been an admission ticket, a jury's vote of "not guilty," or an amulet with a divine name. "Satan's throne" in Pergamum (2:13) might have referred to a temple to the Greek god Zeus, or to the imperial center for emperor worship, or to the shrine to Asklepios, the Greek god of healing. But in both instances the general sense of something highly desirable or undesirable is clear enough.

Studying Revelation as an epistle written to identifiable believers under specific circumstances is also appropriate for material outside chapters 2 and 3. Primarily, the book purposes to encourage Christians undergoing persecution, ***not*** to confuse or divide its readers over fine points of eschatology. In fact, many of John's visions of the future called to mind contemporary events in the Roman empire near the end of the first century. The judgment of the third seal in 6:6 closely resembles the famine of A.D. 92. A day's supply of wheat and barley became so scarce as to consume an entire day's wage. But the olive trees and grapevines, whose roots grew deeper, were not as affected by the relatively short-lived drought. So it seems that God wanted the readers of Revelation to envision the coming judgment as similar to the famine they had recently experienced.[125]

[123]The two best resources for this enterprise, the first a classic and the second an important modern update, are W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904); and C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, JSNTSup 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986). On a more popular level see J. R. Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35-50.

[124]Cf. further M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," *ExpT* 69 (1957–58): 176–78.

[125]Cf. G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 101: "these words place a limitation on the degree of scarcity."

Or again in 9:7–11, the bizarre description of the locusts of the fifth trumpet probably called to mind the distinctive appearance of the Parthian hordes that periodically attacked Rome in its northeastern-most outposts. Unlike the Romans, the Parthians relied heavily on a

> corps of mounted archers, whose tactics were to shoot one volley as they charged and another over their horses 'tails'. There was therefore some factual basis for John's surrealist pictures of 'horses able to wound with their mouths and their tails.'[126]

Just as the Parthians offered the severest threat known in first-century times to the seeming invincibility of the Roman empire, so Satan's endtime armies will prepare for the greatest battle ever conceived in human history (though chap. 19 describes how this "battle" ends before it is scarcely begun!).

Interpreting Revelation in light of the events of its day should caution overly zealous interpreters against looking for detailed correspondence between the events predicted and contemporary news items in the twentieth (or any other) century. Many items familiar to first-century audiences contribute to the overall imagery without necessarily corresponding to any specific "endtimes" referent. Christian scholars generally agree that the writers of the popular endtime paperbacks in the local Christian bookstore have missed the message! A perennially best-selling work of nonfiction, Christian or otherwise, in the United States has been Hal Lindsey's The ***Late Great Planet Earth,***[127] yet over and over again he violates fundamental hermeneutical principles. He asserts that in Rev 9:7–1 1 John was describing armed helicopters and their tailgunners! Now to be sure, he draws some striking parallels between John's locusts and modern-day flying machines, but in so doing he ignores the meaning that would have occurred to John's original readers in favor of one that could never have been imagined until a few decades ago. This violates the most basic principle of hermeneutics: seek the meaning of the text. What is more, his interpretation unwittingly "demythologizes" the text. Instead of depicting supernatural, demonic creatures coming out of the Abyss (w. 2-3) ruled by Satan their king (v. 1 1), Lindsey reduces John's vision to one about mere human warfare.

Lindsey and many others would avoid such errors by observing a basic rule of hermeneutics that interpreters are prone to abandon when studying Revelation: ***the text cannot mean something that would have been completely incomprehensible to its original audience.***[128] Nor may one appeal to Dan 12:9 in support of a different view. True Daniel did not understand everything he prophesied (v. 8), and God did reply through an angel that "the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end."

[126]G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine,* BNTC (London: Black; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 122.

[127](Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

[128]Fee and Stuart (*How to Read,* 209) put it this way: "The primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean."

But we must register three crucial observations. First, the only thing Daniel did not explicitly understand was "the outcome of all this." He did not ask for an explanation of what he had been told but for further information about what had not been revealed. Second, concerning what had been revealed, he was told only that "none of the wicked will understand," but "those who are wise [i.e. not wicked] will understand" (v. 10). Third, Revelation differs from Daniel in that, as the completion of new covenant revelation, God brings his plan of salvation-history to the threshold of the end. All stands ready for Christ to return. So John is told exactly the opposite from what Daniel was instructed: "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near" (Rev 22:10).

Revelation as Prophecy

Frederick Mazzaferri's recent study has shown how the closest generic parallels to Revelation appear in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and particularly Ezekiel. John stands in the tradition of the major prophets of the OT-foretelling as well as forthtelling.[129] Scholars have long debated four major interpretations of the time-orientation of Revelation. The ***preterist*** approach sees all events as past; the ***futurist,*** as all still future (at least from chapter 6 on); the ***historicist,*** as tracing the development of the entire Church Age; and the ***idealist,*** as a symbolic presentation of the timeless struggle between good and evil.[130] When Revelation, with its liberal dose of symbolism appearing throughout, is viewed as similar to OT prophecy, a combination of preterist and futurist interpretations emerges as best. The climactic man&station of the events that usher in Christ's return (chaps. 6-19) remains yet future, but the events will nevertheless resemble (even if on a larger scale) the victories and judgments that God's people and the world have experienced many times since creation.

Not surprisingly, then, the seven seals closely resemble the signs that Jesus said must occur even though "the end is not yet" (Mt 24:6): warfare, murder, famine, and earthquakes-disasters that have afflicted people through most ages of human history. The seven trumpets and bowls call to mind the plagues of God against the Egyptians in Moses' day (hail and fire, water turning to blood, darkness, and sores or boils on people; cf. Exod 7-l 1). Clearly God is more concerned to warn his people with imagery familiar to them than with literal photographs of what everything will look like. So we cannot be sure just how these prophecies of judgment will be fulfilled. But as prophecy we can expect them to point to real events at the end of the Church Age that have not yet occurred. The ***prophecies predict literal events, thou& the descriptions do not portray the events literally.***

[129]F. D. Mazzaferri, *The* Gent-e *of the Book of Revehtion from a Source-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

[130]For further delineations of these various options see the introductions to most standard commentaries on the Apocalypse. Useful examples include: Ladd, *Revelation;* R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); and P. E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Finally, see M. C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

Thus, we may not know exactly who the two witnesses of 11:3–6 are, but we know that God's Word will continue to be proclaimed with great power in the last days. If we should happen to be living in the final generation, this should encourage us to continue witnessing boldly for Christ. Or again, we probably should not waste too much time trying to guess what great world figure or empire will play the role of the beast of 13:1–4. Numerous guesses have littered the pages of church history, and all of them so far have proved wrong. But in the end we can expect some ruler and/or government to usurp the prerogatives of God and persecute his people, even as others have so many times throughout history.

If Revelation is prophecy, then only an antisupernatural bias will permit one to agree with Adela Yarbro Collins when she writes that "a hermeneutic which takes historical criticism seriously can no longer work with an interventionist notion of God."[131] In other words, she believes that modern readers cannot seriously expect the world to end with God's supernatural intervention by means of the various plagues and the tribulation described in Revelation. Certainly we do not expect the universally visible and bodily return of Jesus Christ from heaven, she says. Yet an understanding of Revelation as prophecy must affirm precisely this, however much different schools of interpretation disagree concerning other details (most notably concerning the millennium and the rapture).[132]

Revelation as Apocalyptic

Probably the most significant of the three genres in Revelation is the last one. The title of the book, derived from its first line, designates the document as the *apokalypsis: "the revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1). Apocalyptic literature was prevalent in the world of the NT (cf. the earlier discussion of OT apocalyptic). Contemporary Jewish writings like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, and to a lesser extent 1 Enoch, exemplified this genre. Daniel 7-12 and Zech 9-14 provide the closest OT parallels. Later Christian writings like the Apocalypse of John the Theologian and the Apocalypse of Peter offer still further illustrations.[133]

[131] A. Y. Collins, "Reading the Rook of Revelation in the Twentieth Century," *Int* 40 (1986): 242.

[132] Two symposia helpfully lay out the major perspectives and give each contributor a chance to respond to each other. *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. R. G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1977), presents advocates for *postmillenniallism* (Christ returns after the 1000 years described in Rev 20:4), *amillenniallism* (this millennium is symbolic for either the whole Church Age or the new heavens and earth of chapters 21–22), and *premillenniallism* (Christ returns before the millennium)—which then subdivides into *historic* and *dispensational* forms. In *The Rapture and the Tribulation: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), R. Reiter, P. D. Feinberg, G. L. Archer, and D. J. Moo debate whether Christians alive just prior to Christ's return are bodily removed (or "raptured") from the earth before, during, or after the judgments of God described in chapters 6 (7)–16.

[133] Good studies of apocalyptic literature include D. Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983); and C. Rowland, *The* Open *Heaven (New* York: Crossroad, 1982). The fullest collection of texts is J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983).

Characteristics of apocalyptic literature include a description of the events surrounding the end of world history, often said to have come from God by means of angelic or otherworldly intermediaries. Visions and dreams appear regularly. God's supernatural intervention into this age at the end of time rescues a sinful world in a way that no human ideology or schemes can accomplish. Elaborate and sometimes bizarre symbolism depicts past, present, and future events in a way that requires a careful decoding of the elements of the text. Battles between the forces of good and evil often appear with the good eventually triumphing. One of the primary purposes of apocalypses, therefore, is to encourage a beleaguered religious community in times of oppression or persecution.

More formal definitions of apocalypses are not easy to agree on. One widely endorsed, more technical definition comes from John Collins in conjunction with a "working group" of scholars from the Society of Biblical Literature:

> 'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an other worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.[134]

On the other hand, Leon Morris nicely summarizes eight key *differences* between Revelation and typical apocalypses:

1. regular references to the book as prophecy;
2. typically prophetic warnings and calls for repentance;
3. lack of pseudonymity;
4. an optimistic worldview;
5. no retracing of past history in the guise of prophecy;
6. realized eschatology (the end times have begun with the first coming of Christ);
7. little interpretation by angels; and
8. belief that the Messiah has already come and made atonement.[135]

In large measure we may account for these differences by distinctives of Christian rather than Jewish theology and by the fact that Revelation is prophetic as well as apocalyptic.

To the extent that Revelation shares features of other apocalypses, however, several important interpretive implications follow.[136] Most importantly, we must recognize that Revelation employs highly symbolic and figurative imagery that we dare

[134] J. J. Collins, "Introduction: Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

[135] L. Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, TNTC, 2d ed. (Leicester: Intervarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 25-27.

[136] Perhaps the best, more detailed introductory guide for interpreting Revelation is A. B. Mickelsen, *Daniel and Revelation: Riddles or Realities* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

not interpret too literally. Virtually every reader recognizes this in the most obvious instances: as when John specifically explains that the seven stars are angels (or messengers); that the seven lampstands are churches (1:20); that the dragon is the devil (12:9); that the bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints (5:8); that ten horns are ten kings (17:12); and that the great prostitute is a city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18).

But it is amazing how often those same readers do not recognize that they should interpret the other images in the book as equally symbolic. Instead, many insist that references to a temple (e.g., 11:1) must refer to a literal, rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, that the battle of Armageddon (Hebrew for Mt. Megiddo, 16:16) must occur at that specific geographical site in northern Israel, or that the mark of the beast (13:16–17) has to be some actual visible sign that distinguishes unbelievers from believers. [137]

A far more legitimate approach is to study each scene and each image in light of what Revelation itself tells about them, in light of relevant OT backgrounds, and in view of other historical information of which John's first-century audience would have been aware. Deciphering the imagery of Revelation then becomes much like interpreting an editorial cartoon in a newspaper. A reader of an American paper in 1989, for example, who saw a picture of a large bear extending an olive branch in his paw to a bald eagle, would recognize the portrait of Soviet overtures of peace to the United States. Similarly, we may see the woman who flies to the desert to escape the attacks of the serpent (who is also a dragon making war on her offspring) as the Church being protected by God even as individual believers are persecuted and sometimes martyred by Satan and those on earth who serve him (13:13–17).

It is crucial, therefore, to determine the symbolic elements of Revelation and what they stand for. We have no shortcuts or simplistic answers. Interpreters must become familiar with the relevant historical background and the most likely theological significance of various details. As with parables, certain parts of a vision may function only to add life, color, or drama to the picture. Here, if ever, students must consult a representative sampling of the better commentaries on Revelation, and, where these disagree, students must try to decide which approach is most self-consistent and most likely to have made sense to John's original audience.[138] The more time the student spends reading apocalyptic, the more confidence he or she will gain in the process. We can give only a small sampling of illustrations here, but hopefully, they will clarify the proper procedures.

One image for which OT background is helpful is the bittersweet scroll of 10:9-11, which closely resembles the scroll Ezekiel was commanded to eat (Ezek 2:9–3:9). There it clearly referred to the message of both judgment and hope that God commanded his prophet to speak to his people. This fits perfectly in Revelation as well.

[137] A good list of symbols explained by Revelation, by the OT, or left unexplained, appears in Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation,* 186-93.

[138] To those mentioned above we add G. R. Beasley-Murray, The *Book of Revelation,* NCB (London: Oliphants, 1974). The best popular-level exposition is R. H. Mounce, *Wbat Are We Waiting For?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

Or consider those who had been redeemed from the earth "who did not defile themselves with women" (14:4). At best this sounds like the comment of someone who doesn't believe in sex; at worst like the comment of a misogynist (woman-hater). But actually the OT brims with imagery of sexual faithfulness and faithlessness as symbols of spiritual loyalty or idolatry (e.g., Hos 2:4; Jer 5:7; Ezek 16:32). Thus, we see John figuratively referring to those who remained spiritually pure.

A final, more controversial example involves the three and one-half years (alternately referred to as forty-two months or 1260 days) of great tribulation (Rev 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5). This figure seems to come straight out of the book of Daniel where it refers to the period of time between the end of sacrifice and desolation of God's temple and the end of the age (9:27; cf. 12:7 and 12:11–12, where the number of days is slightly augmented). In view of Jesus' use of this imagery in Mt 24: 15–31, the "tribulation" may well have begun with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. If so, it refers to virtually the entire Church Age.[139] Alternately, it may refer to a still future event that will bring on the last and most horrible events before Christ returns. Most important either way, three and one-half is half of seven-the sacred, perfect, and complete number throughout Scripture (harking back to the seven days of creation). Only three and one-half, the period of tribulation years, is not perfect or good. It is not God's final word, but only an imperfect, incomplete parody of the perfection to come. Whether or not it occupies a ***literal three*** and one-half years is impossible to determine. And of course if the period refers to the entire Church Age, then it is much longer!

This last example brings up the complex topic of numerical symbolism in Revelation. Seven and twelve, and other numbers related to them, play a prominent role in the book. The famous 144,000 of 7:4 and 14:1 offers a classic example. One hundred and forty-four thousand is 12 times 12 times 1000—the number of the tribes of Israel raised to the second power and multiplied by a large round number. So this great company of the redeemed may in fact picture the Church as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel in a grand and glorious way.[140] The notorious 666-the number of the beast (13:18)—may well be significant because each digit is one less than seven. Seven hundred and seventy-seven would be a perfect number fit for Christ, which 666 tries hard to imitate but falls notably short. This makes a crucial point: each member of the "Satanic Trinity" of chaps. 12-14 (the dragon and the two beasts) parodies but falls short of duplicating the characteristics of his counterpart in the "Holy Trinity" (e.g., by mimicking the crucifixion [13:3] or working signs and wonders [13:13]).

In other cases, numbers seem just to indicate short or long units of measurement. One thousand years is a long and wonderful "golden age" (20:4). The armies of 200,000,000 (literally two myriads of myriads, with a myriad as 10,000 equaling the largest named number in the Greek language) comprise the largest conceivable gathering of people in John's day. And the five month plague of the demonic "locusts" (9:5) amounts to a relatively limited time (also equivalent to the life cycle of the insect).

[139] Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary,* 8:499–505.

[140] See, e.g., Mounce, *Revelation,* 168.

Even given all these guidelines, interpreters will still no doubt diverge greatly. So, the most crucial axiom is this: determine the major theological principles of Revelation and avoid getting bogged down in the details. Arguably, chaps. 4–5 form the doctrinal center of the book, and they also prove easiest to interpret: hymns of praise and adoration to God and Christ in view of the splendors of heaven; the atonement won for humanity by Jesus; and the promises of God's sovereignty and triumph mediated to his people in spite of the horrors of the end. In fact, the whole book exudes teaching on all the major doctrines of the Christian faith, not just eschatology. Interpreters must watch for these and highlight them. Even with respect to eschatology, we may agree to disagree on many details and still affirm the reality of Christ's future, visible, and universal return to judge all humanity and to assign to people one of the only two possible destinies awaiting them: the unspeakable agony of eternal punishment or the indescribable glory of eternal life, based on their acceptance or rejection of Jesus.[141] Above all, if we learn the lesson of Acts 1:6–8 and stop trying to guess if we are living in the final generation or how the latest news might fit in with this or that verse, then we can focus on the grand theological themes of the book and be encouraged about God's sovereignty, love, and justice even during our hardest times.[142]

Conclusion

When interpreting NT passages, then, readers must always take into account whether they are reading a gospel, the Acts, an epistle, or the Book of Revelation. Each of these genres in turn contains various forms or subgenres. While the principles discussed in earlier chapters ("general hermeneutics") apply to all of Scripture, each genre or form has unique features that interpreters need to take into account as well. Parables cannot be treated in exactly the same way as pronouncement stories. Teaching in Acts is often more indirect than in the epistles, and apocalyptic differs from straightforward historical narrative. Our discussion has not been exhaustive, merely illustrative. But we have set the stage for an appreciation of the multiple dimensions of Scripture that will help us understand its meaning.

[141]A salutary example of this unity within interpretive diversity is G. R. Beasley-Murray, H. H. Hobbs, and R. F. Robbins, ***Revekztion: Three Viewpoints*** (Nashville: Broadman, 1977).

[142]Particularly helpful with respect to major themes are D. Guthrie, ***The Relevance of John's Apocalypse*** (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); and G. Goldsworthy, ***The*** Gospel ***of Revelation*** (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).

PARTV

THE FRUITS OF INTERPRETATION

CHAPTERTEN

Using the Bible Today

Does the Bible have a legitimate function in this modem scientific world? Can this ancient book speak in any relevant way to the issues of life in today's diverse world? We answer, yes and yes, especially if it is applied upon the principles of sound and accurate biblical interpretation. God's message is timeless and consistently relevant as we understand it correctly. The Bible has a message that we need to know, a message that will make a difference in our lives. But we cannot know the message fully without the proper tools of interpretation.

So we reiterate our claim in the initial pages of this book: interpret the Bible according to good hermeneutical principles, and you will get more out of your reading of the Bible. And in light of all the principles of interpretation we have offered, we hope readers will feel that with these principles-these tools-they will be more likely to "get out" of the Bible what God and his spokespersons "put in" it.

But hermeneutics is not an end in itself. Having studied the principles of interpretation the student might ask, "But is there a reason for understanding the Bible beyond the acquisition of understanding?" "Is it worth going to all this effort?" Again we answer, yes and yes. The Scriptures constitute God's revelation to his people-his very word in written form. So as God's people we eagerly strive to understand and respond to his message. It is a message to be used-to encourage, to motivate, to guide, and to instruct. If we know how to decipher the message, we will be able to understand it and to use it. So in the following pages we will consider some of the ways that Christians use the Bible.'

'Certainly many people other than Christian believers read or study the Bible. Scholars in fields such as sociology, ancient history, or archaeology-to name a few-study it in a variety of ways. Literary critics explore the Bible as literature. Others may read it out of curiosity, or even antagonistically, in an attempt to refute its claims. Nevertheless, what we include below are those uses to which believers put the Bible.

To Gain Information and Understanding

As the foundational document of the Christian faith, the Bible functions as the primary source of data or information. Christians believe that the Bible is God's written ***revelation***[2] **to** humans. Theologians say the Bible is ***special*** revelation not available from any other source. Thus, those who wish to be informed about the Judeo-Christian faith read and study the Bible. Christians believe that through the Bible God has conveyed information to people-information about who God is, what he has done in history, what he wants people to know, and how they should respond to this information.

The Bible reports the history and religious faith of Israel, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the establishment and spread of the Christian Church. It informs us how Israel worshipped, how the prophets took the nation to task for her idolatry, and what ancient Israelites believed about their national destiny and future glory. It recites how Christians like Peter and Paul came to apprehend salvation through faith in Jesus and to spread this "gospel" (good news) throughout the Roman world.

Christians begin with the presupposition that through the Bible God conveys reliable information.[3] In order to comprehend this revelation, we must interpret the biblical accounts accurately; so our approach to hermeneutics governs what we learn from the Bible. A proper hermeneutic promotes our understanding and helps us to interpret the Bible's content accurately and to see the facts correctly. This enables us to discover the knowledge and insight that God wanted us to have.

To Worship

Since the Bible derives from God himself, his people naturally discover in its pages reasons and opportunities for worship. Worship occurs when people respond to God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.[4] God's grace and love prompt his

[2]The writer of Hebrews makes this point explicit in saying, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Heb 1:1). The prophets wrote not simply their own musings or observations but messages conveyed to them by God. Again, "Most of all, you must understand this: No prophecy in the Scriptures ever comes from the prophet's own interpretation. No prophecy ever came from what a person wanted to say, but people led by the Holy Spirit spoke words from God" (2 Pet 1:20–21 NCV). The creeds of the Church affirm, then, that the Bible owes its origin to divine revelation, not to human invention.

[3]Readers might want to consult the two books of essays edited by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge, ***Scripture and Truth*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) and ***Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) for a consideration of various aspects of the Bible's truthfulness.

[4]R. G. Rayburn defines worship in this expansive way: "Worship is the activity of the new life of a believer in which, recognizing the fullness of the Godhead as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and His mighty redemptive acts, he seeks by the power of the Holy Spirit to render to the living God the glory, honor, and submission which are His due" (0 ***Come Let Us Worship*** [Grand Rapids: Baker, 19801, 21). Another excellent study of the topic of worship is J. E. White, ***Introduction to Christian Worship*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980). For key analyses of the worship in ancient Israel, see H. H. Rowley, ***Worship in Ancient Israel*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), especially "Psalmody and Music." 176–212; and S. Mowinckel, ***The Psalms in Israel's Worship,*** 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, ***1962).***

people to respond in various appropriate ways. When believers learn from their study of the Bible who God is and what he has accomplished on their behalf, their hearts well up in praise and adoration. In places the poetry of the Psalms draws readers into such an experience. For example, one of the psalmists writes:

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> the skies proclaim the **work of his hands.**
> **Day after day they pour forth speech;**
> **night after night they display knowledge.**
> **There is no speech or language**
> **where their voice is not heard.**
> **Their voice goes out into all the earth,**
> **their words to the ends of the world. (Psa 19:1–4)**

Or again another poet proclaims:

> **The LORD is my light and my salvation—**
> **whom shall I fear?**
> **The LORD is the stronghold of my life—**
> **of whom shall I be afraid? . . .**
>
> **One thing I ask of the LORD,**
> **this is what I seek:**
> **that I may dwell in the house of the LORD**
> **all the days of my life,**
> **to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD**
> **and to seek him in his temple. (Psa 27:1, 4)**

In places the biblical writers expressly seek to worship God and to elicit from the readers their own adoration of God.

> **I will praise you, 0 LORD, with all my heart;**
> **before the "gods" I will sing your praise.**
> **I will bow down toward your holy temple and praise your name**
> **for your love and your faithfulness,**
> **for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.**
>
> **May all the kings of the earth** praise you, 0 **LORD,**
> when they **hear the words of your mouth. (Psa 138:1, 2, 4)**
>
> **Praise the LORD, all you nations;**
> **extol him, all you peoples.**
> **For great is his love toward us,**
> **and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.**
> **Praise the LORD. (Psa 117)**

The Israelites incorporated these hymns into their Scriptures, and since the beginning of the Church, Christians have joined them in praising God through these treasured lines.

The NT authors included fewer explicit hymns in their accounts,[5] yet the pages of the NT demonstrate that singing and music played important roles in the worship of the emerging church. Commenting on the early church, G. Delling observes: "The Word of Christ is alive in the community in teaching and admonition and in the singing of songs for God, i.e., in these the community praises God from the heart on account of the salvation which He has given by what He has done in Christ."[6] Music, indeed, was a central focus of the Christians' communal life as Bartels emphasizes: "Next to the preaching of the word and participation in the sacrament, the heart of worship was this 'spiritual singing,' a festive recognition of God in Jesus Christ as the Lord of the congregation and of the world."[7] Using prayers or anthems-some even drawn directly from the OT-the early Christians sought to lift up their readers to praise and adore their God. Paul says,

> **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.**
>
> **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph 1:4; 3:20–21)**

At other times believers throughout church history have responded to what they read in unique spontaneous worship. Whether or not Paul intended to evoke worship from his readers when he penned Rom 8:38–39, those stunning verses certainly must have inspired them to proclaim the greatness of their God:

> **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

What believer can read of Jesus' loving sacrifice for his people without crying out in worship and praise for God's immeasurable charity lavished upon his people, "while we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:8)? The Bible serves this major function for the Christian: to elicit and to shape the worship of God's people.

Hence the Bible is used in worship both individually and corporately. In their ***personal*** use of the Bible, believers read, study, and seek to respond to what they find within its pages. The Bible directs believing readers to praise and adoration, to confession of sins, and to prayers of thanksgiving. In response to the God revealed in the pages of the Bible, Christians seek to conform all dimensions of their lives to his will. The Bible provides inspiration and challenge; it generates religious experiences; it provides hope and sustenance. In short, the Bible furnishes the medium for individual worship. God speaks through his living and active word, and his people venerate him.

This Bible also provides the basis for ***corporate*** worship. As the people of Israel worshiped their God, so the Church constitutes a believing and worshiping community. Applying OT terminology to the Body of Christ, Peter proclaims:

> **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:9-10; cf. Exod 19:5–6; Hos 2:23).**

In one sense, believers function as a worshiping community to announce to the unbelieving world "How Great Thou Art." From what they discover in the Bible believers can obey the admonition: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb 13:15). Though the term "word" has a wide semantic range, clearly it can now embrace the Bible in Paul's instructions: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3: 16). To believers the Scriptures attest to God's presence, activity, and love, particularly as expressed in his son, Jesus Christ. They bring to their attention, in a concrete and graphic manner, God's personal and loving commitment to his people. And as such, the Scriptures move them to worship-individually and corporately.

To Formulate Liturgy

It is not strange, then, that the liturgy of the Christian Church has always incorporated texts from the Bible.* Whether "high" or "low," the liturgy of the Church employs prayers, hymns, various readings (e.g., responsive readings), psalms, and the ordinances (sacraments). The Scriptures inform all these elements; indeed, many incorporate scriptural portions directly. An obvious example is the chorus to the French Christmas carol "Angels We Have Heard on High," which quotes ***Gloria***

[5] The number and extent of hymns actually incorporated into the NT letters are issues of some debate among scholars. For further insight in addition to our comments about the genres of hymns above, see two works by R. P. Martin, Carmen *Christi*, SNTSMS 4 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967; rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) and id., *Worship in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), as well as V. H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963); and J. T. Sanders, *The* New *Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical and Religious Background*, SNTSMS 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

[6] "Delling, *"hymnos,* et al.," *TDNT* 8:498.

[7] Bartels, "Song, Hymn, Psalm," *NIDNTT* 3:675.

[8] The English word "liturgy" derives from the Greek term *leitourgia*, which meant some kind of service. In Christian literature it meant service to God. Today it usually refers to a rite or body of rituals used in public worship. In J. E. white's words, "Liturgy is a work performed by the people for the benefit of others . . the essential outward form through which a community of faith expresses its public worship" *(Introduction to Christian Worship* 2324).

in *excelsis Deo* based on Lk 2: *14* in the Latin Bible. Many contemporary praise choruses take their words verbatim from the Psalms; for example, "Come let us worship and bow down," from Psa 95. The chorus to the hymn "I Know Whom I Have Believed" quotes the KJV of *2* Tim 1:12. The ***Book of*** *Common* ***Prayer*** of the Protestant Episcopal Church incorporates portions of the Bible extensively in guiding worshipers, both individually and corporately.[9]

Unquestionably, then, the Scriptures aid our worship and perform an appropriate liturgical function, as long as the worshipers comprehend the biblical passages or allusions. In some uses of the Bible that we will shortly consider (preaching or teaching), the goal may well be for hearers to discover the meaning of the texts. In the liturgy, however, those who lead in corporate worship must find ways to help participants understand what they are hearing or doing in following the prescribed forms. The Bible contains no magic charms. People need to understand what it says to profit from its message.

To Formulate Theology

All humans operate on the basis of a belief system or worldview. For "theists" (i.e., those who believe in a god or gods) belief systems can be termed "theologies" (from the Greek word for god, *theos*). To formulate a theology one states in an orderly fashion his or her belief system with theism at the center. Obviously, a biblical theologian regards the Bible as the necessary basis for theology. At the same time, to produce or write a "theology" is a human endeavor; it articulates an individual's or group's understanding of reality with God at the center. To answer the question "How do Christians understand and express their faith?" requires an explanation of their theology. [10]

Though delineating theology is an ongoing task in the life of the Church, theology acts as an anchor for the Church and for Christians battered and trembling in a sea of relativism or competing world-views. Theology offers the Church a secure understanding of herself and how she fits into God's overall purposes in history and eternity. It protects her against the changing winds that have challenged the Church's existence and claims of truth since the beginning of her existence. From first-century Gnostics to modern scientism, the Church has contended with manifold alternative explanations of reality and truth." Her understanding of theology

[9] *The Book of Common Prayer* (Greenwich, CN.: The Seabury Press, 1953).

[10] For a helpful discussion of the nature of doing theology and locating "systematic theology" on the theological map, see M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85), 22-28.

"Our mention of these two competitors is merely representative. Full-fledged Gnosticism was a second to third century A.D. phenomenon that arose out of a variety of religious and philosophical ancestors and became a leading competitor to Christianity. For further insight consult R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); and C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jrs., eds., *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986). P. A. Heelan expresses what we mean by scientism: "Analytical philosophy generally defends the fundamental position that science is a knowledge of a privileged kind, not deriving from and not responsible to the projects and values of the Western cultural world ...; rather, it constitutes a socially and historically independent account of reality, more reliable than any given so far" ("Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Science," in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. J. Silverman [New York/London: Routledge, 19911, 214).

has established the boundaries of orthodoxy. And whenever the Church claims to be biblical in her conception of theology, then the Bible must stand at the center and comprise the source of her theological thought.

Yet there is a crucial distinction between "biblical" and "systematic" theology. If what we have just said is true, then all evangelicals would insist that any enterprise that purports to call itself "theology" must be biblical. Nevertheless, since the eighteenth century two distinct theological approaches have been followed.[12] Biblical theology relates more closely to the development of theology within the historical development of the Bible itself. It presents the theology that the Bible itself contains. G. Ladd provides a ready definition:

> Biblical theology is that discipline which sets forth the message of the books of the Bible in their historical setting. Biblical theology is primarily a descriptive discipline. ... Biblical theology has the task of expounding the theology found in the Bible in its own historical setting, and its own terms, categories, and thought forms. [13]

Thus, in biblical theology, one could speak, for example, of the theology of the postexilic prophets in contrast to that of earlier prophets. Or one might compare the theology of the Synoptic Gospels with that of the Gospel of John.

To illustrate, it is possible to discuss Paul's particular theology of *faith* and show how that compares to the notion of faith presented by James or the writer of Hebrews. In other words, biblical theologians focus upon how individual biblical writers, sections, or books framed their messages to meet the needs of their specific readers in their historical contexts. The biblical writers' theologies were both explicit and implicit. That is, at times they expressed clearly their understandings of God and his ways, but in other places their theology emerges more implicitly; we see how their prescriptions for their readers naturally grow out of and are shaped by their theological convictions. Thus, biblical theologians recognize that much of the canon consists of "occasional" writings: writings for specific occasions.

Put starkly, we are indebted to the errors of the Judaizers for motivating Paul to explain to the Galatians his view of justification by faith apart from works.[14] For

[12] For a helpful discussion of this development see G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 10-17.

[13] G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 25.

[14] To "judaize" is the attempt to make Christianity more Jewish. Judaizers insisted, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:2). The "Council at Jerusalem" refuted this error, which Paul also attempted to do in Galatians (e.g., 3:15–16; 5:2–6). For discussions of correlating Paul and James at this point, see most standard commentaries on James at 2:14–26, especially: P. Davids, The *Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); R. P. Martin, *James, WBC 48* (Waco: Word, 1988); and D. J. Moo, *The Letter of James, TNTC*, rev. (Leicester: IVP, 1986; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

Paul, *faith goes* to the heart of how one attains salvation; salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by works. Yet James' dispersed readers had a different struggle with ***faith,*** and that situation moved James to insist that a truly living and genuine faith must be one that is lived out in the circumstances of life. Thus, we can speak of the contrasting views of faith in Paul's theology and that of James.[15] This does not mean the two are contradictory; it simply means that the writers expressed their views out of concrete situations that were strikingly different. Paul and James framed their theological responses differently because each was replying to specific problems in specific churches.

Biblical theology, then, emerges from historical conditions. Its formulation depends upon the movements and circumstances of people and events--the interaction of author and recipients in the heat of fast- breaking developments.[16] As Mickelsen puts it, "In this approach the biblical theologian must be constantly aware of the biblical languages, all known historical factors, and the freshness of the message of God through his servant to men involved in a life and death struggle with dread realities."[17]

All this presents a decidedly different picture from a "systematic" theology. M. Erickson identifies systematic theology as "that discipline that strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to the issues of life. "[18] Though systematic theology also makes a valid claim to being biblical-its goal is to exhibit the theology of the Bible-its categories are not always those of the biblical writers, but those of the theologian. Traditional doctrinal categories comprise the framework for the biblical material. Often the frameworks derive from the theologians' interactions with philosophers and other religions. So, for example, one may read Catholic, Reformed, or Lutheran systematic theologies and encounter categories that reflect, in part, the special concerns and issues relevant to these traditions. In other words, the theologians systematize the total Bible's teaching in a framework they feel best represents the Bible's emphases in light of their own study ***and the issues with which they are currently struggling***. That is to say, inevitably, systematic theologies reflect the philosophical frameworks and interpretive agendas of the systematizers.

[15]For analyses of Paul's and James' views of faith see the standard commentaries on the relevant texts.

[16]For a list of the best examples of biblical theologies, see the bibliography.

"A. B. Mickelsen, ***Interpreting the Bible*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 344.

"Erickson, ***Christian Theology,*** 21. For their part, Lewis and Demarest say, "Systematic theology ... aims to produce normative guidelines to spiritual reality for the present generation; it organizes the material of divine revelation topically and logically, developing a coherent and comprehensive world view and way of life" (G. Lewis and B. Demarest, ***Integrative Theology, vol.1*** [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 19871, 23). Finally, D. A. Carson provides his working definition of systematic theology: "the branch of theology that seeks to elaborate the whole and the pans of Scripture, demonstrating their logical (rather than their merely historical) connections and taking full cognizance of the history of doctrine and the contemporary intellectual climate and categories and queries while finding its sole ultimate authority in the Scriptures themselves, rightly interpreted" ("Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in Carson and Woodbridge, eds. ***Scripture and Truth*** 69–70).

Another issue needs to be considered. Put in categories we have discussed above, the theologians' own preunderstandings shape the categories and issues they use in their systems (though they may insist, with justification, that their goal is to allow the Bible's own categories to provide guidance). As well, the theologians' own perspectives will guide their selection process as they choose various texts within each category and as they decide the relative weight to give the Bible's various teachings on specific issues. This is readily apparent when one reads the theologies dealing with specific controversial issues, say election versus free will. [19] One explanation why people come to different positions on the Bible's teaching on this matter is that they bring different preunderstandings to their analysis of the relevant texts, and they also give different weight to the relevant texts.

In a sense, then, each generation, and perhaps each culture, needs to update its formulations of Christian theology. This does not mean that God's truth keeps changing. Bather, it reflects the nature of the process of systematizing: it always exhibits the perspectives and concerns of those who do it. To illustrate, most Protestants will agree that the "Westminster Confession of Faith" introduced a marvelous and singularly important understanding of Christian theology. But, for example, its discussion of the covenants reflects issues, concerns, and the preunderstandings-religious and political-of Christians in seventeenth century Scotland and England.[20] Civil war had broken out in England and the king, Charles I, was forced to initiate reform. An assembly was called at Westminster to devise a creed that both Scots and English could affirm. Speaking about the "federal theology" that the Westminster Confession embodied, Dillistone observes,

> **[it] seemed to provide just the system or schema that men were seeking in the period of consolidation after the revolutionary changes of the sixteenth century. A dialectical interpretation of reality does not lend itself to au easy formalization whereas a succession of contracts can be systematized within a legal framework.**

[19]An instructive specimen is D. Basinger and R. Basinger, eds., ***Predestination and Free Will*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1986). In this work the reader can see how the four writers differ in their view of the nature of Gods foreknowledge. On the basis of their view that God determines and controls events, several argue that God knows future events without limit. Others argue for certain limitations on Gods foreknowledge on the basis that God has freely chosen to give humans genuine autonomy. So, one asks, how can God really know the free choices that independent creatures will make? If human choices are truly free, how could God possibly know the outcomes in advance? In other words, one's philosophical starting point determines one's conclusion.

[20]For helpful discussions of the historical background of the Westminster Confession consult R. T. Kendall, ***Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); and W. M. Hetherington, ***History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*** (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1890). "Federal theology" is the term used to describe the brand of Calvinism that developed in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England and Scotland that gave great prominence to the doctrine of the covenants (the English word 'covenant' translates the Latin ***foedus,*** hence, federal). The concept of covenants was crucial in the sociopolitical world of the time-namely, what covenants protected the "rights" of the king versus those of the people. It was natural that theologians thought in terms of covenants, and the federal Calvinists came to distinguish between the covenants of grace and works. Important to our discussion is this point: neither Calvin nor the other Reformers made this distinction between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. It was introduced by later systematizers.

> . . . Once a group is established and inspired with growing confidence, it tends to look for something more concrete, more definite, more constitutional and this is exactly what the developing Churches of the Reformation found in the doctrine of the Two Covenants. . . . Puritan and Calvinist alike found in this one idea the necessary framework for a new theological and ecclesiastical system.[21]

Thus, our point here is *not* that the authors of the Confession were "right" on some points and "wrong" on others (depending upon one's theological persuasion), or that the issues they struggled with no longer concern us, or that language of the document is archaic. Bather, the point is that their declarations addressed their own concerns and were formulated to counter opposing viewpoints prevalent at that time. Their affirmations were not simply "objective" statements of theology, or "what the Bible actually teaches." Interpretation is never that simple (preunderstandings at work again). Though we can learn much from previous theologians and ancestors in the faith, contemporary Christians require theologians living now to express what the Christian faith means today.[22]

Are the two disciplines of biblical and systematic theology at odds? Must we insist upon one or the other? Evangelicals accept the unity as well as the diversity of the Scriptures.[23] The Bible's diversity reflects the variety of its numerous authors and the circumstances of their times, places, and situations. Its ***unity*** derives from its single divine Source and Author. These two truths suggest the foundations for both biblical and systematic theologies. The approach of biblical theology uniquely exposes and highlights the inherent diversity of the Bible. The lenses of biblical theology enable us to perceive each author's or text's unique perspectives, distinctives, and emphases and to see clearly how they can speak most sensitively and creatively to parallel or similar circumstances today. Biblical theologians feel more deeply the rough edges of the Bible's teachings, for they are not obligated (at this point in their study) to harmonize or explain difficult teachings by resorting to what the Bible says elsewhere about an issue.[24] This approach takes the Bible on its own terms at each point and with each author.[25]

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[21] F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), 132. Our intent here is not to open a lengthy historical discussion nor to debate Calvinism or so-called federal theology.

[22] Noteworthy evangelical systematizers include: D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85); C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word, 1976-79); and G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, and Practical*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986–93). Beyond these, the monumental works of this century are K. Barth, Church *Dogmatics*, *12* vols., translated by G. T. Thomson, G. W. Bromiley, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Scribner, 1936–69); and P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Most recently, see W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (out of 3) to date (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–).

[23] See J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990); and D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity," 65–100.

[24] The need to harmonize unique perspectives leads many theologians to favor one biblical author's formulation over another's. To return to our example above, did not Luther's preoccupation with Paul's view of justification by faith lead him to question James' orthodoxy? That is, Luther believed (wrongly, we think) that James' statement in 2:24 ("So you see that people are made right with God by what they do, not by faith only" NCV) was incompatible with Paul's theology (e.g., "But people cannot do any work that will make them right with God. So they must trust in him, who makes even evil people right in his sight"; Rom 4:5, NCV). Perhaps, as a systematizer, Luther felt he needed to have a precise understanding of *faith;* he preferred Paul's, not James'. The biblical theologian retains the unique emphases of both Paul and James. Of course, this does not mean that evangelical biblical theologians simply leave the matter there. We seek to show how diverse perspectives are compatible.

[25] W. W. Klein, *The New Chosen Peopk: A Corporate Vii of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) attempts to understand the important concept of God's choosing from a biblical theological perspective.

[26] It is risky to suggest examples here, for we all see more clearly the rigidity and inadequacies of *others'* systems rather than our own. One helpful book mentioned above exposes the influences of theological systems pertaining to interpreting the millennium: S. J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

[27] At this point we will not develop explicitly the other two components of the classical theological curriculum: historical and practical theology. The former traces the development of theological understanding throughout the history of the Church while the latter focuses attention on the application of theology to real life. But we will have more to say below about the second issue. For further insight see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 22-28.

We will no longer employ these distinctions in what follows. Again, we assume that both approaches seek to explicate the meanings of the biblical texts regardless of how they use the results.

At the same time, we cannot be content with a mere collection of theological truths espoused by the various biblical authors. We need the organization and structure of the whole. At their best the systematizers bring together all the bits and pieces of the Bible's teaching on an issue and present them logically so we see how it all fits together. Since we presume divine authorship of the entire canon and that God has a unified message to present, the discipline of systematic theology seeks to express this larger picture in a coherent fashion.

Yet this process faces some latent pitfalls. At their worst the systematizers reflect only their own preunderstandings, which they read into the biblical material. They may fall prey to the temptation to claim more precision than the actual details of the biblical texts warrant. They may build entire systems in which many of the elements are based only upon their own inferences rather than on explicit evidence from the Scriptures. Or they may cling tenaciously to their own categories and defend their own theological structures at all costs.[26] These hazards are ever-present. But as we will explain below, when informed by the best work of biblical exegetes and theologians, systematic theology can organize the biblical data into meaningful systems that provide great help and assistance to the church.[27]

So how does the Bible inform theology? Most theologians seek to express the teaching of the Bible in contemporary terms. But how do they formulate the Bible's theology? Whether biblical or systematic,[28] we find no place for a self-structured theology that promotes its own self-serving agenda. Therefore, (1) ***valid theologizing must*** *follow the* ***sound exegesis*** *of* ***the appropriate biblical texts.*** To use our earlier example, if **theologians** wish to formulate a theology of "faith," they must investigate all the passages that speak to that issue. To borrow terms from the scientific arena, theology ought to originate ***inductively*** out of a responsible analysis (as we

have attempted to elucidate in the previous chapters) of the relevant passages of the Bible. It will not do merely to invent theology and seek ***deductively*** to defend it in various texts. Induction and deduction both have their place, but each must inform and correct the other so that in the end theologians extract the Bible's teaching rather than impose their own. Unless a system of responsible hermeneutics guides the process of exegesis and theological formulation, theology, at best, will not rise above human wisdom, and, at worst, will be false, misguided, and even dangerous.

A key point is implicit in these assumptions, but we must state it explicitly: (2) theology ***must be based on the Bible's total teaching, not on selected or isolated texts.*** For example, suppose we want to develop a theology of election and free will. We cannot develop a faithful and honest statement of this doctrine if we deny or discount texts that conflict with our preferred theory. If God authored the entire Bible and if its parts do not hopelessly contradict (these hark back to our presuppositions), then a valid theological statement about an issue must take into account ***all*** that God has said concerning it.

Other factors enter into the process of "weighing" the Bible's various teachings on an issue of theology. For example, in considering some doctrines we discover that certain texts speak more clearly to the issues than do other more obscure texts. In addition, some details are repeated in a variety of places in the Bible, whereas other points may occur in only isolated or even single references. Some teachings occur in direct and didactic passages. They may even be propositional in nature as in, "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy" (Lev 11:44); or ". . .God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 Jn 4:8-9). The Bible presents other points by means of metaphor, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5), or in narrative (see how many of God's attributes emerge from God's speech in Job 38-39).

One finds biblical teaching in "earlier" parts of the Bible that are developed and enlarged in later revelation. We do not mean here that later parts of the Bible contradict or in every case supersede earlier sections, but that in some instances God revealed his truth progressively. In other words, some earlier truths prepared the way for people to understand and accept what God said and did in subsequent events. For example, viewed from hindsight, the OT sacrificial system was never an end in itself; rather, it prepared the way for the Lamb of God who would eventually come to take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29; cf. Heb lO:l-18). Correspondingly, the OT Law, important as it was for the nation of Israel, finds fulfillment in Christ and no longer serves as the undisputed rule for the Church as she defines herself in Jerusalem following Jesus' resurrection.[29]

Our point in listing these various factors should be obvious: we must "weigh" evidence to arrive at adequate conclusions. The student must be conscientious and prudent about the evidence adduced in favor of a theological judgment. Clearer

[29]Cf., e.g., Mk 7:19; Acts 15:7–11; Rom 10:4; Heb g-10. At the same time, as we argued above, NT ethics do not completely jettison the Law. The standard for Gentiles in Acts 15 did have roots in OT law. Jesus insisted that his program fulfilled the law (Mt 5:17–20). For a helpful perspective see C. J. H. Wright, ***An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983).

teaching must carry more weight than obscure texts whose points may be ambiguous. An interpreter may have more conviction about a point oft-repeated than one made only once (though this does not allow the interpreter to deny any clear point in Scripture, even if made only once). Where metaphors or narratives leave conclusions more ambiguous, we dare not force them to overrule texts that speak more clearly or didactically. Likewise, where earlier revelation has progressively prepared the way for later formulations of God's truth, the later must be given priority.

Another point parallels this: (3) ***legitimate theology considers and expresses the Bible's own*** emphases. We have noted repeatedly the inevitable effect preunderstandings have on interpreting and theologizing. This colors the content and the organization of any theological formulation. So theologians ought to strive to "major on the majors"—to stress what the Bible portrays as most important-in their theologies. Theology should grasp God's principal concerns in the Scriptures, rather than merely mirror contemporary agendas and priorities.[30] Theology always runs the risk of being faddish when other issues determine its agenda.

Further, if theology is to have life and significance—and fulfill its design, we would argue-theologians must do more than understand clearly and precisely what the relevant biblical texts mean. Thus, (4) ***they*** must ***then state theological*** points ***in ways that explain and illuminate their significance for the life and ministry of the church today.*** If God's message is to be applicable to people today, theology must display the Bible's truth in ways that disclose its Spirit-energized ability to transform life. Nothing is more boring and irrelevant than a cold and sterile statement of theology. No doubt theology (or "doctrine" as some call it) suffers some of its current bad press because of the omissions of its practitioners. When detached from life and divorced from practical implementation, theology fails to achieve its central mission-to express God's truth to his creatures. Scripture says of itself, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Like good exegesis, good theology must be practical, and both theologians and exegetes must demonstrate the concrete implications of God's Word.[31]

An additional point requires careful consideration, and may be best divided into two items: the Bible is the definitive source for theology; yet we must be ready to learn from our spiritual ancestors. So, for the first part, ***(5) theology must be centered in what God has revealed,*** not in what people, however enlightened, have devised in their own thinking. Though study in numerous fields-for example, archaeology, paleography, ancient history, philology and linguistics, comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, etc.—has shed significant light on the Bible, such study must never supplant what the Bible itself says. Unless theology rests upon solid biblical foundations, it exists only as a monument to human brilliance.

[30]Many self-help, popular Christian books of the 1980s and 1990s address pressing problems and **issues Christians face.** For example, one dominant theme concerns the family. Many theological discussions of the family grow out of legitimate fears in the face of societal breakdowns and upheavals. They seek to support the family and elevate its importance, almost above all else. But we wonder if, indeed, the Bible exhibits such an emphasis upon the "traditional family," as often understood by American evangelicals.

[31]For further help on this **issue see the next chapter.**

Yet, as Ferguson puts it, "Christian theology should be done in dialogue with the creeds and traditions of the church."[32] So we insist that (6) ***modern theologians cannot do their work as if*** *in a vacuum, as* ***if no*** *Christians have ever considered* ***these issues*** *prior* ***to their own time.*** We have much to learn from our sisters and brothers who walked in the faith before us. Of course, traditions, creeds, and church dogmas cut in two directions. On one hand, as we explained above, they can restrict interpreters and theologians severely by predetermining what is orthodox or heterodox. As the Pharisees and rabbis of Jesus' time were locked into their own comfortable traditional wines and wineskins (Lk 5:37–39), our "traditions" may equally restrict our ability to let the biblical texts and biblical theology speak for themselves. For example, contemporary Christians tend to see God as primarily loving. But what about the God who judges, who is "a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29)? Or we filter out the idea that God is a warrior because we are uncomfortable with a God who seems so bloodthirsty. Again, though we cannot avoid our preunderstandings and even our church traditions and commitments, we must be scrupulous in subjecting our theological formulations to the confirmation of the Bible. We must foster a constant dialogue between our doctrines and the biblical text.

On the other hand, the theological insights of our spiritual predecessors can open up our thinking to ideas, implications, and conclusions that would never have occurred to us. These mentors serve as teachers and advisers about the truth of Scripture. At best, ancient and modern councils and creeds attempted to articulate God's truth. Though dogmas or traditions are not on the same level as passages from the Bible, they do incorporate what our finest and best spiritual forebears understood the Bible to teach. As we attempt to do the same in our era, it makes sense to listen to their voices. We may decide to reject their teaching as being wrong or prejudiced; we may modify or rearrange it, but we lose much by simply ignoring their input. And if we ignore them, we run the great risk of missing sterling insights or wasting time redoing or rethinking what they have accomplished already for us.

To Preach

Accurate interpretation informs and governs the public proclamation of God's message. G. Osborne makes a striking statement: "The hermeneutical process culminates not in the results of exegesis (centering on the original meaning of the text) but in the homiletical process (centering on the significance of the Word for the life of the Christian today)."[33]

[32]D. S. Ferguson, ***Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*** (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 113.

[33]G. R. Osborne, ***The Hermeneutical Spiral,*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991) 343. H. W. Robinson, ***Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) makes a strong case for the centrality of biblical exegesis in the task of sermon preparation and delivery. Likewise we highly recommend W. L. Liefeld, New ***Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); and J. R. W. Stott, ***Between Two Worlds*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). Finally, C. R. Wells, "New Testament Interpretation and Preaching," New ***Testament Criticism & Interpretation,*** ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 563–85, argues for critical thinking and methodology as essential friends, not enemies, of good preaching.

Christian preaching has always purported to be biblical. Believing that the Bible is God's revelation to his creatures, Christians seek to proclaim its message to any and all who will listen. By its very nature preaching attempts to convey biblical information and to persuade people to respond to it in appropriate ways. The origins of preaching probably go back to the post-exilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah. In Neh 8 the narrator explains the occasion when Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform (v. 4), opened and read from the Book of the Law (w. 5, 8), and proceeded to explain what he had read so the people could understand its meaning (v. 8). The result was an occasion of great rejoicing "because they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (v. 12). Jesus followed a similar tack when he read from the scroll of Isa 61 and proceeded to explain its significance to his hearers in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16–30).[34] Accounts in the book of Acts provide additional examples of early Christian preaching (e.g., 2: 144 1; 13:16–41).

But if preaching is to be more than just religious public speaking and if it is to convey more than the wisdom of the ages or of the preacher, it must be biblically informed. *Any claim* ***to biblical preaching*** *must rest on* ***what the Bible actually teaches or clearly*** **implies.** If preachers seek to inform people of God's ways and his will, they must be sure that their hermeneutical principles guide the process. When preachers say to their listeners, "God wants you to . . . ," they are bound ethically (and to their God-given function) to interpret God's will accurately.

We cannot stress too strongly, then, what a critical function sound hermeneutics performs. When people listen to preaching they want to "hear a word from God." When they cry out to know if there really is a God or how they may know him personally-when questions of ultimate destiny demand answers-mere human opinions fail to satisfy or convince. And if they receive erroneous answers, they will be misled, with possibly tragic eternal consequences. As people seek to find guidance and courage to live responsibly as Christians—or merely to survive in a crisis-they want to know how God can help or what he thinks about their situation. At such points no self-help or human wisdom will do.

Preachers find their role at this very point. When true to their calling, preachers possess the great privilege and awesome responsibility of comprehending the ancient text, arriving at its correct meaning, and, most importantly, conveying its significance to people in their own time and culture so they may apply it to their lives. Thus, preachers serve as intermediaries who take the truth of God revealed in the Bible and transmit it to their hearers today.

Of course much more than what we have just described occurs under the title "preaching." Loyal parishioners will regularly hear all kinds of topical sermons that have little to do with the Bible. Or perhaps they will encounter orations that start with a biblical quotation but then proceed to range far and wide with little subsequent reference to the text. This kind of preaching fails to take seriously the message contained in the Bible and thus, in our estimation, seriously violates the

[34]Cf. W. W. Klein, "The Sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:14–22)," in ***Christian Freedom: Essays in Honor of Vernon C. Grounds,*** ed. K. W. M. Wozniak and S. J. Grenz (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 153–72.

preacher's assignment. To use the Bible for the preacher's own agenda constitutes a reprehensible abuse of both the preaching office and the Bible. True preaching invites people to obey God's will and to respond to his redemptive acts on their behalf. Since the Bible reliably records that will and those redemptive acts, only a faithful proclamation of the Bible's message fulfills the preacher's calling.

To Teach

What we have just observed about preaching applies also to a parallel use of the Bible-teaching. Indeed, we cannot press too strict a distinction between preaching and teaching, for good teaching always calls those taught to some response.[35] But for our purposes let us refer to teaching as specific training or instruction in matters of Christian beliefs and practice. Since in some sense the Bible functions as the Christians' "textbook," the Church has always needed teachers who educate and train the saints from that book, much like Jesus who taught his disciples.[36]

Both testaments attest to the perverse human tendency to stray from the Lord into false religions and heresies. But as the standard of truth, the Bible serves to keep believers on track. The Church needs teachers who conscientiously seek to understand the Christian, faith today as it contrasts with the competing belief systems represented by cults, "new age" thinking, and other religions. These represent challenges to biblical Christianity, but it just may be that "nominal Christianity" poses the greatest challenge of all. One segment of this group consists of people who have grown up as "Christians." They identify themselves as Christian though the Bible or Christian teaching plays no role in their thinking or actions. Others have been advised on some occasion simply to "receive Christ" without any accompanying instruction about what true discipleship demands.[37] Certainly the teaching role requires responsible hermeneutics to provide believers with an accurate understanding of

[35]The NT itself employs various terms that mark these activities. One term, *kērygma,* meant proclamation or announcement and could be understood as preaching (see 1 Cor 1:21; 2 Tim 4:17; Tit 1:3). Its corresponding verb form, *kērussō,* meant to announce or proclaim, and refers extensively to preaching in the NT (see 2 Tim 4:2; Rom 10:8; Acts 20:25; 28:31; Gal 2:2; 1 Cor 9:27; 1 Pet 3:19; 2 Cor 4:5; 11:4; etc.). The other term, *didachē,* specifies teaching or instruction. The NT writers often employ this word to indicate the content of Christian teaching (see Acts 2:42; 5:28; 13:12; Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 14:26; 2 Jn 9–10; Rev 2:24; etc.).

[36]The etymological meaning of the Greek word *mathētēs* (disciple) is "learner," although in Christian usage in the NT it came to mean much more-a committed follower of Jesus Christ. D. Müller says, "Following Jesus as a disciple means the unconditional sacrifice of his whole life (Matt. 10:37; Lk. 14:26f.; cf. Mk. 3:31–35; Lk. 9:59–62) for the whole of his life (Matt. 10:24f.; Jn. 11:16). To be a disciple means (as Matt. in particular emphasizes) to be bound to Jesus and to do Gods will" ("*mathētēs,*" [*NIDNTT* 1: 4881). See the articles on "disciple" in *NIDNTT* 1: 480-98 written by C. Blendinger and D. Müller.

[37]In Jesus' words, "If people want to follow me, they must give up the things they want. They must be willing even to give up their lives to follow me. Those who want to save their lives will give up true life, and those who give up their lives for me will have true life. It is worth nothing for them to have the whole world if they lose their souls" (Mt 16:24–26, NCV; cf. 10:37 and Lk 14:26–27).

Christian doctrine so they may "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

Of course, biblical teaching must go beyond defending orthodox beliefs. It should encompass orthopraxy: correct living in the world. Christian lifestyle and ministry require intensive training. To live in a Christian manner believers need to understand their religion and what it requires of them. In providing instruction to their original readers the biblical writers also supplied guidance for all their successors in the faith. Both testaments contain numerous examples of Israelites and early Christians who were misinformed or stubborn about what they were to believe or how they were to live. The Israelites presumed that huge sacrifices would please God, but Micah informed them what qualities God really sought in their lives: "And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8). Israel also assumed she would win a great victory on the "day of the LORD," but Amos brought her up short with the warning that that Day would bring her God's judgment for her sins (Amos 5: 18-20).

Similarly, Jesus taught clearly: "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Mt 6:24). And James instructed his early Christian readers: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jas 1:27). With sobering words Jesus warned: "Not all those who say that I am their Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. The only people who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who do what my Father in heaven wants" (Mt 7:21, NCV).

Cultural values and false teaching can lull Christians today into a false sense of what God expects of them, as if he simply smiles upon whatever behavior or attitudes they adopt. Christian teachers need to understand what the biblical injunctions meant when first written and then explain how believers can fulfill God's expectations for his people today. Instructors need to advise believers how to serve Christ in the Church and in the world. If we are to be biblical Christians, we must obtain our agenda from God's Word. Skillful hermeneutics, again, guides our quest for what is truly God's will for his people. Ferguson reminds us that it is necessary "that the teacher preserve the delicate balance between being faithful to the intent of Scripture and allowing at the same time the Scripture to give perspective and guidance on current issues and problems."[38]

To Provide Pastoral Care

The Bible has always been a source of positive guidance as well as comfort and consolation for God's people. While the next section will examine the Bible's role in personal spiritual formation and in providing instruction for godly living, here we focus on its provision of care or guidance to people in times of need. Jesus' words, "In this world you will have trouble," should not be taken to mean he was being unnecessarily negative or unduly alarmist; they simply state the human condition, not

[38]Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics, 122.*

only for disciples, but for humanity as a whole. Life is difficult. Further, the world is often hostile to Jesus' followers. Yet Jesus added a crucial and comforting assurance: "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). What comfort or succor exists for strugglers in the midst of life's trials and tragedies, not to mention its doubts and dilemmas?

Whether pastoral care-giver or close friend or relative, the Christian has many resources available to help others in need. As Clinebell puts it, "Pastoral counseling draws on the rich wisdom and authority of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, as these are available through prayer, scripture, sacraments, liturgical practice, and the disciplines of the church."[39] The Bible stands as the major resource that empathetic helpers may use to provide relief for sufferers.[40] Using the Scriptures, we can remind those who despair or grieve, who are lonely or in agony, that God does care for them; he shepherds them through their dark valleys; he remembers that they are dust and are frail (Psa 23:4; 103:14). In the Scripture's teachings about God's love and provisions, in the stories of men and women of faith, in the songs of comfort or prayers for deliverance, God's people can discover a sympathetic God who cares. Hannah's example of persevering prayer in the midst of childlessness (1 Sam l-2) and Job's trust in God's character despite his painful plight (recall Job said, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him," 13:15) speak to the troubled today.

Jesus' comforting words to Martha—in the midst of his own pain over Lazarus' death-have provided hope for grieving loved ones ever since. He affirmed, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will have life even if they die. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (Jn 11:25–26, NCV). In life's desperate misfortunes, when pain and agony impel us to cry out for explanations, and even in the silences when no answers appear, we take courage in Paul's assurance: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). And to the Corinthians he wrote, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor 10:13). Though the Bible may not depict the exact situation or dilemma we encounter today, it teaches such values and principles that promote comfort or healing or give guidance and hope.[41]

When dealing with the raw edges of human suffering, care-givers want to give as much hope and promise as possible. In such situations we may be tempted

[39] H. J. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

[40] Observe, for example, how sensitively D. J. Tidball brings biblical insights and perspectives to bear in his excellent book on pastoral theology: *Skillful Shepherds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester: Intervarsity, 1986). A very different attempt to show the relevance of biblical tenets for Christian counselors is edited by R. K. Bower, *Biblical and Psychological Perspectives for Christian Counselors* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974).

[41] Two outstanding examples that seek to understand the Bible's perspective in the midst of suffering are P. Yancey, *Disappointment with God (New* York: HarperCollins, 1988); and D. A. Carson, *How Long, 0 Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

to abuse the Bible; so we must insist on responsible hermeneutics as much here as in all our uses of the Bible. We desperately want to assure a parent grieving over a wayward child that all will be well. So we may be tempted to turn the well-known proverb into a definitive promise: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6). But sound hermeneutics forbids such an error because proverbs state general truths, not specific promises (also see 3:5–6). Or we may seek God's will in some situation and sincerely want to follow a path that honors him. That's a fine motive, but we cannot quote Jer 29: 11 ("'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you . . . '") as a specific promise for our personal situation. Jeremiah referred to God's unique plans for Israel's return from exile; this cannot be applied across the board.

Other sections of the Bible suffer similar misuse in our well-meaning attempts to provide guidance or comfort. Indeed, such exploitation of the Scriptures is all too common. For example, some mistreat the story of the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 8:23–27).[42] Matthew surely intended the story to highlight the wonder and power of Jesus. It seeks to call attention to Jesus and elicit faith in him as the Lord of all. Yet we hear people treat the story as if it taught that "God will calm the storms of your life." This may be a true sentiment, but surely it cannot be derived in any hermeneutically defensible way from this passage. Equally, we cannot promise food or money to those going through economic hard times with Paul's words, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).[43] This is not a universal promise. Paul's words followed his glowing commendation of the Philippians who generously supported his ministry (w. 15-18). They gave sacrificially, and so Paul assured them that God would not abandon Christians who demonstrate such faithfulness. He would meet all their needs. Paul articulates the same principle when he says,". . . whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Cor 9:6).

Again, we can confidently promise people from the Bible only those things that God has in fact *intended* to say. A responsible system of hermeneutics will restrain well-intentioned but misguided help. Care-givers dare not take texts out of context or make them say what God never intended they say. Care-givers subvert the function of God's Word when they make false promises or give false assurance in the name of God and the Bible. When such mistaken words prove to be empty, those in need of help may come to discount the value of the Bible or, worse, become disillusioned with God himself.

[42] See the discussion of how to interpret miracle stories above under Gospels.

[43] If this strikes readers as unduly harsh, we can only ask them to read our succeeding discussion on determining valid applications of Scripture. The two examples in this paragraph illustrate a point. We might want to add that the theology underlying both may support extended applications, but they must be more general and less authoritative, as we will explain below. To promise one who is suffering, "God will calm the storms of your life" on the basis of Mt 8:23–27 may be cruelly hollow.

For Spiritual Formation in the Christian Life

As we have seen, people respond to the Bible's message in worship and praise, and the Bible's teachings provide comfort and hope. In addition, the Bible helps to build up the spiritual life; it provides motivation and guidance for living a life that pleases God. Personal spiritual development must rest upon correct and valid interpretations of the Bible. It is almost axiomatic to Christians that the Bible stands at the core of spiritual growth: to grow in the Christian faith mandates some regimen of Bible study.[44] In their earnest grappling with biblical teachings and their implications, Christians have a prime resource for becoming *spiritual* men and women of God.

This brings us back once again to one of the basic Christian presuppositions. If, indeed, the Bible represents God's revelation-his written communication to his people-then when they listen carefully to his voice on its pages, they sense his very presence. This is not "bibliolatry"; Christians do not worship the Bible itself. We believe that the Bible stands as God's written Word to us; so as we listen faithfully and expectantly to the message, we believe that we hear his voice. In it we sense the supervision of a loving parent whose instruction and counsel we seek and welcome.

Thus, when we engage in a careful and faithful reading and meditate upon passages from the Bible, God nurtures our spiritual lives. As we learn what it means to be motivated spiritually and directed by internal biblical principles, not simply those of the culture around us, we change and grow more Christ-like. We apply the principles we discover in Scripture and become more conformed to the image of Christ. The Bible shapes and colors our values and attitudes. We learn from both the positive and negative examples of women and men in the biblical accounts. With God's aid we consciously seek to apply what we learn-to grow in our devotion to serving God and other people.

In short, as we interact with Scripture we engage in a two-way conversation with the Bible's Author. As we understand what he says to us, we progress in our relationship with him and gain increased motivation to grow spiritually. The more we advance in this process, the more spiritually mature we become. Indeed, as Christians, we will develop and promote a spiritual life only by regular interaction with God through such disciplines as Bible study and prayer.[45]

Personal spiritual formation can never remain a private inner issue because the complement to spiritual *formation* is spiritual *living,* and the Bible functions significantly

[44]Note the primary place given to input from the Bible in such helpful books as G. MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984); V. C. Grounds, *Radical Commitment* (Portland: Multnomah, 1984) repr. as *Get Serious About your Faith: Yes but How?* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1991); R. J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline (New* York: Harper and Row, 1978); and D. Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986).

[45]Of course we do not intend in any sense to limit the means to spiritual formation to Bible study and prayer. The books noted above by Foster, MacDonald, and Grounds, to name a few, pursue a more full-orbed discussion of this crucial issue. We simply want to underscore here the principal role that the Bible plays.

here, too. How do we know what lifestyle pleases God? Which actions demonstrate and grow out of the life of the Spirit and which are antithetical to that life? In the midst of the perplexing decisions of life, which options please God or promote his purposes for our lives? God's Word gives principles and instructions to guide us. We do not suggest that the Bible provides "ten easy steps" to attaining God's "perfect will" for our lives. The Bible does not speak specifically to all the personal decisions-either major or minor-that life demands of us each day. Neither are we suggesting that it is always a simple matter to know what is the best decision in a given situation. But as the next chapter on application demonstrates, the Bible provides positive guidance so that we can act confidently and responsibly in obedience to God's purposes. The spiritually-minded person-one whose heart and motivations are permeated with God's principles and purposes-will interact with this guidance in the decisions and activities of life. To obey God requires an act of submission, but the biblically informed believer has the resources to submit in ways that fulfill God's will.

How important it is then to handle the Bible with accuracy! If we desire to please God and do his will, we need a valid interpretation of the Bible. If we do not understand accurately what God intended to say in his Word, or if we read in our own subjective prejudices without any safeguards, we risk abusing the Bible for our own ends rather than using it with God's intentions. How tragic when, instead of following God's principles and will as clearly taught in the Scripture, people twist or reject its teachings to condone or even promote their sin. To illustrate, it is easy for us to condemn what we consider blatant sins, such as murder or adultery. But we find it startling that in the Bible gossiping, greed, envy, and boasting are abhorrent offenses to God (Rom 1:29–32)! In reality, when Paul lists the kinds of lifestyles that disqualify people from entrance into God's eternal kingdom, greed is prominent on the list (1 Cor 6:9-10). Yet how easy it is in our western affluence to turn greed and boasting into virtues. We believe the advertisers who assure us that "we deserve it," and we justify luxury and materialism.[46]

All Christians, however sincere, face an ever-present tendency: to mold the Bible's teachings to promote their values instead of allowing the Bible to transform them. The Bible condemns many practices that we have come to accept and even recommend! Without doubt, we require a responsible hermeneutic to guide our interpretation and to assure its objectivity. We dare not make the Bible say what we

[46]For another more controversial but increasingly urgent example, consider those who reject the Bible's teaching against an actively homosexual life-style. Some would like to deny or side-step the implications of the biblical passages that oppose homosexual practice, but we feel they do so through faulty exegesis. Though we do not condemn a person who finds his or her sexual orientation, for whatever reason, to be homosexual, the Bible clearly states in various places that to *practice* homosexuality offends God (e.g., Lev 1822; 20:13; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9). Several recent and, we feel, sound studies support the traditional biblical condemnation of homosexual activity: D. F. Wright, "Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 125-53; id., "Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible," *EvQ* 61 (1989): 291-300; G. J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *ExpT* 102 (1991): 359-63; and J. B. de Young, "The Contributions of the Septuagint to Biblical Sanctions against Homosexuality," *JETS* 34 (1991): 157-77.

want it to say or have it approve the activities that we want to pursue. The Bible, as God's revealed truth, demands that we submit to its teaching, not make it fit our desires. Of course, the ultimate question still remains even after the best interpretive work is complete: will we submit to God's requirements that we have discovered in his Word?

For Aesthetic Enjoyment

In addition to all its other virtues, the Bible delights the people of God. Its pages brim with adventure, humor, and pageantry. It is a book of aesthetic beauty. Surely God gave us this marvelous message to ***enjoy!*** God's message has come to us in various kinds of highly crafted literature. It would be difficult not to appreciate the Bible's assorted literary qualities and genius.[47] Though we do not limit the value of the Bible to being great literature, many people appropriately acknowledge the "Bible as Literature" and expound its literary excellence.[48] People savor the artful narrative of the intrigues of Joseph and his brothers, and they admire Nathan's cunningly simple parable to King David. They appreciate the masterful poetry in the Psalms and delight in the parables of Jesus. The Bible's diverse literature-OT epics, strange apocalyptic prophecy, tightly reasoned epistles, the skillful sustained argumentation in Hebrews-inspires and captures our interest. The book itself arouses intellectual and emotional enjoyment. It invites us to appreciate its multifaceted beauty. But above that, the Bible's beauty and the pleasure it promotes reflects the beauty and personality of the God who inspired it. Its beauty sings his praises just as the stars and planets do (Psa 19).

Summary

The Bible is a collection of remarkable writings of great consequence to all people. For believers it constitutes God's written revelation to his people. And as in any kind of communication, understanding the message is critical. Whether one communicates with a wink, a word, a picture, or a speech, if the message gets garbled, the point is lost. Indeed, the results of a muddled message can be inconsequential or tragic.

The Bible communicates in various ways and serves many purposes (as we have just reviewed). But if the Bible is to retain its integrity and potency as God's communication to his people, we must understand the intention of its message. To impose our own meaning is not a valid option. As we have argued, only a responsible

[47]See the section on "Literary Criticism" in the bibliography for resources on investigating the literary dimensions of the Bible.

[48]On this topic see L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

system of hermeneutics gives us confidence that indeed we have understood God's message. We must know the meaning of the Bible's message before we can expect that meaning to perform what God intended. That people misuse and misconstrue the Bible's teachings every day (and some have throughout the Church's history), does not invalidate the relevance of hermeneutics. Though God may work through or even in spite of faulty interpretation, this is beside the point. If a child asks for arsenic and her mother hands her an apple, things may turn out well in that instance, but we dare not argue that to understand the correct meanings of the words "arsenic" and "apple" is irrelevant. We must always keep in mind that the best results come from the most accurate interpretations-and results are the purpose for the Bible.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Application

In the previous chapters we have described and defined how an interpreter determines the meaning of the text. Certainly proper application cannot be determined until that meaning has been established. But the process of interpretation is incomplete if it stops at the level of meaning. The terminology adopted for the stages of application varies. Some speak of application as part of interpretation, while others think of it as a separate step. Some talk of what the text ***meant*** versus what it ***means***. One of the most popular distinctions that evangelicals have utilized follows E. D. Hirsch's discussion of meaning vs. significance.[1] "Meaning" refers to the ideas the biblical text originally intended to communicate to its readers; "significance" refers to the implications of that meaning in different, later situations. From this vantage point, therefore, the meaning of any given passage of Scripture remains consistent no matter who is reading the text, while its significance may vary from reader to reader. But whatever the terminology employed, the issue is clear. How do we who believe the Bible remains relevant for people beyond the first audience determine that relevance? We might ask: "What bearing does the biblical message have on life today—on life in general and on my life in particular? How does God expect ***me*** to respond?"

The Importance of Application

Since not everyone shares our conviction that the Bible is meant to be applied outside its original setting, we will discuss briefly two factors that support our conviction.

[1]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). For a somewhat technical and philosophical defense of this distinction against its critics, see G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 397–415.

First, the Scriptures themselves repeatedly claim that people glorify God by obeying-that is by applying-his Word. After Moses reviewed the Law at the end of the wilderness wandering, he concluded by promising the people blessing and prosperity if, and only if, they obeyed the laws (Deut 30:1 l-20). Here blessing and prosperity are conditional; they follow only if people "apply" the laws to their daily lives. The historical and prophetic books of the OT in large measure describe the cycles of faithfulness and faithlessness that caused the Israelites alternately to receive God's blessing and judgment. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities thus served as vivid reminders of the serious consequences of failing to live consistently with God's Word. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reiterates that it is necessary not merely to hear his words but to put them into practice (Mt 7:13–27). James echoes Jesus' words when he reminds his audience, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (Jas 1:22).

Second, the Bible claims that its message is relevant for later generations, not just its original readers. After Moses wrote down the Law and assigned the Levites as its custodians, he gave instructions for it to be read every seven years before the assembled people (Deut 31:9–1 3). Individual parents, however, were to teach the Law to their children on a regular basis (Deut 6:7-25). After centuries of relative neglect, Josiah obtained a copy of the Law, recognized its continuing authority, and led the people in renewing their commitment to God's covenant (2 Kgs 22-23). Over a century later when a remnant returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon, Ezra the scribe reaffirmed the relevance of the Law for his generation by calling the people together to hear God's Word read and explained (Neh 7:73b–8: 18). Later prophets applied to their own generations the messages given by earlier prophets. Jeremiah, for example, recalled Nathan's promises to David to assure the exiles that God would restore them to their land after seventy years in captivity (Jer 33:19-22; cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16). He also built on Isaiah's prophecy that a righteous branch would sprout from David's line (Jer 33:14–16; cf. Isa 11:1).

The NT contains equally striking evidence confirming that God's Word was designed not only for the original readers but for subsequent generations. Note that just as Jesus commands his disciples to teach their converts "everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19), he also prays not only for his immediate followers but for all those who would believe in him through their message (Jn 17:20). In addition, Paul warns the believers in Corinth, who were emphasizing their freedom in Christ, of the dangers of idolatry and immorality by reminding them of God's judgment on the Israelites in the wilderness. Despite recognizing that these believers lived in a different age and era in salvation history, he nevertheless states: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did" (1 Cor 10:6). He makes a similar point later to Roman believers but generalizes to include all the OT: "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).

We understand that people who do not share our presuppositions about the authority of Scripture are not concerned to apply it. But in light of the Scriptures' own witness,[2] we find it more difficult to comprehend why many who claim to be Bible-believing Christians read and study the Bible so minimally and are so little concerned to apply it correctly.[3] And even among those who do seek to implement God's word, many do not consistently heed "the whole counsel of God" (cf. Acts 20:27). Certain parts of the Psalms and Proverbs, the Gospels, and Paul's letters are well-known and applied, while much of the rest of Scripture remains virtually untouched.

This leads to an important theological conviction. *All* Scripture is both inspired and relevant ("useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that the [woman or] man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"—2 Tim 3: 16). This does not mean that we will find a personal application in every phrase or sentence in Scripture, because the amount of application that stems from a passage will vary from genre to genre. We must interpret and apply each text in its context as part of a larger meaningful linguistic utterance. Tightly packed didactic, epistolary texts may place demands on our lives in virtually every phrase and clause. At the other end of the spectrum, we may read several chapters of genealogical material (e.g., in 1 Chr 1-12) before finding much of relevance, and even then only broad principles-about God's providence, his plan of salvation, his concern for individuals, and so on. But every sentence, indeed every verse, appears as part of a larger, coherent unit of thought that has some relevance for us.[4]

Avoiding Mistakes in Application

Despite the importance of application, few modern evangelical scholars have focused on this topic. In fact, most hermeneutics textbooks give it only brief coverage, and many major commentary series only mention application with passing remarks to help readers bridge the gap from the biblical world to the modern world. Perhaps many assume that sound application is more "caught than taught." This is probably true, but sound application often seems hard to find, much less to catch! Fortunately, recent studies are helping to rectify this error of omission. Anthropologists, linguists, and missiologists are engaging in intensive discussions of contextualization: how to apply the Bible cross-culturally from a Western to a non-Western context.[5] And the principles involved prove identical to those needed to

[2]On the significance of the Scriptures' own claim to their authority more generally, see W. A. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," in Scripture and *Truth,* ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 19-59.

[3]On Bible-reading habits among American Christians in the early 1990s, see G. Bama, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura: Regal, 1991), 286-91.

[4]See *further* K. J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon,* ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,1986), 49–104.

[5]Some of the most well-known include E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); and 0. Costas, *Liberating News. A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Recall our earlier discussion under historical-cultural background.

apply the Bible from its original non-Western context to a Western one such as ours.[6] Developers of a few new commentary series are working more self-consciously and with greater sophistication to meet the need for application.[7] Nevertheless, much more work remains, for Christians today still encounter widespread misapplication of Scripture. Examples could be multiplied and categorized in detail;[8] we will merely point out three of the most common here.

Total Neglect of the Literary Context

This might also be called the "ouija board" approach to guidance. Christians who want to base their decisions on the will of God may be tempted to use the Bible as if it were a magical book. For example, they might open the Bible at random and accept the verse their eyes fall on as God's guidance for the decision they are making. While God might conceivably accommodate a sincere but misguided Christian through this method, he never promises to do so; consequently, serious mistakes with damaging consequences inevitably occur when people persist in this approach. One of us, for example, knew a young man who had to decide whether to enlist in the armed forces or go to college. Opening his Bible at random, he saw the passage in Ezekiel that speaks of people coming from Tarshish to Tyre in ships (Ezek 27:25). Although this passage contains no command for anyone to go anywhere in a ship and has nothing to do with becoming part of the armed forces, this young man interpreted the text as a call to join the Navy. Chances are good that he deprived himself of a college education by making a decision he thought was God's will but probably was not. More seriously, though, he completely misunderstood what role the Bible should have in the Christian decision-making process.

A more unfortunate incident was recorded a few years ago on the front page of the sports section of a major Chicago newspaper under the bold headline, "God's Orders Send Pitcher Packing." The story explained how the Christian owner of a minor league baseball team decided to release a pitcher who had requested a raise in pay. She opened her Bible at random, again to Ezekiel (no doubt because it comes roughly in the middle!), and read the phrase, "prepare thee stuff for removing" (Ezek 12:3; KJV). This became her guidance "from God" for dismissing the pitcher. Had she read the context, she would have discovered that these instructions from God to Ezekiel concerned an object lesson Ezekiel was to give the Israelites. He was to pack as if going on a long trip, but he was not actually supposed to

[6]A point stressed by Osborne in his helpful chapters on application, both labeled, somewhat idiosyncratically, "Homiletics" and subdivided into "Contextualization" and "The Sermon" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral,* 318–65).

[7]Of those that have already begun to appear the best are *The Bible Speaks Today* and *The New Testament Commentary,* both from Intervarsity Press, and *Interpretation* from John Knox Press. All three may be substantially outstripped in detail and quality, however, by the forthcoming series from Zondervan, *The NIV Application Commentary.*

[8]As, *e.g.,* in J. W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: Twenty Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1980), which covers errors of interpretation as well as errors of application (errors that, unfortunately, are by no means limited to the cults!).

go anywhere. Had the owner of this team really wanted to imitate Ezekiel (which would still not have been a correct application of the passage!), she would have been the one to make preparations for leaving rather than firing someone else.[9]

Partial Neglect of the Literary or Historical Context

Fortunately, most Bible readers usually avoid the extreme errors of the ouija board approach. Much more common, however, is the proof-texting error that is often unwittingly encouraged by Bible memory systems that focus primarily on individual verses. To their credit, those who use this approach at least read entire sentences as meaningful units of thought, but often they fail to observe the larger contexts that appear to limit the application in important ways. Philippians 4:13, for example, suffers regular abuse. Christians often announce: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" to reassure others (or themselves) that they can succeed in undertakings for which they may or may not be qualified. Subsequent failure leaves them distraught with God as if he had broken his promise! But had they read w. 11 and 12, they would have seen that the application of this passage is limited to contentment regardless of one's economic circumstances.[10]

In other instances, such readers miss important contextual or historical-cultural background insights. Psalm 127:3–5, for example, reads:

> **Sons are** a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

This is a popular passage for wedding ceremonies, perhaps because Christian couples think that God is thus commanding them to have large families. If so, they need to look more carefully at the context. Contending with their enemies in the gate of an ancient walled city refers either to military battle or legal action (which took place near the city gate). The language here is exclusive: "sons" does not include "daughters" because in ancient Israel girls could neither be soldiers nor legal witnesses. In an age when infant and child mortality rates were high, large families ensured that sufficient sons would survive to care for aged parents in their declining years. While there is at least one clear principle in this passage that Christians can apply, (e.g., about the need to care for one's elderly parents, 1 Tim 5:8), Christians dare not use this verse to assert that all believers must have large families."

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[9]For details of this example, along with a discussion of inappropriate uses of a "fleece" to determine God's will, see K. A. Ecklebarger, "Are We Fleecing Ourselves?" Moody *Monthly* 85 (Nov. 1984): *26-28.*

[10]Cf. further R. R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 154-55.

[11]Cf. further L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–50,* WBC 21 (Waco: Word, 1983), 180-l.

Insufficiently Analogous Situations

The most subtle of all misapplications of Scripture concerns those who interpret passages in their correct literary and historical contexts but then bring them to bear on situations where they simply do not apply. The temptation of Christ well illustrates the subtlety and sinister nature of this misapplication. Using a subtle ploy, Satan quoted Psa 91:11–12 and challenged Jesus saying, "If you are the Son of God ... throw yourself down. For it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone"' (Mt 4:5). Here Satan asks Jesus to demonstrate God's miraculous ability to preserve his life. Certainly Jesus himself had this power. What is more, the psalmist states that God promises safety and protection to all who "dwell in the shelter of the Most High" (Psa 91: 1). The problem here is that the devil's challenge confuses the psalmist's reference to "unintentional stumbling" with taking a ***deliberate*** jump off the Temple pinnacle. The intent here is not to test God's faithfulness to his word by manufacturing situations in which we try to force him to act in certain ways; rather, it indicates his providential care for his children. Jesus thus refutes the devil with another text of Scripture that strictly forbids presuming on the grace of God (Deut 6:16).[12] No passage of Scripture can be casually or carelessly applied to any and/or every situation.

A Four-Step Methodology for Legitimate Application

What then should we do? It is always easier to spot fallacies in wrong methods than to formulate sound principles. The very nature of application-which varies from individual to individual in ways that meaning does not[13]—indicates that we probably cannot create a comprehensive list of inerrant principles; however, we can formulate some general and workable guidelines. The foregoing examples of how ***not*** to apply passages remind us that all applications must be consistent with the meaning of passages arrived at by means of the sound hermeneutical principles we have already discussed in this book.[14] Legitimate application requires the use of both the general hermeneutical principles (establishing an accurate text, the correct meaning of words, the historical-cultural background, the larger literary contexts, and the like) and, also, special hermeneutics or genre criticism. In other words, we

[12]Cf. further C. L. Blomberg, Matthew, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 84–85.

[13]A point no more strongly stressed than by W. C. Kaiser, Jr. "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots,* ed. K. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), 12341, and elsewhere. Rather than speak of single intent or single meaning with multiple applications or significances, however, it seems to us better to speak of fixed meaning with varying significances. Kaiser's language could wrongly suggest that certain passages originally intended to communicate only one idea when in fact several are present.

[14]Cf. B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation,* 3d. rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 185.

must also ask of historical narratives if various characters represent good or bad examples or if they are merely descriptive of what happened as part of some larger theological point about God's working in the world. We must inquire if prophecies were pointing to current events in the biblical writer's day, to the first coming of Christ, to his second coming, or to some combination of the three. We must inquire whether proverbs are descriptive or prescriptive, and, if the latter, to what extent they teach absolutes or mere generalizations. We must also determine in what ways OT laws were fulfilled in Christ. In short, most of the principles and many of the examples already discussed in this volume suggest legitimate applications.

But we can say more. Recent evangelical analysis has come to a consensus that the key to legitimate application involves what is usually called "principlizing."[15] This may be defined as "an attempt to discover in a narrative [i.e., a text] the spiritual, moral, or theological principles that have relevance for the contemporary believer."[16] How one develops this process ranges from the relatively simple to the relatively complex. Jack Kuhatschek's excellent work, ***Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible,*** boils it all down to three steps: understand the original situation, determine the broader principle that the biblical application reflects, and apply that general principle to situations we face.[17] Ramesh Richard, on the other hand, enumerates six steps that move from biblical statements to implications, extrapolations, applicational interpretations, interpretive applications, and finally to significance.[18] We propose a four-stage model that we believe incorporates all of the major elements of these and other paradigms currently used. The four steps are as follows:

1. Determine the original application(s) intended by the passage.
2. Evaluate the level of specificity of those applications. Are they transferable across time and space to other audiences?
3. If not, identify one or more broader cross-cultural principles that the specific elements of the text reflect.
4. Find appropriate applications for today that embody those principles.

To explain these steps further, we will briefly elaborate on each.

Determine the Original Application(s)

In this step the interpreter asks questions such as: What did the biblical author of a given passage want his hearers or readers to do? What was the intended response to the text? To answer these questions the interpreter asks a series of additional

[15]E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 229.

[16]H. A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 212.

"(Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), 33.

[18]R. P Richard, "Application Theory in Relation to The New Testament," *BSac* 143 (1986):211.

questions. Is there a command to obey, an example to follow or to avoid, a promise to claim, a warning to heed, a teaching to act on (even if not phrased as a direct command), a truth to believe?[19] Other queries might be added such as: Is there a need that prompts prayer or a blessing that motivates praise? Sometimes contemporary applications will be identical to the originally intended responses, though often they will differ in some ways.

For example, obeying the **command** not to covet a neighbor's wife remains as timely today as it did when Moses received it on Mount Sinai (Exod 20:17). But this verse also prohibits coveting a neighbor's house, manservant, maidservant, ox, or donkey. Most Western urban dwellers do not have to worry about the last four of these. But the text identifies those possessions of their neighbors that the Israelites might be most tempted to desire. The interpreter needs to ask what such items might be today and include these in the application: a car, a stereo, a house, a computer, and so on. In fact the text of Exodus specifically justifies such generalization by concluding "or anything else that belongs to your neighbor."

To be correctly applied, an attempt to emulate the early church members' practices of sharing their faith should focus on marketplace evangelism (Acts 17: 17). Many groups automatically assume that identical practices are both appropriate and necessary today. In certain contexts and certain cultures this may be true, but the interpreter must inquire why the first Christians gravitated to the central squares of European towns to preach. The answer is: public arenas were the socially acceptable places to consider new ideas (cf. Acts 17: 18-2 1). Many Third-World villages today have similarly structured communities whose central plazas make ideal settings for preaching the gospel. But most Western cities have no such centralized location, and the nearest equivalent-a shopping mall or an airport terminal-is not a place where people go to hear the latest news or to hear visitors publicly greet the town. In fact, because non-Christian cult members often conduct their evangelism in these arenas, Christians have to overcome a cultural stigma to witness effectively in such places. Sensitive application of Acts 17 may motivate believers to look for better, more suitable forums (in colleges and universities, through radio and television, and the like).[20]

Asking if there is a truth to ***believe*** and a teaching to ***act upon*** from Acts 16:25-34 would certainly yield the identical answer Paul gave to the Philippian jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (v. 3 1) · This example differs from the previous two since the application is already at the level of a general principle, so we need not pursue the remaining steps in the process. However, since many readers of this passage are already believers, they simply need to consider how they can help others apply its message. These three examples have taken us through the entire process of application, but we need to go on to itemize what we have done and give further illustrations.

[19]T. **N. Sterrett,** *How to Understand Your Bible* **(Downers Grove: Intervarsity,** 1974), **172-78.**

[20]For **a sensitive treatment of the topic, see M. Green,** *Evangelism in the Early Church* **(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970).**

Evaluate the Level of Specificity of the Original Application(s)

This step was a fairly easy task for the passages on coveting and on believing in Jesus that we just discussed. The command against coveting a neighbor's wife or husband clarified that this was a specific example of the more general prohibition against coveting what belongs to others. In the case of believing in Jesus, anyone at all familiar with the Bible or Christian teaching will recognize this as the foundational principle of the NT that is repeated in many different ways and places. But in the example of marketplace evangelism, not every reader will realize this as a specific example of a broader principle that may vary from one context to the next. Those familiar with biblical examples and commands concerning evangelism will realize that the methods vary while the mandate to share the faith widely remains consistent. Even then, further historical and cultural background information may help readers to understand what functional equivalents to the marketplace may be available for believers in other times and places.

The issues raised here revolve around a major topic in the study of hermeneutics, and, more specifically, of application. How does the interpreter know when certain biblical commands, examples, promises, warnings, and so on, are "culture-bound"? To answer the question, we suggest further questions: When may the interpreter feel free to assume that the text is presenting a specific ***form*** of a more general ***principle?*** When does the principle remain timeless and unchanging? How may the form of implementing that principle change from one context to the next?

Perhaps no more controversial example of this dilemma afflicts Christianity today than the issue of women's roles in the home and the church. Although key texts (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2–16;14:33b–38; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Eph 5:18–33; 1 Pet 3:1-7) indicate certain timeless elements and certain culture-bound elements, sorting out which is which proves immensely difficult. Take 1 Tim 2:8-15, for example. Many would agree that it is possible to pray in a godly fashion without necessarily "lifting up holy hands" (v. 8) and that braided hair for women is not always (or often) immoral (v. 9). Similarly, few would dispute that it is always appropriate for men to pray without anger or disputing (v. 8) and that women should always perform good deeds (v. 10). But what does the interpreter do with w. 11-12, in which women are commanded to learn in quietness and full submission and not to teach or have authority over men? In addition to questions about the translation of key words in this passage and their grammatical relationship to one another, the debate over the function of vv. 13-14 looms large. To many interpreters, v. 13 grounds Paul's commands in God's order of creating man first and then woman. They see this as a natural indicator that his teaching should be applied universally. Verse 14, however, seems to base those same commands in the events of the Fall, in which case we would expect the redemption in Christ to reverse its effects.

While we do not propose to take a stand on the foregoing passage,[21] we do note that many hermeneutics textbooks use passages like this to illustrate the principles

[21]For **two of the best and most thorough recent discussions, from** complementarian **and** egalitarian perspectives, **respectively, cf. the relevant articles in J. Piper and** W. **Grudem,** eds., *Recovering Biblical*

they outline, and if readers disagree with their particular interpretations and applications, unfortunately, they question the principles employed.[22] We must admit that the passages involving women's and men's roles are among the most difficult in Scripture, and this accounts for the sincere disagreement of godly, well-educated interpreters. Consequently, these passages are examples of the difficulty of positing universal application except perhaps to rule out some of the most extreme and unlikely positions. Individual preunderstandings also inevitably color interpreters' approaches to these delicate texts.[23]

Our purpose here is simply to list a variety of criteria that will enable most interpreters to reach a fair measure of agreement on a wide variety of less complex texts, which they can employ with the more complicated passages. Before doing so, however, we must introduce one other preliminary matter. Many passages in Scripture do not clearly indicate whether they convey universal principles or only culture-specific applications. As a result, more liberal interpreters argue that unless something in the text specifically indicates that the passage teaches a timeless truth, we should assume it to be "occasional," that is, limited in its specific application to its original context.[24] More conservative writers, on the other hand, often reply that the reverse is true: unless specific textual data support a "culture-bound" perspective, we should assume the originally intended application remains normative for all believers of all times.[25]

We detect problems, however, with both of these views. The former makes it difficult to establish the timelessness even of fundamental moral principles such as prohibitions against theft or murder;[26] the latter would seem to require us to greet one another with a holy kiss (1 Thes 5:26) or drink wine for upset stomachs (1 Tim 5:23).[27] This debate in fact reminds us of the polarization of perspectives on the application of OT Law in the NT age. As with our resolution of that debate, we believe the fairest and most scriptural approach assumes neither of the above perspectives, but rather a mediating one. With 2 Tim 3:16 and related texts, we affirm that every passage (a meaningful unit of discourse that makes one or more points that can be restated, if necessary, in a proposition) has some normative value for believers in all times and places. But we presuppose nothing about whether the

Manhood and Womanhood (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991); and C. S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992).

[22]E.g., D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 34-30; Osborne, *The Hermetaeutical Spiral,* 328–30; *Fee* and Stuart, *How to Read The Bible For AN Its Worth,* 69.

[23]On which, see esp. R. K. Johnston, "The Role of Women in the Church and Home: An Evangelical Testcase in Hermeneutics," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation,* ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 234-59.

[24]See the discussion of and response to this and related perspectives in J. R. McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible,* ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 222-27.

[25]The view McQuilkin himself presupposes ("Normativeness" 230); and defended by W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 314-18.

[26]McQuilkin, "Normativeness," 225-27.

[27]A. Johnson "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in Radmacher and Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible, 277-78.*

application for us today will come by preserving unchanged the specific elements of the passage or whether we will have to identify broader principles that suggest unique applications for new contexts.[28] Instead we ask a series of questions of the text:[29]

I. ***Does the text present a broad theological or moral principle or does it give a specific manifestation of such a principle, which Scripture elsewhere embodies in one or more different forms?*** Nine-tenths of the Decalogue (minus the Sabbath command) clearly illustrates such broad moral categories (Exod 20:2–17). Much of the rest of the Law gives specific ways of obeying and disobeying these principles. In the NT, both Jesus and Paul reaffirm the continuing relevance of all nine.[30] The same is true of the so-called double-love command (Deut 6:4–5; Lev 19:18), which Jesus brings together in Mk 12:29–31 ("Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself"). Romans 12:1–9 presents fundamental ethical obligations for believers: transformation of body and mind; use of spiritual gifts; and, again, love. A theme that recurs in the Law, Psalms, Proverbs, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Epistles is the prohibition against partiality and the need to show mercy to the poor and dispossessed, to the outcast and the stranger.

On the other hand, numerous specific texts illustrate applications of this principle that may need to be changed if the principle is to be successfully implemented in new contexts. For example, OT Law commanded farmers not to harvest the very edges of their field or go over their land a second time to glean what was dropped from the initial harvest. This enabled the poor to freely gather the leftovers (Lev 19:9–10). These commands presuppose a rural, agrarian society in which the poor have access to the fields. Such principles would scarcely help the vast majority of urban poor in our world today. Instead, those who seek to apply this text must find new ways to prevent the wasting or hoarding of surplus food in our world. One Christian businessman in the Denver area, for example, tried repeatedly and finally succeeded in getting a major airline to donate its unused meals to a local clearing house for Christian charities, which in turn distributed them to needy people. We may need to find equivalents to the effort expended in gleaning so that poor people today have to expend some effort for their food rather than simply receiving it free. Many charitable food banks have allowed the poor to retain their dignity and incentive to work through charging a nominal fee for commodities. The laws of gleaning are thus relevant as a specific example of our broader concern for the poor, even if we do not imitate exactly their ancient formal application.[31] Certainly the Scriptures themselves exhibit a diversity of responses to the problem (cf. Mk 10:21; Lk 19:8; Acts 4:32–35; Jas 1:27).

[28]Similarly Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral, 326.*

[29]The list does not purport to be exhaustive but illustrative. It shares important similarities with that of Johnson, "Response," 279430, but is by no means identical.

[30]For a justification of treating the Sabbath command differently, see esp. D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[31]An excellent, recent resource book for implementing these principles today is J. Ronsvalle and S. Ronsvalle, The *Poor Have Faces: Loving Your Neighbor in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

2. *Does the larger context of the book* in which *the passage appears limit the application in any way or does it promote a more universal application?* This question concerns information that might be near to the passage or it might be separated from it in another part of the book. For example, the interpreter might read Jesus' warning to Peter that he would have to die for his faith (Jn 21: 18-19) and wonder how widely it applies. Even if not every Christian is martyred, should all believers at least be prepared for someone to lead them "where [they] do not want to go" (v. 18b)? Reading further in the context leads the interpreter to see that Jesus predicts a quite different kind of destiny for John (w. 20-23). In fact, Jesus' words were later misinterpreted as implying that John would live until Christ's return (v. 23). Although Jesus did not say that, he spoke positively enough about John's future to make it clear that his words to Peter were meant for Peter alone and could not necessarily be generalized to include anybody else.[32]

On the other hand, the book of Ecclesiastes is more difficult to assess in places. It is clear that the author has tried indulging in most of life's pleasures and found them to be futile. Even though periodically he punctuates his narrative with seemingly positive principles such as, "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (Eccl 2:24a), ambiguity clouds his statements. Although he immediately adds, "this too, I see, is from the hand of God" (v. 24b), he ends the paragraph with the conclusion, "this too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Only when we recognize chaps. 11-12 as the concluding lessons that "the Preacher" has learned can we detect his purpose. Here similarly positive commands to enjoy life in wholesome ways, while one is able, are presented without any qualification (11:9–12:1;12:13). This suggests that passages like 2:24a have a timeless, normative value.[33]

3. *Does subsequent revelation limit the application of a particular passage even if the book in which it* appears *does not?* Obviously, the interpreter must ask this question of every OT text. As discussed above, we can assume neither that all of the OT carries over into the NT without any change in application nor that none of it carries over unchanged. Rather, we must examine each text to discover how it has been fulfilled in Christ (Mt 5:17). But the same test must be applied to NT texts, not because we live in a new period of salvation history but because the NT itself sometimes revokes earlier commands or presents alternate models. So we find that earlier ones were not intended to be normative for every place and time.

A well-known example is Jesus' command to his disciples to take along no money or provisions for their itinerant preaching but to rely solely on the generosity of those to whom they minister (Mt 10:9–10). Later, however, Jesus refers specifically to these commands (Lk 22:35) and then says, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag. .." (v. 36). Paul does this, too, changing or reversing early practices

[32]Cf. further D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 679-82.

[33]Though even then interpreters do not all agree. We have followed the perspective we believe to be ably defended in M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983); and W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979).

later on in his ministry. On occasion he relies on other Christians for financial support; at other times he makes tents to finance his ministry. The rationale in each case is what most likely advances the cause of the gospel (1 Cor 9). It is thus inappropriate for Christians today to assume that all full-time Christian workers must be paid by other believers or that none may be so remunerated. We must ask what will bring the most number of people to Christ? What will not put the gospel into disrepute? What will not unduly burden God's people? Given the abuses of fund-raising by so many in ministry today, we could make a good case for promoting far more tent-making models than currently exist![34]

4. *Is the specific teaching "contradicted" elsewhere in ways that show it was limited to exceptional situations?* In a sense this is simply an important subquestion of the previous one. Because Scripture portrays Abraham as a paradigm of faith and obedience, we must ask how we can apply the story of his willingness to offer up his son Isaac on the altar (Gen 22). Although we will return to this example later, one thing seems clear here: God does not want us to sacrifice our children the way early Canaanite (and a few contemporary pagan) religions often did. Later laws make this abundantly plain (e.g., Lev 18:21; 20:2–5). We cannot know whether Abraham realized that in his day, but we need not vacillate. As it turned out, God never had any intention of making Abraham kill his son. Surely the test was a unique one, not repeated elsewhere in Scripture and not to be repeated by any subsequent believers.

So, too, God's unusual call to the prophet Hosea to "take to yourselfan adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness" (Hos 1:2) had a unique purpose in God's dealings with ancient Israel. While some first-time readers of this passage might question why God appears to condone prostitution or at least tells Hosea to marry an apparently unrepentant prostitute, this situation is unique and bears closer study. Now, to begin with, it is unclear if this text originally meant, as is usually assumed, that Gomer already was a harlot, or if it merely anticipated her later adultery.[35] But even if the former, other Scriptures unequivocally state that prostitution is sinful (Lev 19:29; 1 Cor 6: 15). What then are we to make of Hosea uniting again with his wife after her later adultery (Hos 3: 1)? Jesus indicates that reconciliation is not always possible or necessary following marital unfaithfulness (Mt 19:9).[36] But unlike the Judaism of his day, he never mandated divorce in the case of infidelity. Hosea's actions were object lessons intended by God to illustrate the spiritual infidelity of his people Israel and God's unfailing love for them in spite of their disobedience (Hos 1:2; 3:1). Since God has not specifically commanded this as a general principle, we cannot apply these passages from Hosea to our contemporary situation. In other words, we find no warrant here to marry prostitutes or to preserve marriages that have been ruptured by adultery. Still, the broader principle of faithfulness in the face of faithlessness may suggest that in some circumstances these actions are acceptable. More impor-

[34]On this theme, cf. further J. M. Bassler, God and *Mammon: Asking for Money in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

[35]See D. L. Hubbard, *Hosea,* TOTC (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1989), 59–60.

[36]On which, see further, C. L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3–12," *TrinJ* n.s. 11 (1990): 161–96.

tantly, they should cause us to seek other applications of the broader principle, such as ways of continuing to love prodigal children or friends who have wronged us, and so on.

5. ***Are cultural conditions mentioned in Scripture or assumed by its authors that make it inappropriate always to apply a given text in the same way?*** One of the few things widely agreed on by interpreters of the "problem passages on women" is that veils (or long hair) on women and short hair on men (1 Cor 11:2–16) are not universal absolutes. A key to this understanding is Paul's own statement that a woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered might as well shave her head (v. 5), which is a "disgrace" (v. 6). These remarks drive the contemporary reader to ask what was disgraceful about shaved heads among women of Paul's day. Numerous possibilities exist. For Jewish women the most likely reason is that shaved heads could have suggested that they had been tried and convicted of adultery; for Greco-Roman women it may have suggested that they were the more "masculine" partner in a lesbian relationship.[37] So unless short hair or uncovered heads send the same signals in modern-day cultures (as, for example, in certain parts of the more conservative Islamic world), the specific practice here is irrelevant. On the other hand, any dress or grooming, behavior or conversation that suggests sexual unfaithfulness or deviance should remain as wrong for Christian women today as it was in first-century Corinth.

An examination of the rationale for Paul's commands to the men in this passage might at first glance suggest a different conclusion. At least in v. 14, Paul writes: "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?" Notwithstanding the fact that most of us, if honest, would quickly answer the question, no, the term "nature" suggests that Paul appeals to some timeless principle of which we are simply unaware. Here a knowledge of Scripture and of some historical background helps. Paul, raised as a devout Jew, knew of one major category of Jewish man who was praised by God for never cutting his hair-the Nazirite (Num 6: l-2 1). Paul himself had practiced such vows on a temporary basis (Acts 18:18). So "the nature of things" in 1 Cor 11:14 must mean something like "the common custom throughout the first-century Greco-Roman world," which in turn explains why all the churches of that time had adopted this practice (v. 16). We see again the need to understand the culture of the time to find the rationale. The best recent research suggests that long hair (perhaps resembling an external head covering) on a man likely made him appear too much like Roman priests officiating at certain pagan rituals.[38] Once again, if long hair is inextricably bound up with non-Christian religious practice in some modern culture, then it, too, should remain taboo. But if not, then hair style with God is not a

[37]For Jewish backgrounds, see esp. J. B. Hurley, *Man and Woman* in *Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981), 162–84; for Greco-Roman backgrounds, G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 511.

[38]Cf. R. E. Oster, "When Men Wore Veils to Worship: The Historical Context of 1 Corinthians 11.4," *NTS* 34 (1988): 481-505; C. L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-Coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *BA* 51 (1988): 99–115; and D. W. J. Gill, "The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *TynB 41* (1990): 245–60.

moral issue.

6. Is ***the particular cultural form expressed in the biblical text present today, and*** *if so* ***does it have the same significance as it did then?*** The two examples from 1 Cor 11 could illustrate this criterion as well. But we may move even further to examples in which certain cultural forms no longer even exist, at least not in all cultures. Most men and women still have a choice concerning hair style, but few of us have ever considered if we should or even could bring a sheep or goat to church and slaughter it in front of the pulpit, letting the blood run down the sides! Of course, the sacrificial laws of the OT are first of all fulfilled in Christ in ways that no longer require literal obedience, even if we could (Heb 4: 14–10:18). But we can still learn principles about the costliness and purity demanded by those laws as we read the opening chapters of Leviticus. Do they not say to us that we should be equally devoted to Christ and should seriously embrace moral purity (2 Cor 6:14–7: 1) and sacrificial giving (2 Cor 8–9)? Just as poor people could offer less costly sacrifices in those days (Lev 12:8; cf. Lk 2:24), so Christians should not require identical levels of giving from all believers today. In fact, the NT does not promote a fixed percentage of giving. We may better capture the spirit of NT giving through what R. Sider calls a "graduated tithe,"[39] by which the more one makes, the higher percentage one ought to give to the Lord's work, and especially to helping the poor (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:12–15).

Other religious practices exist among Christians in certain parts of the world but not in others. For example, few North Americans trouble themselves over the fact that they do not greet each other with a holy kiss (1 Thes 5:26). Southerners in the United States, however, do at times greet each other this way. While living in Florida, one of us had a pastor who greeted almost all the women who came to his church with a kiss on the cheek, and the practice was largely accepted and appreciated in that context. In the Middle East, however, men commonly greet other men with a kiss on each cheek. In the republics of the former Soviet Union it is common for men to kiss other men on their mouths. The ancient biblical practice most resembled modern Middle-Eastern behavior, i.e. same-sex kissing on the cheek.[40] No sexual connotations were associated with it; it was the acceptable convention for greeting a good friend warmly. The identical form of application can therefore be preserved in some modern cultures but not in others. Opposite-sex kissing should probably be discouraged in most Western contexts, where, at least among men, sexual desires are often too easily aroused. The Living Bible's paraphrase offers an acceptable alternative: "shake hands warmly."

Most readers could correctly infer the significance of 1 Thes 5:26 even if they do not customarily kiss others in church. However, we might not realize that it was limited to men with men and women with women. In other cases, the significance of biblical practices may escape us altogether. Why, for example, were Israelites not permitted to clip the edges of their beards or tattoo their bodies (Lev 19:27, 28)?

[39]See esp. R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 3rd ed. (Dallas: Word, 1990), chap. 7.

[40]See further L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT *rev.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 185586.

Here Bible students may have to consult commentaries or encyclopedias to learn that the two practices proscribed in Leviticus, like many mentioned in the OT laws, formed part of Canaanite religious ritual.[41] So is it acceptable for Christians to be tattooed today? Some say no, simply because the Bible forbids it. Others simply assume it is all right because it is an OT prohibition. Neither of these approaches is adequate. Instead, interpreters must ask: Is getting the tattoo a part of a non-Christian religious practice, as in fact occurs in some Satanist cults? If so, it remains equally abominable to God. If not, it remains a matter of moral indifference.

Perhaps the most famous example of a practice from biblical times that has largely vanished in Western cultures (though by no means in other parts of the world) is the custom of eating food sacrificed to idols. We consider it because it illustrates principles widely applicable to our society. In both 1 Cor 8-10 and Rom 14:1–1 5: 13 Paul enjoins mutual tolerance on this and related issues. In other words, numerous morally neutral practices in the world can lead some people but not others into sin. In the case of food sacrificed to idols, some could not disassociate eating the meat from their own past pagan practices, namely, fellowship meals with various deities (1 Cor 10:14–22). Paul counseled the "strong" brothers and sisters in Christ not to flaunt their freedoms in these areas if this would cause "weaker" ones to be led into actual sin. He also admonished the weaker ones not to pass judgment on the stronger for their practices.

While modern equivalents abound,[42] perhaps the best known involves the consumption of alcohol. One Scripture passage recognizes wine, for example, as a gift from God that gladdens human hearts (Psa 104:15), but another earnestly commands believers not to get drunk (Eph 5:18). This latter verse obviously counsels moderation rather than debauchery. Some people, however, cannot drink without being tempted to consume to excess, so they should abstain altogether. Those who can avoid drunkenness may choose to drink discreetly; however, their primary concern should be to be filled with the Spirit and not to hurt their weaker brothers or sisters. Those who abstain, in turn, should not pass judgment on those who choose to drink.[43]

The same principles apply to the entire process of determining legitimate applications. Since applications vary from individual to individual, even though meaning remains fixed, numerous biblical passages require Christians to express mutual tolerance. It is unfortunate that Christians often explain their different responses by saying, "this is what this passage means to me," to pass off faulty ***interpretations.***

[41]See e.g., G. J. Wenham, *The* Book of *Leviticus,* MCOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 272. Wenham, however, goes on to note, beyond what most commentators say, that this was an inappropriate defacing of Gods image in humanity-the purity of the external should correspond to the purity of the internal. Even if this is so, it is still doubtful if tattooing is automatically sinful in the NT age in which external, ritual purity laws have been abolished. But to the extent that it, or any other practice, damages the body, it is not exercising good stewardship of "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19).

[42]See the lengthy and sadly amusing list in G. Friesen with R. Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), 382–83.

[43]For a good study of the biblical data, see N. L. Geisler, "A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking," *BSac* 139 (1982): 4656. Geisler goes on to argue for teetotaling as an appropriate contemporary Christian response to the excesses of our culture. This is one understandable response, but it is not the only legitimate application of the relevant texts (see below).

But when people use it, say, to ***apply*** Deut 6:6–7 (on teaching God's commands to one's children) in various ways, they may be legitimately applying the text in ways they deem best for their unique circumstances.[44]

7. Is ***the rationale for the application rooted in a creation ordinance, in the character of God, or in part of his redemptive plan for humanity?***[45] Creation ordinances refer to principles for how people should live that God established prior to the Fall. Presumably, such principles remain part of the redemptive ideal for Christians as they are progressively recreated in God's image after salvation. A classic example is monogamous marriage. Both Jesus (Mt 19:5) and Paul (Eph 5:3 1) reaffirm Gen 2:24 as the rationale for strict standards on sexual ethics. Intervening tolerance of a wide variety of divorces (Deut 24:1) or of occasional polygamy,[46] therefore, does not constitute a valid application of Scripture for Christians today. At times these practices might reflect the lesser of two evils, as in the case in certain non-Western cultures where a polygamous husband becomes a believer. In such instances the less evil action may be to keep the extended family intact and spare the "extra" wives the tragic circumstances that would occur should he divorce them.[47] But that is a quite different matter from telling a Christian who has only one spouse that it could be acceptable under certain circumstances to take more than one!

Other scriptural commands reflect the nature of God himself. In Lev 19:1, Yahweh commands all the Israelites to "be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." Centuries later, Peter quotes these words to justify his commands to "prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you," and "do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance," but "be holy in all you do" (1 Pet 1:13,14,15). We can be sure that these are timeless, universal principles applicable for all believers everywhere, even as specific illustrations of that holiness at times vary.[48]

Galatians 3:27–28 illustrates a passage grounded in principles of redemption: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." While this passage by itself cannot prove that Paul envisioned no functional distinctions between categories of people in the Church, neither can it be limited to equality in opportunities for salvation. Baptism reflected an outward, liberating rite for women and putting them on equal public footing with men in a way that the corresponding OT initiation ritual of circumcision could not. So, too,

[44]E.g., one couple with grade-school children used it to explain why they chose home-schooling; another couple used it to justify Christian schools; and a third couple used it to justify sending their children to public schools while teaching them about the Bible at home and in church.

[45]Larkin, *Culture,* 109.

[46]We must realize how rare polygamy was even in OT times; almost without exception it was limited to kings or very wealthy aristocrats who could afford more than one wife. See esp. W.C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 182-90.

[47]See, e.g., Kraft, *Christianity,* 362–64.

[48]Significantly, Kaiser *Ethics* sums up OT ethics under this very heading of holiness and then divides his thematic studies'into holiness in various areas: e.g., family and society, marriage and sex, wealth and possessions, and so on.

at the very least, the Church of Jesus Christ should seek outward, public signs to affirm the full equality of the sexes and also of races and classes.[49]

8. Is ***the command or application at variance with standard cultural norms*** *of the day?* If so, it likely indicates a transcultural or timeless mandate. In all the discussion of women's roles, it is often forgotten that what would have stood out as most noticeably radical in the various NT domestic codes (see above) were the commands to the *men.* A few partial parallels, for example "husbands, love your wives," (Eph 5:25) exist in the ancient world, but none enjoins as sacrificial an abandonment of men's own rights and privileges as Paul's statement, which goes on to add, "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy" (v. 26).[50] Similarly, in the Greco-Roman world few voices were as blunt and sweeping in their condemnation of homosexuality (or, for that matter, of heterosexual sin) as Paul's in Rom 1: 18-32. In this case he adopted a far more countercultural stance in his day than is held even today in an age of increasingly visible and vocal gay-rights lobbies. This makes it unlikely that Paul's views were in any way intended to be limited to first-century Roman society.[51]

In the OT the so-called ***lex talionis*—"an *eye*** for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Exod 2 1:24)—must also be read against its cultural background. To us it sounds like a vindictive call for revenge, but in its day, it was a radically limiting law that prevented an individual from exacting ***more than*** equivalent compensation and, for the most part, limited retribution to a legal court.[52] Jesus goes further and prohibits personal retaliation altogether (Mt 5:38–42). Both of these principles remain timeless, but their specific applications continue to vary. In the first century, striking someone on the right cheek (v. 39) was typically a backhanded slap meant more to insult than to injure; taking one's cloak was a form of legal collateral (v. 40); and going the extra mile referred to forced Roman conscription (v. 41). Legitimate application of these passages does not require Christians to put themselves or their loved ones in positions that deliberately risk injury or nakedness. It does require them to renounce retaliation and find ways of loving their enemies (v. 43)-giving them what will help them become better individuals.[53]

9. ***Does the passage*** *contain an explicit or* **implicit *condition*** *that limits its application?* Conditional promises are valid only if the conditions are met. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised his followers: "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you" (Mt 7:7). Many

[49]See esp. B. Witherington, III, "Rite and Rights for Women—Galatians 3.28," *NTS* 27 (1981): 593–604. R. N. Longenecker reveals some of these possibilities by organizing his discussion of New ***Testament Social Ethics for Today*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, **1984)** around the three parts of v. 28.

[50]A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians,* WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 373-74.

[51]See further D. F. Wright, "Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible," *EvQ* **61** (1989): 291–300.

[52]A theme helpfully expanded by C. J. H. Wright into an entire book subtitled, "The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today," ***An Eye for an Eye*** (Downers Grove: InverVarsity, 1983).

[53]A theme desperately in need of additional application to the Church today. See C. T. [*sic*] Blomberg, "How the Church Can Turn the Other Cheek and Still Be Political," ***Southern Baptist Public Affairs 2.1*** (1990): 10–12.

today treat this promise as if it were a contract from God guaranteeing that whatever they request God will give to them, particularly in the areas of health and wealth. Others add the qualification, based on passages like Jas 5: 15, that if they ask in faith they can be sure this will happen.[54] But after reading this book, hopefully, no one will try to interpret Mt 7 without first reading Mt 6, or Jas 5 without first reading Jas 4!

In these larger contexts of Jesus' and James' teaching, we learn about the most important condition of all for God to answer prayer according to human desires: it must first be in accordance with his will (Mt 6:10; Jas 4:15). James 4 helps us to understand better why God grants some and not other requests. On the one hand, even when certain good gifts do accord with his will, God has determined to give them only if we ask (Jas 4:2). That alone should be a powerful incentive to pray. On the other hand, sometimes we ask for things with wrong, selfish motives and therefore do not receive them (v. 3). But in other cases, even when our motives are pure, we need to remember that our desires do not always conform to God's. Particularly in the area of physical healing, Jesus' reply to Paul may also apply to us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). In light of these various scriptural conditions concerning prayer, Douglas Moo well defines the prayer of faith in Jas 5: 15 as that which "always includes within it a tacit acknowledgment of God's sovereignty in all matters; that it is *God's* will that must be done."[55] First John 5:14 makes the same point even more explicitly.

Not only do promises in Scripture often have conditions attached, but so also does prophecy. It is not always easy to sort out which OT predictions concerning Israel's future have conditions and which do not. Dispensational theology has historically tended to emphasize numerous apparent unconditional promises to the Jewish people, while so-called covenant theology has stressed the unfulfilled conditions attached to many of those promises.[56] The promise of land for the nation of Israel provides an excellent illustration of this debate. In Gen 15 God renews his covenant with Abraham made in Gen 12:1–3 and specifies that he will give to Abraham's descendants "this land, from the river of Egypt [the Nile] to the great river Euphrates" (15:18). In neither chapter do any conditions appear, unless one interprets the call to Abraham to "go" in Gen 12:1 as a condition, but Abraham did indeed leave his home in Ur and travel to the Promised Land. On the other hand, when the Israelites under Moses were ready to occupy Canaan, God declared all of the blessings of the land to be contingent on their obedience to the Law (Deut 28). One plausible way to resolve this tension, which fits the rest of OT history, is to state that the promise always remains available in principle but that the

"For a good survey and sympathetic critique, see B. Barron, ***The Health and Wealth Gospel*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1987).

[55]D. J. Moo, ***The Letter of James,*** TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 182.

[56]The state of the current debate is well represented in J. S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity* and ***Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*** (Westchester: Crossway, 1988). A significant collection of essays representing the shift toward mainstream evangelicalism among the current generation of dispensationalist scholars is C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

opportunity for the people of each generation to appropriate that promise depends on their obedience.[57]

The plot thickens, however, when we ask *if* God's promise to Abraham and to Moses has ever been completely fulfilled. The largest known territory occupied by Israel occurred under Solomon. Apparently that land included up to the Euphrates (1 Kgs 4:24), but no Scripture indicates that it ever went all the way to the Nile. Still, Solomon himself could praise God by saying, "Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses" (8:56). So if God's promise to Israel was fulfilled, then we need not necessarily look for any further fulfillment. This interpretation would obviously have direct bearing on the view that sees a modern-day Jewish nation in the land of Israel as the fulfillment of Scripture.

On the other hand, even if we assume that the people of Israel never fully occupied all the land God had intended for them, this does not automatically mean we should look for a complete and literal fulfillment in our day. The NT applies many OT passages that originally applied solely to Israel to the Church (see esp. 1 Pet 2:4-10). In fact Paul specifically quotes from God's initial covenant with Abraham ("All nations will be blessed through you" Gen 12:3b) as part of the "gospel," which foresaw Gentiles coming to faith in Christ (Gal 3:8). So it seems highly incongruous to take the first half of the verse out of Genesis and assume that "Israel" still means a literal Jewish nation. Although it is popular among conservative American Christians to cite Gen 12:3a ("I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse") as a reason for supporting the current state of Israel, legitimate principles of application would seem to require that the "you" in this text now refers to the Church of Jesus Christ. In other words, God will bless those who support Christian causes and will not bless those who attack them.[58]

But are there no unfulfilled promises to Jewish people? Some would say not, but various NT passages seem to hold out hope for a more glorious future for the Jews. The most well-known of these is Rom 11:26–27: "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins"' (quoting Isa 59:20–21). Since Jews and Gentiles have been contrasted throughout Rom 9-11, it is not likely that "all Israel" means "the Church" here. Neither is it likely that Paul means every single Jewish person irrespective of his or her attitude toward Jesus. The context refers to the coming Messiah (the deliverer) and speaks of banishing godlessness and of forgiving sins.

The most likely interpretation of this passage is that there will be an outpouring of faith in Messiah Jesus among large numbers of Jews at the time of Christ's return.[59] But that does not suggest that the overwhelming majority of Jews in the

[57]See esp. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 110-13.

[58]Cf. esp. J. C. L. Gibson, *Genesis*, 2 vols. Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 2:15. Pages 5-28 contain an excellent application of Gen 12:1–3 for Christians more generally.

[59]Cf. further C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 2:572–79.

land of Israel, who are not currently Christians, is a necessary fulfillment of prophecy. Paul implies a clear condition in Rom 11:26–27—for Jews now to experience God's blessings they must have faith in Christ. At best, we might say that current Jews in Israel comprise a precursor of such fulfillment. What is more, nothing in this or any other NT passage refers to a *nation* of Israel-that is, a political state that occupies certain boundaries. Romans 9-11 could just as conceivably be fulfilled among Jews and Gentiles scattered throughout the world. In fact, Jesus takes language from the Psalms about Israelites living in the Promised Land and applies it to all true Christians inheriting the entire earth ("the meek shall inherit the earth" Mt 5:5, quoting Psa 37:11).[60]

So it is hermeneutically naive to claim that the largely secular nation of Israel today necessarily occupies any privileged position in God's scheme of things. Worse still, such a view often leads to uncritical political support for Jews against the Palestinian people, even though the vast majority of our Christian brothers and sisters in Israel today are Palestinians, not Jews. We realize this may be a controversial example for some of our readers;[61] however, in light of our emphasis on the commitment of Scripture to social justice we feel it is important to raise this issue here. Hermeneutics can literally make the difference between life and death for multitudes of people on our globe!

Identify the Cross-Cultural Principles

We have already illustrated this step with most of the examples discussed above. If a particular command, example, promise, or warning cannot be applied universally without alteration, can we deduce a broader principle that Scripture does promote as timeless? Can we then suggest new illustrations or applications of that principle for new situations? So, for example, with Paul's teaching on food sacrificed to idols, we proposed the broader principle of "freedom for Christians on morally neutral practices while they weigh how their freedom might affect fellow believers." For tattoos, the principle was not to imitate pagan religious practices. For women's head coverings, we generalized to cover any forms of appearance or behavior that would suggest sexual infidelity In other words, in each case we want to know why a specific command was given or a particular practice adopted or shunned. What did it mean in its particular cultural or historical context? Sometimes Scripture in the immediate or larger context of a passage tells us directly, or at least gives hints. Sometimes we must do our own historical and cultural research, or, more typically, rely on the best work that others have done.

But we must address here another issue involved in this third step in the process of application. When Bible students generalize or principlize from a specific

[60]On *The Gospel and the Land* in these and other passages, see esp. W. D. Davies, in his book so-titled (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

[61]For a vibrant defense of the position adopted here, see esp. C. Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Tring, Herts: Lion, 1983).

application, how generally should they phrase the overarching principle? Consider again the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. Since God does not expect Christians to kill their children, what broader principles can we deduce from this passage? Someone might propose, for example: "Obey God in whatever he commands you, even to the point of trusting him to get you out of seemingly intractable moral dilemmas." After all, Scripture consistently reminds us of the positive, purifying value of trials and temptations (e.g., Jas 1:2-18; 1 Pet 1:3-9). But God does not promise to "get us out" of all situations in which we might be tempted to sin. In 1 Cor 10:13 Paul suggests that, more often than not, God leaves us in those situations but provides the power not to sin (a power we can choose or refuse to accept!). Moreover, the text never hints that Abraham recognized he was being tested, although in retrospect the biblical narrator knows that he was (Gen 22:1).[62] On occasion we, too, cannot be sure if difficulties in our lives reflect testing from God or temptation from the devil.

So perhaps we should advance a still broader principle from Gen 22: "Trust in God's sovereignty." This principle lies behind numerous passages of Scripture, most notably in the OT historical narrative. Its truth is impeccable. But then we must raise the question: Is that *all* the passage intends to teach us? A specific application for our lives based on this general principle might bear little resemblance to the specifics of the story of Abraham and Isaac. For example, we might decide to trust that God will provide us an adequate job after months of unemployment. But this application does not in any way link with the specifics of the Gen 22 passage.

We might settle for a mediating solution, perhaps based on the reflection of Heb 11:17–19 that Abraham believed God could raise the dead, so he trusted that even if he killed his son, God would bring him back to life. Our timeless principle then becomes: "We will not overly grieve or worry when death threatens us or fellow believers, since we know that even if it comes, we will be resurrected on the last day." This principle has solid NT support (1 Thes 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:20–28) and fits several of the particulars of the passage in Genesis.

This process illustrates that applications possess different levels *of authority.* The closer the correspondence to the actual text, the greater the degree of confidence we have that our application of that specific passage is legitimate. Usually, the specific application will be close to the text only if the broader principle it teaches specifically incorporates elements from the text. More general truths like "the sovereignty of God" in our example will not regularly yield specific, contemporary applications that closely resemble the original ones.

So we may not, therefore, always assert (with the same level of confidence) that we have correctly applied a passage. When we can employ the originally intended response in our situation with little or no change, we have the highest level of confidence that our application is valid. When we can derive a broader principle,

[62]On this literary device, in which the narrator knows more than the characters throughout Gen 22, see J. H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary,* ed. F. E. Gaebelein, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 167–70.

which itself still incorporates numerous particular elements of the passage, then we have a lower degree of confidence that our application is legitimate. But we have to be sure we have derived a valid, timeless principle. When we back off still further to the level of more general truths, our applications may well reflect good Christian things to do, but it is less easy to be confident that they are actual applications *of the specific text at hand.*[63]

We confront this issue particularly when we seek to address contemporary situations to which the Bible does not directly speak. What, for example, is a Christian position on the possession or use of nuclear weapons? While the Bible says nothing about nuclear weapons, it does record much about war (mostly in the OT). Yet Christians disagree on whether or not war is ever appropriate in the NT age.[64] Few in the history of the Church, however, have espoused full-fledged pacifism. Be this as it may, do the principles of "conventional warfare" necessarily carry over to the nuclear era? Some think not, alleging for example, that the historic principles for a just war (trying to avoid civilian casualties, etc.) cannot be applied to even the most limited of nuclear wars.[65] But were we to grant, for the sake of argument, that all nuclear war is immoral, does that prohibit even the possession of nuclear weapons? Does their benefit as a deterrent outweigh the dangers of a nuclear accident that could trigger such a holocaust? Obviously, we do not answer these questions by citing chapters and verses of Scripture!

That does not mean, however, that the Bible is irrelevant in a debate on nuclear weapons. Broader principles or general truths can be brought to bear on the topic. Interpreters need to balance the teaching of Scripture about the sanctity of life with its concern for justice. They need to raise questions about the eternal destiny of people who might lose their lives in a nuclear holocaust. They may also apply teaching about the role of government in enforcing the law, and about Christians not demanding their rights or seeking to retaliate against wrongs done to them. The issue is complex and we understand why Christians disagree. We cannot directly use specific passages in the same way that they were used in biblical times. And even the general principles we adopt will tend to be broad. So we must temper our discussion with humility. Although we may feel strongly about one side or the other in the argument, we dare not claim the same level of certainty that we have when we quote Jn 3:16 as the basis for trusting in Christ for salvation![66]

[63]For further discussion of these distinctions, see esp. Kuhatschek, ***Applying,*** 56-57.

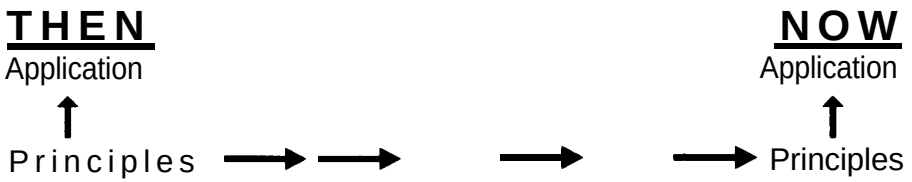
[64]See, e.g., R. G. Clouse, ed., ***War: Four Christian Views*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981).

[65]E.g., R. J. Sider, ***Completely Pro-Life*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1987), 159–63.

[66]A good resource for how to think "Christianly" about contemporary issues is H. Blamires, ***The Christian Mind*** (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1978). Excellent illustrations of applying the broad themes of creation, the fall, and redemption to ethical dilemmas appear in J. R. W. Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1990). Less methodologically sophisticated but also quite helpful on a variety of contemporary topics is K. S. Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

Find Appropriate Applications that Embody the Broader Principles

Again we have been illustrating this final step all along. The following diagram illustrates the process.



Having found the principles(s) that led to the specific application "back then," we seek to translate the principle(s) into appropriate and corresponding applications "now." Thus, we may give a hearty handshake instead of a holy kiss; or we may set up inexpensive food banks instead of leaving our fields to be gleaned; and we should be concerned about the effect of consuming alcohol in the presence of a recovering alcoholic, even if we are never faced with the dilemma of whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Most of these applications probably seem straightforward and reasonable to our readers.

Greater sensitivity is required, however, when Christians wish to live responsibly in cross-cultural contexts. Whether a white person of European descent ventures to minister effectively in a Muslim community in Jordan, or whether people of two different races try to get along in the same American city, differences between cultures increase the possibility of gaffes in communication. Some conservative Christians in Scotland might find it appalling that Americans would participate in or even watch sports on Sunday. Many Russian Christians find it outrageous that North American women wear make-up. Some Evangelicals cannot understand the fi-eedom that C. S. Lewis or many north German Christians feel to smoke. In each case scriptural texts are marshalled to support these particular applications. Thoughtless Christians who carelessly flaunt their fi-eedom will quickly lose the respect of their acquaintances in other cultures, even if their applications are valid.[67]

Scripture provides many examples of cross-cultural contextualization. When Paul encounters those who teach that circumcision is mandatory for salvation, he resists the teaching rigorously even at the risk of severe schism (Gal 2). But when this issue concerns merely a better reception for the half- Jew Timothy to minister among Jews, he happily circumcises him (Acts 16:1–5).[68] Indeed, Paul himself justifies such behavior, noting that it is a characteristic of ministry:

[67]Perhaps **the best existing work on contextualization in cross-cultural settings is D. J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen,** *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* **(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).**

[68]Cf. **W. 0. Walker, "The Timothy-Titus Problem Reconsidered,"** *ExpT* **92 (1981):** 231–35.

> **I** am free and **belong to no one. But I make myself a slave to all people to win as many as I can. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews. I myself am not ruled by the law. But to those who are ruled by the law I became like a person who is ruled by the law. I did this to win those who are ruled by the law. To those who are without the law I became like a person who is without the law. I did this to win those people who are without the law. (But really, I am not without God's law-1** am **ruled by Christ's law.) To those who are weak, I became weak so I could win the weak. I have become all things to all people so I could save some of them in any way possible. I do all this because of the Good News and so I can share in its blessings (1 Cor 9: 19-23 NCV) .**

If 1 Cor 8 and 10 stress the need for believers to consider the feelings and convictions of other believers, this passage stresses the need to consider what will most likely help or hinder ***unbelievers*** from coming to the faith.

Put another way, faithful application of the Bible to new contexts requires that we become as earnest in our study of the contemporary world as we are of Scripture itself. That is to say, we must learn not only to exegete the Scriptures but also to exegete cultures. Those who would preach or teach the Bible to others quickly learn this lesson,[69] but in fact everyone who seeks to apply the Bible to his or her life in a valid way must learn it. Reading and listening to news, traveling, and, if possible, living for a while in different cultures, sharing with Christians across denominational lines-all these can enhance our sensitivity. A regular amount of time spent in direct contact and friendship with unbelievers is also crucial. A study of the full breadth of topics usually included in the core curricula of liberal arts colleges can be beneficial. A full discussion of how to exegete culture might require another book like this one, but we would be remiss if we did not alert our readers to the importance of the task.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

We would also be remiss if we did not remind our readers that everything we have taught in this book falls short of the intended goal ifinterpreters do not simultaneously pray and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them in the hermeneutical task. We assume that point of departure; it is part of our preunderstanding. Yet as we pointed out earlier, an appeal to the Spirit is no substitute for sound interpretive method. Roy Zuck's excellent article on "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics" deserves reading from start to finish; here we can merely summarize his fourteen main points:

[69]**See esp. the excellent suggestions of J. R. W. Stott,** *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* **(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) on "The Call to Study" (pp.** 180–210), **in which he describes resources and resource people he uses to balance scrutiny of Scripture with an understanding of the modem world.**

1. The Holy Spirit does not give new revelation on a par with Scripture.
2. He does not guarantee that our interpretations are infallible.
3. He does not give one person new insights that no one else has.
4. Many non-Christians can apply sound hermeneutics to understand the meaning of Scripture; without the Spirit, however, they refuse to apply it adequately to their lives.
5. Understanding is not the exclusive domain of biblical scholars.
6. Spiritual devotion on the part of the interpreter is crucial.
7. Lack of spiritual preparation can hinder correct interpretation.
8. There is no substitute for diligent study.
9. The Spirit does not rule out study helps.
10. He does not override common sense and logic.
11. He does not normally give sudden intuitive flashes.
12. The Spirit's role in hermeneutics is part of the process of illumination.
13. He does not make all of the Bible equally clear.
14. He does not ensure comprehensive understanding.

In short, the five crucial elements for proper interpretation and application are: (1) salvation, (2) spiritual maturity, (3) diligent study, (4) common sense and logic, and (5) humble dependence on the Spirit for discernment.[70]

We hope this book has demonstrated the necessity for all five of these elements, even if our primary focus has **been on (3) and (4). No** one should imagine that this textbook presents a foolproof formula for interpreting and applying the Scriptures. That represents a lifelong process-a goal toward which we should strive. But if we have stimulated your desire for reading the Bible more, for tackling some of the more difficult or lesser known portions of it, then we are happy. If we have heightened your awareness of the kinds of questions to ask of the text as you read and to ask of others' interpretations, then we have made progress. If we have encouraged you to use some of the outstanding study tools and resources that are available to Christians today, then we have accomplished some of our goals. Nevertheless, our labor is in vain if we have not awakened a greater zeal to ***obey the*** Scriptures more, once they are understood, and to know and love the God who inspired them. We live in an age of great biblical illiteracy and even greater biblical disobedience. As a preacher once put it, "When the darkness is very great, even a little light will do." So we conclude this focus on application by encouraging you to put into practice the principles we have outlined in this book. As you do this you will have the ability to handle correctly the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). Read the Word, study it, meditate on it, and then apply it. God will bless you as you do!

'OR. Zuck, **"The Role of the Holy Spirit** in Hermeneutics," *BSac* **141 (1984):** 120–30

Appendix

Modern Approaches to Interpretation

Most of this book has considered what one might call traditional hermeneutics, that is, common-sense wisdom for interpreting the Bible combined with the methodological precision given to that wisdom by the last century and a half of modern biblical criticism. As we have seen, it also embraces the more sophisticated tools of source, form, and redaction criticism-tools whose foundational concepts substantially predate the terms themselves. Today, however, many Bible scholars, particularly those outside of evangelical circles, are calling for nothing less than a paradigm shift in hermeneutics.[1] They find the old ways sterile, limiting, or misleading and believe it is time to do something new. The suggestions they make for replacing the more common approach to interpretation-traditional historical-grammatical analysis-primarily revolve around two areas of study: (1) modern literary criticism and (2) social-scientific analysis.[2] The first of these in certain aspects recovers a healthy emphasis on the literary nature of the Bible that has been lost in our scientific age. We

'The **concept comes originally from T. S. Kuhn, *The* Structure** *of Scientific* ***Revolutions,*** **rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). A paradigm shift occurs when one model of interpreting data is almost entirely replaced by a quite different model.**

[2]For an excellent example, see C. H. Talbert's unnecessarily scathing review of J. Fitzmyer (*The* Gospel *According to Luke,* 2 vols. [Garden City: Doubleday, 1981–85]) in *CBQ 48* **(1986): 336-38,** in **which Talbert essentially faults Fitzmyer for having written a traditional, historical-critical commentary of a kind that Talbert believes is now passe, that is, in an age when he thinks literary-critical paradigms should predominate. For a more positive call for a paradigm shift to a social-scientific perspective, see B. J. Malina,** *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* **(Atlanta: John Knox,** 1986).

dispute that it is a case of *either* the old ways or the new ways.[3] We grant that these new arenas of study can afford important insights to supplement traditional hermeneutics, but they also offer dangerous pitfalls when abused.

Literary Criticism

"Literary criticism" means different things to different people. Aída Spencer has recently compiled a list of no less than fifteen distinct definitions, many of which are best treated under different headings.[4] Such topics include analysis of authorship, date, place of writing, original audience, linguistic style, sources, tradition and redaction, integrity, and purpose. All of these are necessary components of the analysis of any work of literature. But while all at various times in the past have been considered a part of literary criticism, now they are usually treated under historical criticism. What critics who are calling for a shift in biblical studies usually mean by literary criticism today is largely ahistorical in nature-methods that require an examination only of the final form of the text. We treat two such methods earlier in this volume: genre criticism, which analyzes the literary classification of an entire biblical book, and that portion of form criticism that describes the form or subgenre of a given part of a biblical book. Under genre criticism we note also the growing tendency to classify the nature of the rhetoric of the writer-what is often called rhetorical criticism.[5] This still leaves three major areas of literary criticism, however, that need to be discussed: structuralism, narrative criticism, and poststructuralism.

Structuralism

Structuralism is a method of analyzing data that arose in several disciplines within the humanities and social-sciences-most notably anthropology, sociology, and linguistics-as well as in the study of literature.[6] Its name derives from its analysis of "deep" structures inherent in human cultures and language that remain constant despite immense diversity of "surface" structures. In literature "deep structures" refer to the underlying functions, motives, and interaction among the main characters and objects in a narrative, and, most notably, the types of oppositions and their resolutions that develop as the text unfolds. "Surface structures" include: plot, theme, motifs, characterization; or, in poetry: meter, rhyme, parallelism,

[3] An excellent defense and discussion of the complementarity of historical and literary methods appears throughout M. A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[4] A. B. Spencer, "Literary Criticism," in New *Testament* Criticism *and Interpretation,* ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 235-36.

[5] A term first given widespread currency and used in a broader context, to overlap with some of the concerns we will treat under narrative criticism, by J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 8.

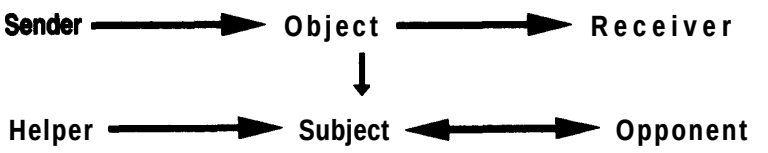
[6] On the broader context of structuralism, see esp. J. -M. Benoist, *The Structural Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978); in literature specifically, see esp. J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

and so on. Structural analysis deliberately ignores the historical background of a text and instead seeks to show universally recurring features in narratives from all cultures and eras (and particularly in fictional narratives). These features reveal a text's most fundamental meaning irrespective of its author's conscious intention. In other words, for structuralists, meaning resides not in the largely irrecoverable mental processes of a text's human author but in the actual words of the text itself. To this extent, structuralism concurs with a major literary movement of this century known as formalism or new criticism, a movement that perhaps proved as formative in the rise of biblical structuralism as did structuralism in other disciplines. But structuralism goes beyond formalism by moving from surface structures to deep structures, and it requires the mastery of a variety of technical procedures of analysis replete with a daunting vocabulary of linguistic terms.

Structuralist analysis of literature can be subdivided into several categories. It includes the approach to Bible translation known as "dynamic equivalence" (see our discussion of Bible translations in chap. 3), the analysis of the constituent elements of plot in a fairy tale (many of which are found widely in other kinds of narrative literature), and theories of communication, most commonly known as semiotics (from the Greek *semeia* for "signs").' But the two forms of structuralism that have been most widely applied to biblical texts are "actantial analysis," pioneered by the French linguist A. J. Greimas, and "paradigmatic analysis," given major impetus by the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss.*

Actantial Analysis

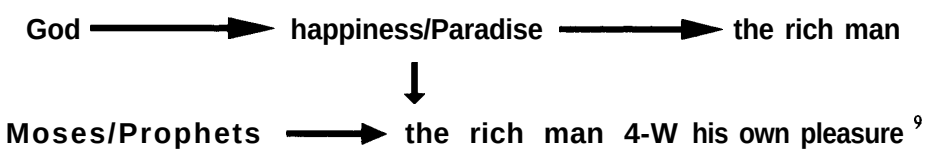
Actantial analysis of narrative affirms that almost all stories, to have any kind of full-fledged plot, disclose six major actants, that is, characters or objects that develop the essential action of the story. Specifically, a "sender" seeks to communicate an "object" to a "receiver" by means of a "subject" who may be aided by a "helper" and hindered by an "opponent." Occasionally, one or two of these actants are missing, and often one character or object fills more than one slot. The six actants are often exhibited in diagrammatic form as follows:



'For wide-ranging introductions to forms of structuralism applied to the biblical texts, see esp. D. C. Greenwood, *Structuralism and the Biblical Text (New* York: Mouton, 1985); and R. F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 231-71.

* These two movements form the central focus of the detailed introduction to NT structuralism by D. Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), which he then works out in detail in id., *Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

Thus, one might diagram the actants of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31) as:



In other words, God (the sender) wants to communicate eternal happiness (the object) to everyone (the receivers), but the rich man (one of those receivers but also the subject by means of whom Lazarus can also become a receiver) cannot obtain this gift because his lifestyle (the opponent) stands in the way. Obedience to the Scriptures (the helper) could have removed this obstacle. This kind of diagram quickly enables the interpreter to separate the essential elements of a passage from subordinate details. In this case, we are alerted not to focus on the details the parable provides about the nature of the afterlife (which on other grounds are likely not good sources for our doctrine of eschatology), but to concentrate on the need to exhibit true godliness through stewardship of our God-given resources. [10]

Another example proves more provocative. David Jobling argues that Gen 2:4b–3:24 is not a two-part story about creation and fall but a three-part narrative about "a man to till the ground." As a result, Jobling maintains that God's original purposes, apparently thwarted, are actually accomplished by Adam's expulsion from Eden. In Jobling's actantial analysis, Yahweh is both sender and opponent, because his creation of Adam and Eve in Paradise prevents them before the Fall from having the kind of dominion over all the earth that they would later have when they are forced to work the soil to receive its produce."

We remain unconvinced that this represents the correct analysis of the story, but the problem is not so much with structuralism as with an incorrect analysis of the various actants. Surely the opponent to God's purposes in Gen 2-3 is the serpent! But the nature of the canonical Christian narrative of God's acts in history in general proves quite amenable to the core structuralist plot: God (sender) seeks to communicate salvation (object) to all humanity (receiver) by means of Jesus Christ (subject), who is aided by the work of the Holy Spirit (helper) in convicting human hearts and is opposed by the work of Satan (opponent) who tries to keep people enslaved to their sins. Numerous portions of the biblical narratives reflect this core message with many variations on the theme.

[9]P. Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 69.

[10]See C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), 203–8.

[11]D. Jobling, *The* Sense *of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible,* JSOTSup 39, 2 vols. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 2:17–43.

Paradigmatic Analysis

This second main branch of structuralism focuses on a paradigm of oppositions. Its advocates believe that the core message of a narrative lies in pairs of opposites and the ways, if at all, in which they are mediated or resolved. Levi-Strauss believed that all religious myths (i.e., stories of how humankind got into its current religious predicament and can be extricated from it, whether historical or legendary) represent attempts to mediate opposition. Native Americans might describe how hunters turned into farmers in order to domesticate the land and the animal kingdom that had previously been their primary adversary. Primitive animism may tell stories of the origins of sacrifice to gods who are more knowable than the remote Creator. Christianity recounts how Jesus mediates salvation to humanity, overcoming its alienation from God produced by the Fall.

Paradigmatic analysis seems as if it might be more widely applicable to the Bible, with more diverse and interesting results than actantial analysis. Indeed, entire commentaries on biblical books have been written from this perspective, focusing on the explicit and implicit oppositions in every passage, and deducing primary theological content from the resolution or irresolution of those oppositions.[12] D. Patte, for example, who has been this method's most vocal advocate, believes that four major NT writers present conflicting paradigms for the human predicament and its solution. John sees Jesus as teaching necessary knowledge to the ignorant; Luke has Jesus providing interpretive keys to Scripture; Paul is convinced Jesus enables people to overcome a lack of ability to do what God wants; and Matthew describes Jesus as making it possible for people to want to obey God.[13] Doubtless, these are truncated and simplistic formulae; even if they were true it would not be clear why they could not be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory. Still there are valid insights here as to key distinctives of the various NT theologians and a reminder that the core of their message has to do with Christ's providing a way out from our opposition to God.

Jobling again illustrates a less conventional application of structuralism in his use of paradigmatic analysis in Judg 8 and 1 Sam 12. In delving into the oft-noted tension between the OT's alternately positive and negative attitudes toward the establishment of the monarchy, Jobling concludes that the "Deuteronomist" (the putative author of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, minus Ruth) fails to resolve this tension, so that Israel remains free to choose for or against a king at any given point in its history.[14] We may doubt that this is the case, given that the promises of 1 Sam 12 chronologically supersede Judg 8, but this kind of structuralist analysis does warn us against too facile a harmonization of the diverse tendencies in Scripture on this topic.

[12]E.g., D. Patte, *The* Gospel *according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Cf. id., Paul's *Faith and the Power of the Gospel: A Structural Introduction to the Paulfne Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). It does not seem, however, that many other scholars are following Patte's lead, nor is it likely that commentaries of this genre will ever become commonplace.

[13]Id., *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Critics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 123–27.

[14]Jobling, *Biblical Narrative, 44-87.*

We have only scratched the surface in illustrating what structuralist analysis has done with biblical texts. But it is fair to say that it already seems on the wane. In fact, it never seemed to catch the interest of more than a small (though vocal) minority of biblical scholars. No doubt this was due in large part to its highly esoteric vocabulary. But even many who took the time to master its methods came away frustrated that they had gained few new insights not already derivable by more conventional tools.[15] What is more, its ideological (though not necessarily methodological) roots were closely bound up with atheistic, deterministic, and Marxist presuppositions-that is, based ultimately on the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel and his dialectic theory of the evolution of human history by means of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.[16] Suffice it to say that structuralism is today and probably will remain the least significant of the new literary-critical tools.

Nevertheless, structuralist study did generate a laudable interest in what scholars call the "close readings" of texts and, particularly, in an analysis of their characters, relationships, and oppositions. In fact, some of the most valuable results of structuralism may, somewhat ironically, come from the analysis of "surface structural" features, even though that was not the primary intent of the discipline. For example, a study of the main characters in Jesus' parables discloses recurrent patterns of relationships. Most notable is the "monarchic" parable, in which a king, master, or father-figure judges between contrasting (good and wicked) subordinates (e.g., the father and his two sons; the bridegroom and the wise and foolish bridesmaids; Abraham with the rich man and Lazarus, and so on).[17] Focusing on each of these main characters and the roles they play in a given parable may then disclose a major lesson (or specific component of a unifying theme) of the narrative (see further under our treatment of Parables). But this kind of analysis of surface structures probably deserves to be classified under a further heading: narrative criticism.

Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism is that branch of modern literary criticism that most closely resembles what readers of the world's great literary classics have done for centuries. Its predecessor was the study of the Bible as literature, a profitable exercise often undertaken in public school and university settings. Studying the Bible as literature focuses on the questions one would ask of Shakespeare or Cervantes, Sophocles or Cicero, Aesop or Goethe. Of particular value for works of narrative genre, this

[15]E.g., J. Barr, "Biblical Language and Exegesis-How Far Does Structuralism Help Us?" *King's Theol Rev 7* (1984): *48-52;* cited by B. Stancil, "Structuralism," in *NT Criticism,* ed. Black and Docker-y, *332.* Stancil's article overall (319–44) is a well-balanced introduction and critique.

[16]Cf. R. Detweiler, "After the New Criticism: Contemporary Methods of Literary Interpretation," in *Orientation by Disorientation,* ed. R. A. Spencer (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), *13;* V. Poythress, "Philosophical Roots of Phenomenological and Structuralist Literary Criticism," *WTJ* 41 (1978): 166.

[17]R. W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 35-54; cf. G. Sellin, "Lukas als Gleichniserzähler," *ZNW* 65 (1974): 166–89; 66 (1975): 19–60.

approach analyzes plot, theme, motifs, characterization, style, figures of speech, symbolism, foreshadowing, repetition, speed of time in narrative, point of view, and the like.[18] It focuses on an appreciation of the aesthetic value of the work rather than on its theological or moral value. If the latter is studied too, one still approaches the work only from the point of view of a sympathetic outside observer, not as the devotee of a particular religion.

Applications

Such an approach to a portion of Scripture can have great value. Noting how a character is developed may help one understand whether the author wants readers to identify with that character or to avoid imitating that person. In other instances, characterization may be deliberately ambiguous. Thus, it is arguable that, despite the complexities of characterization, Samson's heroic death, like his repeated filling by the Holy Spirit throughout his life (Judg 13–16), marks him out ultimately as someone to be emulated, though not in every aspect of his life. Conversely, for all of Saul's redeeming characteristics, Scripture ultimately seems to portray him as a tragic figure, losing what he could have had while knowing better, and thus someone not to be emulated (1 Sam 9-2 Sam 1).[19] In between these two stands Nicodemus who appears three times in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 3:1-15; 7:50–52; 19:39). But here the reader is not given enough data to know if Nicodemus, like Joseph of Arimathea with whom he finally appears (19:38), eventually became a disciple of Jesus or not. He can be viewed as a model of someone who came to faith against the pressure of his peers, and hence more slowly and secretively than others, or as one who failed to make the decisive break from his past, which true discipleship requires. Perhaps John deliberately refuses to satisfy our curiosity so that we might take whatever steps are necessary to avoid failing to enter the Kingdom, if that is indeed what happened to Nicodemus.[20]

Focusing on the surface features of plot, theme, episode, and so on, can also demonstrate the unity of a text, which older historical criticism often segmented into complex layers of tradition and redaction. David Clines, for example, broke fresh ground nearly fifteen years ago with his study of themes in the Pentateuch. By showing how the five books of Moses were united by the common theme of the partial fulfillment of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs-which in turn contained the three aspects of posterity, divine-human relationship, and land-Clines undermined the basis that had led critics to postulate J, E, D, and P (Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly writers) among whom the Pentateuch could

"Good, representative examples include K. R. R. Gros-Louis, ed., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives,* 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974-82); L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[19]For both of these assessments see D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul,* JSOTSup 14 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980).

[20]Cf. esp. J. M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 108 (1989): 635-46.

be parceled out.[21] So too, Alan Culpepper, in his fine literary analysis of the unity of style and literary features of John, appears to have superseded his earlier work on a Johannine school as the composite author through several successive stages of redaction of the Fourth Gospel.[22]

To be sure, it is not clear that either writer, nor practitioners of narrative criticism more generally, recognize how radical a challenge their method offers to more traditional source criticism. But, as G. W. Coats explains in his analysis of the Joseph narrative (Gen 37–50), if "the story stands as a unit in at least one stage of its history," then "the burden of proof lies therefore on the person who wants to argue that the unity is synthetic" (i.e., brought about by a redactor imposing that unity on disparate sources).[23] And even when literary critics do not recognize this point, their concern to focus on the final, unified form of the text makes possible many discussions across theological lines (most notably conservative-liberal), since historical questions are simply bracketed as irrelevant for the matters at hand. In other words, even if one scholar may accept that a certain narrative tells the story as it actually happened, while another may dispute that claim, both may agree on what the story means and how it functions.

Studying the Bible as literature further helps us to focus on major emphases and not to get sidetracked with peripheral details. For example, once we understand the theme of the Pentateuch as the partial fulfillment of God's promises despite various obstacles, apparent digressions such as Abraham's twice-aborted attempts to pass Sarah off as his sister (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18) make more sense in their context. Along this line, neither story has a particular "moral" in its own right-for example, to speak for or against half-truths or deceiving an enemy; rather, thematically, they reflect potential impediments to the fulfillment of God's desire to bless Abraham with the holy land and promised seed. As Abraham's schemes fail, we learn more of God's sovereignty and how he is working to make sure that his promises do not fail.[24]

Yet again, this kind of literary criticism can explain the purposes of repetition better than traditional source criticism. Passages that have often been viewed as doublets (two similar sounding accounts believed to reflect only one original, historical event, which was then narrated differently in two or more different documents) and as clues to discerning separate sources can now both be seen to be authentic. Thus, the similarities between Isaac's meeting Rebekah and Jacob's first encounter with Rachel, both at a well, involving the watering of flocks, and leading

[21] D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978). The suggestion that Genesis through Deuteronomy is actually a compilation of the works of four different anonymous authors (usually called J, E, D, P), centuries after the life of Moses, represents the famous "documentary hypothesis," which has dominated the last century of Pentateuchal criticism.

[22] R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Cf. id., *The Johannine* School (Missoula: Scholars, 1975).

[23] G. W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Stoy* (Washington, DC: CBAA, 1976), 60.

[24] Particularly helpful in interpreting OT historical narrative is J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981), 66-96.

ultimately to a return to the woman's home and a betrothal, fit into a conventional "type-scene" of ancient oral and literary narrative.[25] In other words, as in form criticism, stories often sounded more similar than they would have had additional details been narrated because of the currency of stereotypic forms in which people expected those stories to be told. What this means for Bible readers, then, is not that they should assume that only one historical event has been told in two or more different ways. Rather, the similarities help them to recognize the "form" or "sub-genre" of the passage and thereby how to interpret it (see our section on OT genre criticism). Then, to discover the unique emphasis of any given text, readers should pay attention to those areas in which the stories, notwithstanding convention, diverge. With this strategy in mind, the reader will see how Jacob is much more assertive than Isaac, a feature that continues throughout the patriarchal narratives. Conversely, Rebekah proves more discerning than Rachel. These observations fit the greater prominence given to Jacob than to either his father or his wife. Thus, the narrative gives clues as to which characters we should most identify with and learn from.

A careful study of plot and character development also helps us to identify the climax or most important idea of a passage. Too, we may recognize where a surprise or shock effect would have driven home certain truths with extra force or poignancy to the original biblical readers. Dan Via has helpfully categorized the parables as comic or tragic, based on their endings.[26] ("Comic" here refers, of course, to a positive resolution of a plot conflict, not to a sense of humor!) Hence, even though the parables of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14) and the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33–46) have similar monarchic structures and much of the identical imagery, the former ends on a note of destruction and the latter on a note of victory. Modern teaching based on these passages should reflect similar emphases: warning those who too glibly think that they are right with God and encouraging those who fear that his purposes may fail.

The minor prophets can be similarly categorized. Although many of them preach judgment throughout a majority of their books, often a climactic, final look to the eschatological restoration of God's people reverses the reader's focus to the ultimate "good news" beyond the "bad news" (e.g., Hos 14:4–8; Amos 9:11–15; Zeph 3:14–20).[27] The amount of discussion of a topic may not prove as significant as the placement of that discussion within a given book. On the other hand, Micah seems consistently to alternate between sections of good and bad news, as if to balance them.

Literary criticism has done many other things. It identifies characters as flat, stock, or round, or as agents, types, or full characters, depending on how complex and lifelike they are portrayed.[28] Those developed the most-as with Jacob, Joseph,

[25] See esp. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative (New* York: Basic, 1981), 49–56.

[26] D. O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Litera y and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

[27] Cf. M. J. Buss, "Tragedy and Comedy in Hosea," *Semeia* 32 (1984): 71–82; and N. K. Gottwald, "Tragedy and Comedy in the Latter Prophets," *Semeia 32* (1984): 83-96.

[28] One of the most thorough studies of characterization is A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

and his brothers in Gen 37–50—are most likely the characters on which the story's writer wanted his audience to center most attention.[29] Literary criticism delineates ways in which writers attempt to achieve empathy, as with the introduction and conclusion to the story of Judah's revenge for the rape of Dinah (Gen 34), or to "justify God's ways to man."[30] Plot analysis can dovetail with redaction criticism in helping to understand the outline and ideological emphases of a narrative writer. The central plot of Matthew's Gospel, for example, unfolds around the growing hostility of the Jewish leaders against Jesus.[31] Matthew's placement of certain passages, different from the other Gospels, then makes sense against this backdrop.[32] But what is today increasingly called "narrative criticism," while adopting all of these devices from the study of Bible as literature, usually goes one important step further.

Narrative criticism itself adopts an analytical framework that distinguishes the real ***author*** of a particular writing from the **implied *author,*** who is again distinguished from the ***narrator.*** The real author is the person who actually wrote the text. The implied author is the picture of the real author that emerges fi-om the text without any additional background information. The narrator is the person in the narrative who actually tells the story. Similarly, one may separate the *real* ***readers*** from the **implied *readers (the*** picture of the readers emerging from the text alone) and the ***narratées (the*** persons in the text to whom the story is told). The real author and readers are often inaccessible just from the written text. Narrators and narratées might well be fictional characters, as, for example, with the narrator, Ishmael, in Herman Melville's ***Moby Dick.***[33] Thus, those who believe that Luke-Acts was not written by Paul's "beloved physician" but by a second-generation Christian to an end-of-the-first-century church might distinguish between the real author and readers (as just described), the implied author and readers (the picture of Luke derivable from the text, who was perhaps purporting to write to a pre-A.D. 70 congregation), and the narrator and narratée (the historical Luke and Theophilus).[34]

Or, to give an OT example, in the minor prophets several different real authors seem to resemble one and the same implied author; several groups of real readers correspond to one implied reader.[35] Thus, it is not so crucial to determine the exact historical settings of books like Joel and Obadiah, which are notorious

[29]W. L. Humphreys, *Joseph and Hfs Family: A Literary Study* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), *68-92.*

[30]See, respectively, M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 445-75, 484.

[31]R. A. Edwards, *Matthew's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

[32]See the suggested outline and headings in C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992).

[33]Most scholars credit the development of this method in literature more generally to W. Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

"New Testament narrative criticism has largely focused on the Gospels and Acts, with one pioneering study dominating the analysis of each of the four evangelists: J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986–90); and Culpepper, *Anatomy.*

[35]Sternberg, *Poetics,* 75. The minor prophets are not, for the most part, historical narratives, but many narrative critics apply their methods to all genres of literature.

problems for traditional historical critics. The real authors (or editors) are not concerned to, divulge much information about themselves because they share a common, almost timeless concern-to warn God's people about particularly well-entrenched patterns of sin. They prophesy judgment with the possibility of subsequent restoration contingent on repentance. In this instance literary criticism allows Bible students to more closely approximate the interpretations of average Bible readers who never bothered with all that historical background in the first place. There are obviously strengths and weaknesses in such a situation. But when students discover proposals of modern narrative criticism that fit with the results of more traditional historical criticism, they may be able to accept both with greater degrees of confidence.

Critique

Inasmuch as the nature of biblical narrative and historiography, like most contemporary literature of its era and unlike much modern avant-garde writing, did not try to separate these various authors and readers,[36] one wonders if narrative criticism has accomplished much. Still, in avoiding both the intentional and affective fallacies (which affirm, respectively, that meaning is wholly in the mind of an author or wholly in the perception of readers), narrative criticism offers a more sophisticated and valid model of where the meaning of a text resides-namely, in that text! We may speak of authorial intention as a key to hermeneutics only to the extent that real authors have been transparent in equating their narrators with their implied authors and making both reveal substantial information about the real authors themselves. We may speak of readers creating meaning only to the extent that real readers correctly identify the roles of narratée and implied readers.[37] Or as Stephen Mailloux puts it, intentions are best described or defined in terms of "the intended structure of the reader's response."[38]

But there are more serious pitfalls with narrative criticism, be they in its more traditional form as "the Bible as literature," or in its more rigorous, recent analytical form. Narrative critics often assume when they study the Bible as literature that the texts must be viewed as fiction.[39] This seems to result, however, not from the nature of the method itself but from a misunderstanding of the number of features that historical and fictional texts share. Students of ancient historiography helpfully stress how few literary characteristics actually enable a reader to distinguish what we today would call historical fiction from well-written, interesting history? And Norman Petersen has applied literary criticism to the epistle to Philemon, showing how even as nonfictional

[36]Sternberg, *Poetics,* 58-83.

"Cf. further Blomberg, *Parables,* 15659, and the literature there cited.

[38]S. Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 112.

[39]E.g., D. A. Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

[40]See esp. C. H. Gempf, "Historical And Literary Appropriateness in the Mission Speeches of Paul in Acts" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1988). From the perspective of modern literature, cf. esp. T. J. Roberts, *When Is Something Fiction?* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

and nonnarrative material as a letter can have an unfolding plot, point of view, climax, and so on.[41] Thus, it does not follow that narrative and fiction must be synonymous.

Second, narrative critics often depreciate the religious value of a text in favor of its aesthetics, even if this is sometimes done to correct a past imbalance in the other direction.[42] But again it seems this abuse can be divorced from the method itself. A genuine appreciation of the beauty, power, and style of a biblical book should lead a believer in its inspiration and canonicity to treasure it that much more.[43]

Third, narrative critics may employ modern, anachronistic theories of the composition of literature that do not work well with ancient texts. James Dawsey, for example, remains wholly unconvincing in his book-length attempt to defend the thesis that the narrator of Luke is unreliable, so that Luke is filled with contradictions between what the real author wants to communicate and what his narrator actually does communicate.[44] Again, the problem resides with Dawsey's analysis more than with the model of narrative criticism itself.

In general, studies of the Bible as literature, like narrative criticism *per se*, hold out the best hope for modern interpreters of Scripture to glean insight from the tools of literary criticism. Sadly, many literary critics have not stopped here, however, but have moved on to the discipline known as "post-structural&m." Here we cannot be as enthusiastic about scholarly developments. But in some circles, post-structuralism is so popular that serious Bible students must familiarize themselves at least briefly with its methods.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism refers to developments that built on but went beyond structuralism (and, for that matter, narrative criticism). Both share a concern to move past the focus of these disciplines on meaning as residing in a text to a consideration of meaning residing in individual readers. Two major categories of poststructuralism are reader-response criticism and deconstruction. Reader-response criticism is the less radical of the two, affirming that meaning derives from the interaction between a text and its readers. Deconstruction, when consistently applied, despairs of finding coherent meaning at all, apart from readers' own diverse perceptions and experiences.

Reader-Response Criticism

Most credit Stanley Fish with providing the greatest impetus for this movement. Fish himself defines reader-response criticism as "an analysis of the developing responses

[41] N. R. Petersen, ***Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

[42] Cf. esp. Berlin, ***Poetics.***

[43] Powell, ***Narrative Criticism,*** 88-89.

[44] J. M. Dawsey, ***The Lukan Voice: Confiion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke*** (Macon: Mercer, 1986).

of the reader in relation to the words [of a given text] as they succeed one another in time."[45] In other words, this analysis tries to reproduce the experience of a "first-time" reader of a passage, so that what is learned from a later portion of a text cannot yet influence one's understanding of an earlier portion. As noted above, it finds meaning in the product of the interaction between text and reader and assumes that no two readers will necessarily derive the identical meaning from their interaction with the same text. In fact, this view maintains that similarities in interpretation derive only from the fact that various readers belong to "interpretive communities" with shared conventions that lead them to read texts in similar ways. But apart from these shared conventions, there is no objective meaning in the symbols of the texts themselves. They view authorial intention as almost wholly irrecoverable and irrelevant anyway. What counts is not what authors intended to write, but what they did write. Reader-response critics seek the reader's perception of a text, because apart from meaningful contexts outside the text, words themselves have no meanings.[46]

Reader-response criticism, therefore, necessarily proposes a wide variety of interpretations of passages, at least some of which even more conservative critics can appreciate. For example, Robert Fowler approaches a traditional evangelical hermeneutic when he refuses to endorse a popular, modern reading of the feedings of the 5000 and 4000 (Mk 6:30–44; 8:1-10) as eucharistic, because the Last Supper (Mk 14:12–26) had not yet occurred at the time of those miracles. The feeding miracles may be used to interpret the Last Supper but not vice versa. But Fowler is not applying historical criticism to limit the interpretation of an event to data derived from previous events; he is taking the point of view of a reader coming to Mark for the first time, who has not yet read of the Last Supper.[47]

Interestingly, this strategy of sequential reading perhaps agrees better with the standard process in the ancient world in which written texts were read aloud to groups gathered to listen to them. Hearing a text only once afforded the listener no luxury to look ahead to the end or to reread a section already forgotten. Perhaps traditional historical-grammatical analysis, with all its cross-references to uses of words and concepts throughout a document, has often found too much meaning in texts, which a one-time listener could not have been expected to catch![48]

Reader-response criticism, further, helpfully explores the "gaps" in a text, in which a reader must supply his or her own meaning. For example, why does the account of David's sin with Bathsheba begin with kings going out to war, while

[45] S. E. Fish, ***Self-Consuming Artifacts*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 387-88; cf. id., ***Is There a Text in This Class?*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) pass.

[46] Good introductions to reader-response criticism appear in J. L. Resseguie, "Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels," ***JAAR 52 (1984): 307-24*** (limited to the Gospels); R. M. Fowler, "Who Is 'The Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" Setneia 31 (1985): 5-23 (on Scripture more generally); and J. P. Tompkins, ed., ***Reader-Response Criticism*** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.. 1980) (on literature more generally).

[47] R. M. Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark* SBLDS 54 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981), 140–41.

[48] S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels (New* Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 84–88.

David (the king) stays home (2 Sam 11:1)? Why does David send Uriah home to sleep with his wife after David has committed adultery with her? When Uriah refuses to go, is it because he knows what David has done and refuses to participate in his attempted cover-up? Or is it just that he is so virtuous he refuses to avail himself of any privileges that his fellow-soldiers still on the battlefield cannot share, as he explicitly claims (v. 11)? When he refuses to go home, does David suspect that Uriah knows or not? At each stage of this narrative, the reader must make some assumptions to fill in these "gaps." How we answer these questions will considerably color our perspectives on the main characters in the story.[49] If Uriah is being less than straightforward with David, then we cannot identify with him quite so much as the innocent victim.

Despite these various contributions, our overall evaluation of reader-response criticism must be more negative than positive. Its main weakness lies in its relativism. On the one hand, if nothing more than shared interpretive conventions account for similarities in readings of given texts, reader-response critics should not object to readings totally different than their own, and yet most still attempt to defend their interpretations as better than others! On the other hand, one could argue, theologically, that all humans-created in God's image-share common interpretive conventions that allow for objective meaning to transcend individual perceptions. In the former scenario, reader-response criticism is self-defeating; in the latter it collapses back into some more traditional text-centered hermeneutic. In still other instances, what pass for competing ***interpretations*** should probably be viewed as alternative ***applications. Can we see*** in the prodigal son, his father, and his older brother a correspondence with Freud's understanding of id, ego, and superego, respectively? The fit is actually quite apt even if almost certainly not Jesus' (or the Evangelist's) conscious intention.[50] Original meaning may remain fixed, even as contemporary significance varies. But reader-response criticism has done all interpreters a service in reminding them just how widespread the influence of their preunderstandings are (recall our earlier discussion). Only as we allow our cherished preconceptions of the meanings of texts to be challenged by new data and new perspectives can we hope for anything approximating objectivity.[51]

Deconstruction

Seemingly even more widespread in literary circles, including biblical studies, is the second brand of poststructuralism: deconstruction. Ideologically, deconstruction

[49]Sternberg, *Poetics,* 193213.

[50]M. A. Tolbert, "The Prodigal Son: An Essay in Literary Criticism from a Psychoanalytic Perspective," *Semeiu* 9 (1977): 1-20.

[51]For as appreciative a critique as has been found among evangelicals, but one that nevertheless points out some of these and other problems with reader-response criticism, see A. C. Thiselton, "Reader-Response Hermeneutics, Action Models, and the Parables of Jesus," in R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton, and C. Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 79–113. We too adopt a somewhat open stance, while insisting on the constraints we defended under the concept of "validation."

derives from Nietzsche and his modern-day disciple, Jacques Derrida. It is an anarchistic, hyper-relativistic form of criticism designed to demonstrate how all texts, indeed all human communication, ultimately "deconstructs" or undermines itself.[52] In the words of T. K. Seung, its avowed purpose is one of "generating conflicting meanings from the same text, and playing those meanings against each other."[53] Nor is this just a new variation on the old theme of contradictions in Scripture. Bather, deconstruction seeks subtle, often unwitting, ideological inconsistencies or ambiguities in a text that prevent interpreters from claiming that it has a fixed meaning. Motives for such analysis range from a fairly innocuous desire to be creative to a preoccupation with denying any absolute claims of the text over interpreters.

Obviously, no one with anything like a traditional Christian view of Scripture's inspiration, accuracy, clarity, or authority could accept deconstruction as an ideological package. Still, it is arguable that there is some value in focusing on underlying tensions in a text as keys to part of the meaning of a passage, particularly in the more cryptic parts of Scripture, even if we might wish to go on to propose resolutions to those tensions. For example, it is intriguing to read how Esther, in essence, has to lose her "Jewishness" in order to save it. Only as the Persian queen, hiding her ethnic identity from her husband-king, can she rescue the Jewish people from the pogrom Haman planned for them.[54] Perhaps this presents a salutary reminder of the ambiguities and compromises inherent in trying to live life as a person of God in the political arena of fallen humanity.

Or again, consider Job. After all the many speeches of Job and his counselors, God ultimately vindicates Job against his friends: "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). But his friends, in essence, have tried to vindicate God as justly punishing sinners and rewarding the righteous; whereas, Job has repeatedly protested that God is unfairly persecuting him. That is, if God is right in supporting Job, then God must be unjust because Job seemed to accuse him of being unjust.[55] The solution may be that when God declares Job right, he is not referring to every single thing that Job said. But again we are cautioned against imitating Job's friends with too facile or simplistic explanations of why people suffer.

Here is one more example on the very conservative end of the deconstructive spectrum (which, by definition, isn't all that conservative!). Werner Kelber has helpfully called attention to how John's Gospel comprises words about "the Word" (ho *logos*) incarnate, who is Jesus, such that careful attention to these words and the Word will direct oneself away from written (or oral) words to a Person. The more

[52]Two standard introductions to deconstruction in literature more generally are J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); and C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (New* York: Methuen, 1982).

[53]T. K. Seung, *Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 271.

[54]D. J. A. Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions,* ed. D. J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter, JSOTSup 87 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 31-52.

[55]Id., "Deconstructing the Book of Job," in D. J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do To Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament,* JSOTSup 94 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 106–23.

one takes seriously the medium of John's message, the more one will be pointed away from that message to a living relationship with the one about whom the message is spoken.[56] To a certain degree, the text undermines its own unique authority. And doubtless, many Christians do need regular reminders that they worship a Person and not a book.

Far more characteristic of deconstruction, however, are much more radical applications. Dominic Crossan, for example, has written quite a bit about the parables in which his own cleverness rather than validity in interpretation seems to be his goal, as summarized by his term, "freeplay."[57] In one place, he declares, "since you cannot interpret absolutely, you can interpret forever."[58] Thus, he reads the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 1 l-32) as an allegory of Western consciousness' path from mimetic (realistic) to ludic (playful) allegory.[59] He sees the parable of the treasure in the field as teaching, among other things, that one must abandon all for the sake of the kingdom, which includes abandoning the parable, and, ultimately, abandoning abandonment![60] Quite understandably, D. A. Carson critiques this type of deconstruction by calling it "so anachronistic as to make a historian wince,"[61] to which Crossan would probably reply, "Of course, I wasn't attempting to please a historian!"

Similarly, from an OT perspective, Peter Miscall argues that any attempt to assess the positive or negative characterizations of David and his associates in 1 Sam 16-22 runs aground on conflicting data so that it is impossible to make definitive statements about the significance of these characters or the events with which they were involved.[62] If Miscall is right, then we cannot identify characters whose behavior we are to emulate or avoid quite as easily as most readers have thought.

Advocates of deconstruction ought to ask where all this would lead us if adopted on a widespread scale. Those who have replied to this question do not give us satisfying answers.[63] Although some herald deconstruction as the wave of the future, ordinary people do not and cannot live as if human conversation were ultimately relativistic and self-defeating. More likely, poststructuralism will prove to be a passing fad. Deconstruction will one day deconstruct itself. But what will take its place?

Supporters of poststructuralism reject the idea of a giant eclecticism or meta-criticism in which the valid insights of all the various new critical tools will cooperate with more traditional hermeneutics. But it seems to us that we need something

[56] W. Kelber, *The Eclipse of Presence: Transparence and Opacity in the Fourth Gospel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).

[57] See esp. J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fail: Paradox and Polyuaknce in the Parables of Jesus (New* York: Seabury, 1980), 25-104.

[58] Crossan, *Cliffs,* 102.

[59] Crossan, *Cliffs,* 101.

[60] Id., *Finding Is the First Act* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 93.

[61] D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed.* F. E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 329.

[62] P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Nawatiue* (Chico, CA: Scholars; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

[63] Most notably, Moore, *Literary Criticism,* 171-78.

precisely like this. Cultural anthropologists, for example, have for nearly a decade renounced relativism in favor of seeking meta-models that remain valid atop cross-cultural diversity.[64] Interesting ly, the method that some hail as the next panacea for biblical criticism is a social-scientific analysis that draws heavily on anthropological models.[65] To date, such analysis has not always accepted its place as one limited method among many. As with new ideas more generally, its supporters tend to hail it as the best approach of all. But in time, less grandiose claims will no doubt prevail. Meanwhile, we must survey this new methodological arena of biblical scholarship and see what promise it offers a study of hermeneutics."

Social-Scientific Approaches to Scripture

Many of the same factors that spawned discontent with traditional historical-critical methods and gave rise to literary criticism of the Bible have also led scholars to propose new, social-scientific models of interpretation. Discontent with the status quo, a realization of the modem presuppositions imported into historical criticism, opportunities for creativity and fresh insights, and the growing interdisciplinary dialogue in the universities all have contributed. Hence, many biblical scholars are delving deeply into the study of sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science, using the findings of their studies to add new dimensions to the discipline of biblical hermeneutics.

Classification

These social-scientific studies fall into two broad categories: research that illuminates the social history of the biblical world and the application of modern theories of human behavior applied to scriptural texts.[67]

[64] P.G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *ZBMR* 11 (1987): 104–12.

[65] Note particularly how B. J. Malina ("Reader Response Theory: Discovery or Redundancy?" *Creighton University Faculty Journal* 5 [1986]: 55–66) *sees* social-scientific analysis as the appropriate successor to a bankrupt reader-response criticism.

&Additional key literature on modem literary criticism of the Bible, not already mentioned in the preceding footnotes of this section, includes T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) (an evangelical survey and sympathetic critique); N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (New* York: Harcourt, 1982) (a major study of archetype and symbol by a leading literary critic); E. V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) (a survey of reader-centered approaches, but including structuralism and more traditional forms of literary criticism as well); N. R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) (a survey of narrative criticism as it had developed by the end of the seventies); S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989) (on narration, characters, plot, time and space, and style in the Hebrew Bible); and W. L. Moberly, "Story in the Old Testament," *Themelios* 11 (1986): 77-82 (an evangelical appropriation of the best insights of literary criticism for Old Testament historical narratives).

[67] Good overviews of recent research include, for the OT, R. R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); B. Lang, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); and R. E. Clements, ed., *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives (New* York: Cambridge University Press, 1989);

Social History

This category could easily comprise a special branch of historical background research. But, for the most part, modern students of the Bible have not focused on *the* significantly different social world and dynamics of Bible times. We live today in a highly individualistic culture with many opportunities for choices in life-concerning spouses, jobs, places to live, and so on. More often than not, ancient Middle Eastern cultures were rooted more strongly in the various groups to which an individual belonged, and these-family, ethnicity, gender, trade-drastically limited opportunities for choosing a spouse, or changing a career or place of residence (or in the case of women, even having education or a career "outside the home"). Careful attention to the social world explicit or implicit in various biblical texts often casts new light on them and/or gives the lie to popular misinterpretations.[68]

This obvious but often neglected truth was dramatically driven home to one of us when a Singaporean friend in graduate school was talking with him about married life. The author marveled at how he could speak so calmly and pleasantly about extended families living together-including newlyweds moving into the home of one of their parents! He ventured to tell him that the Bible suggested a different model-"a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife" (Gen 2:24). The Singaporean quickly replied that this could not mean physical, geographical separation, since Bible cultures more often than not resembled his experience in traditional Chinese society. Rather, this verse must refer to a change in ultimate allegiances (after marriage the interests of spouse supersede those of parents even if all live under the same roof). The author left the conversation feeling rather foolish!

Sensitivity to this kind of social history can illumine numerous other passages. Mk 3:31–35, for example, then stands out as remarkably radical. Jesus lived in a culture that prized familial loyalties above all other human relationships (a virtue often lacking today!). So for him to ignore his biological family while teaching the crowds that his disciples ("whoever does God's will") were "my brother and sister and mother" would have shocked and offended many of his listeners. What is more, these words suggest that Jesus was creating not only new, intimate personal relationships with his followers but also an extended family that would involve detailed obligations for care and commitment among those "family" members.[69] An understanding of kinship ties can also explain how entire households were converted simultaneously (e.g. Acts 16:14–15, 31-34). Modern missionaries, encountering

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and for the NT, D. Tidball, *The* Social *Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); C. Osiek, *What Are They Saying About the Social Setting of the New Testament? (New* York: Paulist, 1984); and H. C. Kee, *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach To New Testament Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

@Particularly helpful in stressing these points, in his application of "group/grid" analysis to modem vs. biblical cultures, is B. J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

[69]See esp. D. M. May, "Mark 3:20–35 from the Perspective of Shame/Honor," *BTB* 17 (1987): 83-87.

non-Western tribes or clans in which religious commitments made by leaders were binding on whole groups of people, have been too slow to recognize the validity and biblical precedent for such response.[70] Conversion must be personal, but it is not always individual.[71]

Modern American separation of church and state also clouds our understanding of ancient cultures that knew no such divisions. To say, for example, that Jesus brought a spiritual message without political implications would introduce a division foreign to the first century. The various Jewish authorities combined governmental and religious roles in their communities and nation. If Jesus was perceived as a threat to their authority in the one realm, that threat naturally carried over to the other. Conversely, Rome (more naturally associated in modern eyes with the political authority) would eventually include within her purview religious claims ("Caesar is Lord"). Christians could not offer the imperial sacrifice, but the rest of the empire viewed these claims as little more significant than our pledge of allegiance or salute to the flag. For first-century Christians such "patriotism" implied blasphemous associations of deity with human emperors; consequently, their "civil disobedience" led to numerous outbreaks of persecution and to the writing of several NT documents (e.g., Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation).[72]

Other portions of Scripture probably arose in social settings not familiar to modern readers. Although scholars debate their precise origin, OT poetry and wisdom literature (particularly the psalms and prophets) probably stemmed largely from group rather than individual settings (e.g., "schools of sages," professional musicians' guilds, or communities of temple worshipers).[73] Certain penitential psalms, therefore, may well reflect corporate repentance and longing as a regular feature of public worship and liturgy, more than merely private, individual confession of sins.[74] Often overlooked social factors transformed pre-exilic Israelite religion into what came to be known as "Judaism." Most notable were the influence of Persian and other foreign ideas and practices during the Babylonian captivity, and the clash between the ideals for a restored Jewish state following the exile and the harsher realities of life in the homeland following Cyrus' edict that permitted Jews to return to Israel.[75]

Even such dry and seemingly uninteresting parts of Scripture as the genealogies may be illuminated by social history. Robert Wilson demonstrates that, in all likelihood, the presence of two different family lines of offspring of Adam and Eve serve social functions. Genesis 4:17–26 describes the origins of civilization and the

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[70]See esp. Tidball, *Social Context, 84-85.*

[71]A concept particularly associated with the modem church growth movement and pioneered by D. McGavran first in *Bridges of Cod (New* York: Friendship, 1955).

[72]For the various points in this paragraph, cf. esp. R. A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas (New* York: Crossroad, 1989).

[73]Cf. the various perspectives surveyed in R. N. Whybray, "The Social World of the Wisdom Writers," in Clements, ed., *Ancient Israel, 227-50.*

[74]Cf. *e.g.,* L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150,* WBC *21* (Waco: Word, 1983), 195-96, on Psalm 130.

[75]Cf, e.g. H. G. M. Williamson, "The Concept of Israel in Transition," in Clements, ed., *Ancient Israel,* 141-61.

decadence that ensued, while Gen 5 documents the preservation of a righteous line of descendants culminating in Noah. Both the wicked majority and the godly minority go on to figure prominently in the chapters to come, climaxing with God's judgment of the world in the flood and his preservation of Noah and his family in the ark.[76] Indeed, Wilson goes on to develop the thesis that biblical genealogies consistently reflect underlying social realities, though his arguments vary in weight from passage to passage.

Like other items of historical background, the value of a study of the history of social interaction in a given culture depends directly on the accuracy of the data and the appropriateness of their application to specific texts. Scholars agree on most of the above examples. In other cases, interpretations prove more controversial. For example, many people assume that Jesus and his followers came from the substantial majority of the Galilean populace who were poor, marginalized, peasant workers. But recent study has reassessed the role of tradesmen, like carpenters in Galilean villages, and paid more attention to details such as the mention in Mk 1:20 that Zebedee's family had "hired men" or servants. A growing number of scholars thus suggests that Jesus and his troupe may have included a fair number of the tiny "middle class" of their society (though even then we may not import the affluence attributed to Western middle class people into our picture of first-century life).[77] Equally groundbreaking but less secure is the attempt to divide the prophets into Ephraimite and Judean categories, in which the former are identified as "peripheral" to their society, and working for social change, and the latter as "central" to their human environment, working for social stability.[78] Given that appeals to the laws of Moses dominate the messages of both groups of prophets, one wonders if theological emphases do not overshadow sociological distinctives.

Perhaps the most valuable upshot of the new interest in studying social history is that it gives interpreters new sets of questions to ask of the biblical texts. Howard Kee helpfully enumerates a long list of these; sample items include: to what groups do various individuals in the Bible belong? What are the social dynamics of those groups? What are their goals? How might they be accomplished? What are the roles of power within the group and the means of attaining them? Are age groups or sex roles defined? What are the key formative experiences of the group, including initiation, celebration, and stages of transition? What are the boundaries of acceptable behavior that may or may not be transgressed? And there are many more.[79]

[76]Cf. further R. R. Wilson, Genealogy *and* ***History in the Biblical World*** *(New* Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 7-28.

[77]See the discussion of past and present study in J. P. Meier, ***A Marginal Jew*** (Garden City: Doubleday, 1991), 278–85. Cf. esp. D. P. Seccombe, ***Possessions and Poor*** in ***Luke-Acts*** (Linz: Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt B. 6, 1982). One may also point to the fairly well-to-do women who supported and accompanied Jesus (Lk 8:1–3). Jesus himself may have been more a part of this "middle class," in view of his potential contact with and employment in nearby Sepphoris. See, e.g., R. A. Batey, ***Jesus*** and ***the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

[78]R. R. Wilson, ***Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

Asking new questions of a text will certainly elicit new answers and yield fresh insights.

Application of Social-Scientific Theories

Under this heading we turn to a different kind of social-scientific analysis. Here scholars use theories about human behavior developed in modern studies of various cultures, including the so-called primitive cultures, to shed fresh light on what may have been the dynamics of social interaction in biblical times. In other words, even where we have no reliable data from the Bible or other ancient texts about the ways in which people interacted in certain settings, perhaps analogies from other cultures in other times and places can enable us to make plausible inferences as to those dynamics.

So, for example, scholars have expended much energy in recent years to account for the social forces involved in the rise of ancient Israel as a political state from a loose confederation of tribes to a people who demanded and received a king (the story narrated in 1 Sam-2 Kgs). The three most popular theories have proposed analogies, respectively, from the later development of the Greek nation out of independent city-states, from peasant revolts in other ancient cultures, and from the rise of modern socialism or communism.[80] From the Greek concept of "amphictyony" (an association of neighboring states) has come the hypothesis that during the days of the judges Israel was a very loose confederation of tribes unified only by the single Shiloh sanctuary. An alternate explanation of the settlement period theorizes that "Israel" came into being by a rebellion of nomadic tribesmen already living in Canaan who overthrew their urban oppressors. On a quite different front, studies of ritual taboos in traditional cultures have offered widely accepted explanations for why certain animals were considered unclean in ancient Israel: they deviated from some established norm that was the symbol of ritual purity.[81]

Again, the study of Melanesian "cargo" cults in the South Pacific led to a popular proposal about a people's response to "failed prophecy" (a bit of a misleading term), as when the OT prophets repeatedly predicted "the Day of the Lord is at hand" (see esp. Zephaniah), even though centuries passed without its fulfillment. This phenomenon was perhaps repeated in the experience of first-generation Christians who may have expected Christ's return within their lifetime (see esp. 2 Thess). Among other things, this proposal suggests that a religious group whose members discover that "the end" has not come as soon as they first believed "saves face" by engaging in more vigorous proselytizing or evangelism. As more people flock to

[79]Kee, *Truth,* 65–67.

[80]These three views are classically associated, respectively, with M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1958); G. E. Mendenhall, The ***Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical*** *Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); and N. K. Gottwald, ***The Tribes of*** *Yahweh:* ***A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 B.C.E*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

[81]See esp. M. Douglas, ***Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts*** *of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

the movement, then, it regains its credibility and can revise its expectations without threatening the existence of the group.[82]

Study of recurring patterns of institutionalization in the development of religious groups or sects has proved influential in accounting for the development of the first-century church. Itinerant charismatics often give way to more settled and organized forms of leadership. Charisma is replaced by office. Many NT scholars believe they can discern such a pattern of institutionalization as one moves from Jesus and his first followers (the "wandering charismatics"), to Paul (who promoted settled charismatic worship-1 Cor 12–14), to post-Pauline literature (esp. 1 Tim 3, with its criteria for office-holding, believed by most to be written a generation later than Paul; or Jude 3, seen as a classic example of "early catholic" institutionalization of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints").[83]

Sociological analysis has further suggested a different way of viewing the divisions at Corinth (1 Cor 1: 10-17) in light of socio-economic divisions, in which the more wealthy apparently bring extra to eat and drink but do not share enough of their provisions with the poor who come empty-handed (cf. 1 1:20–21).[84] It has viewed 1 Peter as an extended tract encouraging the church to become "a home for the homeless" (referring to literal refugees).[85] And it has viewed miracle-stories in the Gospels and Acts as responses to the frustration of a marginalized existence in this life.[86]

How should the student of hermeneutics respond to this plethora of proposals? Numerous items are certainly worthy of consideration, but we must subject this program to careful analysis by asking key questions. First, is the specific sociological theory reductionistic or deterministic?[87] That is to say, does it rule out God, the supernatural, or human freedom as possible and even primary agents? Several of the explanations for the establishment of the Israelite nation or for belief in Jesus' miracles involve precisely such presuppositions. Those that rule out God or human freedom cannot be accepted by the open-minded inquirer.

Second, does the theory require rejecting part of the biblical text as it stands or reconstructing a set of historical events at odds with the claims of the text itself? Many of the theories involving the transition from judges to kingship assume that the data of Scripture are almost wholly unreliable and must be replaced with a different reconstruction of events. Theissen's views of Jesus' first followers in Palestine as almost exclusively itinerant charismatics depend on trusting only a handful

[82]Cf. **esp. J. G. Gager,** *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* **(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); and R. P. Carroll, When Prophecy** *Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament (New* **York: Seabury, 1979).**

[83]Cf. **esp. G. Theissen, The** *Sociology of Early Palestinian* **Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Theissen builds on the more wide-ranging studies of the growth of religions from sect to institution by M. Weber.**

[84]G. **Theissen,** *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* **(Philadelphia: Fortress,** 1982), **145-74.**

[85]J. **H. Elliott,** *A Home For the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter* **(Philadelphia: Fortress,** 1981).

[86]H. **C. Kee,** *Miracle* **in** *the Early Christian World (New* **Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).**

"'A criticism frequently leveled by E. Yamauchi in his important analytical survey, "Sociology, Scripture and the Supernatural," *JETS* **27 (1984):** 169–92.

of Q-sayings as the oldest and most authentic portion of the gospel tradition. Other perspectives require a denial of the stated authorship of biblical books. To the extent that such theories assume the unreliability of the Bible as we have it, we believe that they are ill-founded.

Third, is a given proposal based on a valid theory, well-agreed upon by other social-scientists? A popular view of the rise of apocalyptic literature proposes that it stems from times of acute social crisis among the communities in which it arises. But recent study has shown that more crucial is the ***perception*** of crisis-which may or may not correspond to reality. In this case we may not speak with as much confidence about the social origins of every scriptural use of apocalyptic as consistently due to the oppression of the people of God.[88] A popular explanation for group dynamics in OT times has been the notion of "corporate personality" (hence, e.g., all Israel could be punished for the sins of Achan-Josh 7),[89] but more recent research suggests that while corporate responsibility (as in the Achan story) may indicate some kind of corporate solidarity, it does not necessarily require the "psychical unity" so often postulated as a unique feature of the ancient Hebrew mind.[90]

Fourth, if the theory is valid elsewhere, are the parallels or analogies with the biblical material close enough to warrant its application to this new context? Twentieth-century South Pacific islanders may be too far removed in time and space from the ancient Middle-East to provide much help for interpreting the missionary movements in ancient Judaism and early Christianity!

Fifth, does the theory fit the biblical data as well as more traditional alternatives? For example, one may read 1 Peter as a call to "seek the welfare of the city" (cf. Jer 29:7) at least as plausibly as a mandate to care for the needy within the church.[91] Or again, it is hard to find much fit between peasants' revolts within a nation and the Israelites' establishment of themselves in the land from outside.[92] The story of exodus, covenant, and conquest, however one conceives it, seems far more plausible.

Notwithstanding all of these criteria by which some of the more popular social-scientific theories should be at least tempered if not rejected outright, numerous proposals seem to reflect an advance over older, commonly held opinions. Viewing ritual cleanliness and uncleanliness in light of religious taboos seems more

[88]See **esp. A. Y. Collins,** *Crisis in Catharsis: The Pow of the Apocalypse* **(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). On the origins of OT Apocalyptic, see esp. P. D. Hanson,** *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* **(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).**

[89]Due **in large measure to H. W. Robinson, "The Hebrew Conception of 'Corporate Personality' in the Old Testament," in** *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments* **(Berlin: Töpelmann,** 1936), **49-62; rev. and repr. as** *Corporate Personality fn Ancient Israel* **(Philadelphia: Fortress,** 1980).

[90]See **esp. J. W. Rogerson, "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A** Re-examination," *JTS* **21 (1970): l-16.**

[91]See **esp. D. L. Balch,** *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Chico, CA: **Scholars,** 1981); **B. Winter, "'Seek the Welfare of the City': Social Ethics according to 1 Peter,"** *Themelios* **13 (1988): 91-94.**

[92]Cf. **esp. N. P. Lemche,** *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy* **(Leiden: Brill, 1985).**

appropriate than the popular view that these laws reflected some kind of primitive understanding of hygiene.[93] Wayne Meeks' research on "the first urban Christians," a study of the major cities in which Paul ministered, helpfully compares and contrasts Pauline churches with other socio-religious groups, including trade guilds, and demonstrates the wide range of socio-economic statuses of early Christians.[94] Because of the abundance of written material on life in ancient Greece and Rome from extrabiblical sources, theories here are much more likely to be soundly based than those, say, relating to periods of Israelite history for which little but ambiguous archeological evidence exists to confirm or contest biblical detail. Richard Horsley has provided a devastating critique of the wandering charismatic theory of Christian origins and provides a more plausible model when he views early Palestinian Christianity as a rural- based renewal movement of local communities within the existing but diverse forms of Judaism.[95]

These kinds of evaluations or "judgment calls" obviously require some familiarity with the social sciences. We advise theological or "pre-seminary" students to take introductory courses in sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and the like, in order to be familiar with the basic terms and theories that these disciplines employ. They will still need to rely on helpful literature that evaluates the methods employed in these disciplines, especially when applied to the Bible.[96] But even the relative novice can sift theories that incorporate biblical data as valid source material from those that depend largely on reconstructions of ancient history that contradict the testimony of Scripture. In our judgment, even the most valid social-scientific study will never replace the classic historical-grammatical tools of analysis, but it can provide important supplementary information and correctives to past mistakes in interpretation.

Advocacy Groups

Two subdisciplines within this broad arena of social-scientific interest in the Bible have taken on whole lives of their own, both in the sheer volume of literature published and in the political stances they represent. Traditionally, biblical scholarship promoted a certain detachment by its practitioners as a laudable goal. Precisely because the use of the Bible in church and synagogue has usually involved theological motives and biases, scholars in academic institutions have tried to distance themselves from particular ideologies as they study Scripture. But two main groups of practitioners of social-scientific analysis now seek to reverse this trend. We speak specifically of those who practice liberation and feminist hermeneutics. Both groups

[93] See esp. the appropriation of Douglas' research throughout G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

[94] W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

[95] R. A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[96] Cf. esp. B. Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). To date, no comparable, comprehensive critique of the methodologies of a broad cross-section of OT sociology exists.

share a common commitment to the liberation of the disenfranchised of this world and view "detached objectivity" as both a myth and a weakness. In other words, if one is not part of the solution, he or she is part of the problem! If biblical scholars do not join other kinds of people in the quest for full equality, human rights, and a decent life for all persons irrespective of gender, race, nationality, and so on, then they *de facto* remain aligned with the inhuman, oppressive, sexist, and racist powers of this world. There are, of course, numerous other strands of Christian theology, both traditional and avant-garde, that remain activistic in nature.[97] But no other systems of thought utilize so unique a set of hermeneutical axioms nor remain as influential internationally as these two. So we turn to each briefly for some special analysis.

Liberation Hermeneutics

Liberation theology has developed a three-part hermeneutical agenda. In opposition to the stated objectives of many forms of classical theology, experience takes precedence over theory. And the dominant experience of a majority of people in the Third-World, in which liberation theology was born, is the experience of poverty—suffering, malnutrition, lack of access to basic human rights, education, clean water, medicine, and the like. Hence, a liberation hermeneutic begins with the experience of the injustice of poverty. Second, it attempts to analyze or assess the reasons for this impoverished existence. Third, actions take precedence over rhetoric. Liberationists seek to determine a course of corrective measures on the basis of their previous observation, insight and judgment.[98] In the liberationist hermeneutic, the Bible does not normally come into play at the beginning in step one but only to aid in steps two and three. Particularly by focusing on the biblical narratives of liberation from oppression, with the exodus as the OT paradigm, and a socio-political understanding of God's kingdom as the NT paradigm, the liberationist takes heart from his or her conviction that God has a "preferential option for the poor."[99] God sides with the oppressed against their oppressors and calls believers today to do the same in working for a more humane society on this earth.

How to bring about this new society, God's kingdom, remains a topic on which liberationists disagree. Some labor within the framework of Western democracies but believe that we need more socialist checks and balances on a capitalism run amok.[100] Some strongly eschew violence but endorse social protest and civil disobedience *à la* Martin Luther Ring, Jr.[101] Still others endorse both violence and

[97] E.g., one thinks, respectively, of mainstream Protestant liberal reformers and proponents of New Age or pantheistic world views.

[98] The most current detailed introduction to liberationist hermeneutics (as distinct from liberation theology more generally) is C. Rowland and M. Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1989).

[99] A slogan that emerged in the late 1960s from Vatican II and subsequent Catholic bishops' conferences as the rallying cry and starting point for the vast majority of liberation theology.

[100] E.g., R. J. Sider, "An Evangelical Theology of Liberation," *ChrCent* 97 (1980): 314–18; and J. A. Kirk, *Theology* Encounters *Revolution* (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1980).

[101] E.g., R. J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics and Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978); and J. M. Ford, *My Enemy Is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in Luke* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

Marxism as necessary means to more desirable ends.[102] Most all agree that the current disparities between the haves and have-nots of this world cannot continue to widen, as they have so considerably under current forms of capitalism. Most all believe that the Bible itself promotes peace and justice in ways that require a modification of current economic and political structures in society.

As clearly as any liberationist writer, José Miranda equates Christianity with communism, believing that it is taught throughout the Bible.[103] It is indeed striking that both "halves" of Marx's manifesto come straight from the book of Acts: "from each according to his ability" (Acts 11:29) and "to each according to his need" (4:35). The OT Jubilee laws were designed to prevent the perpetuation of extreme disparities in the distribution of wealth, as debts had to be forgiven in the Sabbath and jubilee years. A major theme of the Law and Prophets is the denunciation of injustice against the powerless and a call to help the poor. The communal living and redistribution of goods depicted in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–5:11 scarcely resemble recognizable, contemporary Western forms of Christianity. And Luke's summary statements make it clear that he viewed this fellowship as exemplary and not the mistake (2:47,5:14) some modern-day Christians have thought it was. Paul too outlines radical requirements for Christian stewardship of money (2 Cor 8–9), in which, following the model of God's provision of manna in the wilderness, "he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little" (2 Cor 8: 15; Exod 16: 18). The goal was "that there might be equality" (2 Cor 8:13).

There are two major problems, however, with a hermeneutic that proceeds from the conviction that Christianity is communist, at least in the forms that have evolved since the days of Marx. First, such a hermeneutic tries to impose on society ethics that were originally limited to God's people. Neither in OT Israel nor in the NT church were "believers" mandated to make God's laws or principles the laws of every nation. Second, the liberationist hermeneutic usually plays down the voluntary nature of NT giving (2 Cor 9:7; cf. Acts 4:32). Texts like these show that the Christians retained personal property. In short, as with the good news of the Kingdom itself, no one is forced to be a good steward of his or her God-given resources who doesn't want to![104] But, having said this, many Bible scholars, evangelicals included, are coming to agree with liberationists that models of Western church life have much to learn from the paradigms of fellowship and stewardship of the Bible. As well, in certain respects the Bible's paradigms may more closely approximate socialist (or social democratic) rather than purely capitalist structures.[105]

[102] E.g., J. H. Cone, ***A Black Theology of Liberation,*** 2d ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, **1986);** J. L. Segundo, ***The Liberation of Theology*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, ***1976).***

[103] J. P. Miranda, ***Communism in the Bible*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, ***1982).***

[104] For important critiques of liberation hermeneutics, cf. E. A. Nuñez, ***Liberation Theology*** (Chicago: Moody Press, ***1985);*** R. C. Hundley, ***Radical Liberation Theology: An Evangelical Response*** (Wilmore, KY: Bristol Books, 1987); and R. Nash and H. Belli, ***Beyond Liberation Theology*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, ***1992).***

[105] Cf. e.g., T. D. Hanks, ***God So Loved the Third world*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); A. Kirk, The ***Good News of the Kingdom Coming*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983).

Liberationist hermeneutics pose other problems. They often do not seem adequately to preserve the "spiritual" element of salvation. Mark 8:36 stands out poignantly at this juncture: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" They may overlook that "the poor" in Scripture are consistently not ***all the*** physically dispossessed or oppressed but those who in their need turn to God as their only hope.[106] In so doing they create a ***de facto*** "canon within the canon" and ignore or deem as not as authoritative those texts that do not support their agenda. But more traditional forms of theology have proved equally blind to the parts of Scripture the liberationists stress. So as a corrective to one imbalance, though not as the sum total of the scriptural witness, liberation theology proves extremely sign&cant.

Rereading other Scriptures from a perspective of a commitment to help the disenfranchised of this world can thus shed significant new light on them. The Exodus account reminds us that God is concerned about sociopolitical as well as spiritual freedoms.[107] We may rightly see Esther more as a model of one who risked the penalties of civil disobedience to stand up for her people than as one who was duly submissive to the authorities in her world.[108] We should view Jesus, as already noted above, as a challenge to political as well as religious authorities and structures in his society.[109] And in perhaps the most important biblical document that requires us to wrestle with the liberationist agenda, the epistle of James, we discover a community of largely poor, Christian day-laborers being oppressed by their wealthy, often absentee landlords-a frightening parallel to the situation of many Third-World laborers today. Many of them are Christian believers denied a decent wage and basic human rights by the large multinational corporations or corrupt national governments that employ them as virtual slave labor.[110] Yet many conservative Christians explicitly and implicitly continue to support right-wing regimes and ultra-capitalist policies that only exacerbate the physical suffering of their Christian brothers and sisters. Whatever else we may question in a liberationist hermeneutic, we obviously have much still to learn from it. We must listen to the voices of the disenfranchised, test each claim against the Scriptures, and see if either their or our presuppositions have obscured the true meaning or significance of the text.[111]

Feminist Hermeneutics

Feminism may be viewed as one particular branch of liberation theology, but it too has developed a life and literature all its own. Rosemary Reuther identifies

[106] See esp. W. Heard, "Luke's Attitude Toward the Rich and the Poor," ***Trinf*** n.s. ***9 (1988): 47-80;*** cf. S. Gillingham, "The Poor in the Psalms," ***ExpT*** 100 ***(1988): 15-19.***

[107] See esp. J. S. Croatto, ***Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

[108] O. E. Costas, "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for a Liberating Theology," ***EcR 40 (1988): 66-78.***

[109] Cf. further H. C. Waetjen, ***A Reordering of Pow: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*** (Minneapolis: Fortress, ***1989).***

[110] See esp. P. LJ. Maynard-Reid, ***Poverty and Wealth in James*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); and E. Tamez, ***The Scandalous Message of James (New*** York: Crossroad, 1990).

[111] A good anthology to help in such a process is R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from* ***the Margin*** (London: SPCK, 1991).

three major directions in contemporary feminism: liberal, socialist/Marxist, and romantic/radical. The liberal element sees a model of progress within capitalist society and works for political reform, equal rights, and improved working conditions. It tends to benefit middle-class women more than poor or minority women. The socialist feminists who follow Marxist assumptions believe that women can achieve full equality only by the full integration of labor and ownership. They argue that capitalism in typical patriarchal cultures places a double burden on working women: not only do they **work outside the home, they also remain the major source** of domestic labor. The romantic or radical view upholds the notion of women and feminist values as inherently superior to men and patriarchal values.[112] Still other writers advocate some combination of two or three of these positions.[113]

Feminists can also be classified in terms of the role the Bible and Christianity play in their hermeneutics. Evangelical or biblical feminists believe that Scripture, at least in Gen l-2 (before the Fall) and in the NT (after redemption), promotes full equality of the sexes and does not delineate any unique roles for husband vs. wife or male vs. female.[114] Nonevangelical Christian feminists agree with more traditional Christians that parts of the Bible, even before the Fall or after redemption, promote patriarchalism and bar women from certain roles in the family and in the church (e.g., Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:11–15). But because of their prior commitment to a world-view that permits no such discrimination but seeks human liberation from all forms of oppression, these feminists will not accept such portions of Scripture as authoritative. Instead, they focus on other texts that do teach complete equality (e.g., Gen 1; Gal 3:28), regarding them as more "programmatic." They believe that "biblical revelation and truth are given only in those texts and interpretative models that transcend critically their patriarchal frameworks and allow for a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects and actors."[115] A third category of feminists finds Scripture so irredeemably chauvinist that they have abandoned any recognizable forms of Judaism or Christianity in favor of other religions, most notably, reviving an interest in the goddess worship of many ancient pagan cults.[116]

Feminists of all these various classifications have challenged numerous traditional interpretations of Scripture. They have argued that a better translation of "a helper suitable for" Adam (Gen 2:18) is "a partner corresponding to" (or even "superior to") him[117] and that 1 Tim 2: 1 l-l 5 must be seen in the context of women

[112]R. Reuther, S&m *and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 41–45, 216–32.

[113]E.g., C. Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Y. Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 93105.

[114]E.g., G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); and A. B. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

[115]E S Fiorenza, In *Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 30.

[116]Most notably, *N.* R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979).

[117]Spencer, *Curse*, 25.

teaching heresy, promoting fertility rites, or murdering men, and hence not as a timeless mandate for women "not to teach or have authority over men" (v. 12).[118] They have called upon Bible readers to focus on the women in various texts, to read their stories through feminine eyes, so that we agonize over the rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13) or the dismemberment of the unnamed woman of Judg 19.[119] They ask us to question why five women appear in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1: 1–18), all of whom are famous in Scripture for finding themselves in morally ambiguous situations. One plausible answer-with which we agree-suggests that Matthew intends to stress that even the Messiah had such women in his ancestry and came to identify with and remove the stigma attached to them.[120] Feminists point us to paradigms of wisdom, leadership, and authority like Ruth, Deborah, and Huldah, inviting us to identify with the desire of these women for justice or their loyalty to family.[121]

As with liberation theology more generally, a feminist hermeneutic combines certain objectionable features with other highly commendable ones.[122] When nonevangelical feminists create a canon within a canon to reject the authority of texts with which they disagree, they replace the Bible with some other external standard as their ultimate authority and, hence, differ from the perspective on Scripture we have defended in this volume. When biblical feminists argue for lexically dubious interpretations of certain words (such as "suitable" meaning "superior" or "have authority" meaning "to engage in fertility rites"), they raise suspicions that their eagerness to make the text say something other than what they find objectionable (deriving from their preunderstanding) has overwhelmed common sense.

At times the fallacies are subtle and can trap even well-intentioned interpreters. Susan Durber, for example, notes that both the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin presuppose a male audience, even though the protagonist in the latter is a woman. She deduces this from the fact that Jesus introduces the first parable by asking, "which of *you* [second person plural]. . .?" but begins the second by asking, "which woman [third person]. . .?" So she concludes that any woman reading Luke 15 is "immasculated" (forced to read as if she were a man) and that alternative feminist readings are not viable.[123] But these subtleties were almost certainly

[118]C. C. Kroeger has promoted each of these views in a succession of articles, All may now be found in her book, co-authored with R. C. Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). The Kroegers conclude that the best option for rendering 1 Tim 2:12 is "I do not allow a woman to teach nor to proclaim herself the author of man" (p. 103).

[119]P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

[120]C. L. Blomberg, "The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew l-2," *BTB* 21 (1991): 145-50. Cf. J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 33, who, much more implausibly, goes on to argue that Jesus was in fact illegitimately conceived by Mary and another man (not Joseph).

[121]T. Cavalcanti, "The Prophetic Ministry of Women in the Hebrew Bible," in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. E. Tamez (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 118–39.

[122]The most important and detailed critique of modern Christian and particularly evangelical feminism is J. Piper and W. Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

[123]S. Durber, "The Female Reader of the Parables of the Lost," *JSNT* 45 (1992): 59–78.

lost on an ancient audience, used to such male-oriented language, but doubtless stunned by Jesus' choice of a woman to justify his own behavior and, in some sense, stand for God. Jesus' parables are actually far more amenable to feminist concerns than Durber recognizes.[124]

These critiques notwithstanding, all Bible students, particularly those from more conservative backgrounds, would do well to reread Scripture through the windows of various feminist perspectives. They must be open to see if they have read texts in light of their own prevailing, patriarchal cultural biases (that is, traditionalists have preunderstandings, too!). They must learn to hurt where oppressed women hurt and work together with them for a more just and compassionate world. They have to ask if elements of passages traditionally assumed to be universally timeless in their authority are indeed culture- bound instead. That is quite different, however, from applying an interpretive canon-within-a-canon. It acknowledges every text of Scripture as inspired and authoritative but recognizes that both interpretations and applications often vary from one culture to the next. Today most Christians do not believe it is necessary for women to keep their heads covered while praying in the modern church, any more than that all believers ought literally to wash each other's feet. Might there be equally good reasons for not insisting that women refrain from teaching or having authority over men? The principles taught by each text must be applied today in culturally appropriate ways.

Just as importantly, we need to recognize that women may read the Bible differently than men. Both may discover unique insights that emerge more clearly because of their specific gender. Both, too, may be "blinded" in some contexts because of their gender. In other words, there are two issues at stake. First the biblical texts themselves are culturally conditioned by the overwhelmingly patriarchal societies of their day. They reflect the world as it existed "back then." Interpreters must consider when, if ever, this conditioning coincides with normative, divinely intended values. Second, all readers are conditioned by their culture and gender and must exercise great care not to impose anachronistic, alien grids from high profile agenda items of modern society onto ancient texts.

Further, we encourage readers for whom some of these ideas are new or possibly scandalous not to reject them without sensitive study of the authors who propose them. In many cases, liberationist and feminist hermeneutics emerge out of suffering of a kind and scale that most Americans, particularly white males, have never experienced or even observed firsthand.[125] All the writers of this textbook can personally testify that extensive travel in Third-World cultures, as well as among the

[124]Cf., by way of contrast, the positive affirmation of the value of these texts in particular and of parables in general in N. Slee, "Parables and Women's Experiences," *Religious Education 80* (1985): 232–45.

[125]This is certainly true of the "founding father" of liberation theology, G. Gutiérrez, whose seminal work, A *Theology* of *Liberation*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis,1988), should be required reading of every theological student. In personal conversation in Lima, Peru with two of the authors of this book, Gutiérrez made it far more clear than do either his conservative critics or his liberal devotees (and even than do his own writings) that his hermeneutic is fundamentally biblically based but that he is very concerned to correct a past, severe neglect of liberationist themes in Scripture by the conservative Catholic establishment that dominates the Latin American scene.

urban poor of North America, invariably makes one question standard but culturally biased interpretations of various passages. For example, one of us was particularly challenged by a Third-World Christian who called his attention to the oft-abused passage, "the poor you will always have with you" (Mk 14:7)-a quote by Jesus of a text from the Law commanding generous care for the poor (Deut 15:11). Even the most sensitive North American Christian is likely to read this text fi-om the viewpoint of the benefactor-we always have time and obligation to help the needy. Quite differently, the impoverished Third-World Christian living in a regime that abuses human rights will more likely see it as a tragic reminder that there will always be oppressors in the world for God to judge! We must take the time to listen to divergent readings of Scripture from our Christian brothers and sisters around the globe, and particularly fi-om women, minorities, and the poor. As we do so, we will be both convicted and renewed.[126]

'"In addition to the works already noted above, cf. esp. J. L. González and C. G. González, ***Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980); N. K. Gottwald, ed., The *Bible and Liberation: Political and Social* ***Hermeneutics*** (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983); L. M. Russell, ed., ***Feminist Interpretation*** *of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); and A. L. Laffey, *An* ***Introduction*** *to* ***the*** *Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). For a detailed bibliography of the sociology of the NT, see D. M. May, ***Social-Scientific*** *Criticism of the New Testament: A* ***Bibliography*** (Macon: Mercer, 1991). For a programmatic and important new genre of commentary, see B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

Annotated Bibliography

Hermeneutical Tools

Many books on hermeneutics provide a bibliography. Often such books list a catalogue of significant works in the field of hermeneutical theory.[1] We commend such bibliographies and urge readers to consult them for further study. We will not follow their example, though readers interested in further study in the various areas of hermeneutics can pursue those interests by consulting the extensive footnotes provided throughout this text. (Conveniently located in the appropriate sections, these function in lieu of that kind of bibliography.) Rather, we have chosen to provide a bibliography that assists students in the actual practice of interpretation. We are convinced that biblical interpreters require the appropriate tools as much as skilled practitioners in any endeavor.

The bibliographic references are presented here in units based on usage. Brief annotations supply insight into the uses and benefits of the various entries. We have marked those books we believe to be outstanding, indispensable, or at least top priority with an asterisk [*]. As students are building their biblical libraries we suggest these books be purchased early in the process.[2]

Some books included use the Hebrew and Greek languages. This distinction is noted in the annotations. Students who can acquire the use of these languages will have a decided advantage in the process of interpretation, and they should make use of these original language tools.[3] Those who are unable to learn one or both of

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[1]For example, excellent bibliographies exist in G. R. Osborne, ***The Hermeneutical Spiral*** (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991), 436–80; W. J. Larkin, ***Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 361–81; or A. C. Thiselton, ***The Two Horizons*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 447–66.

[2]Obviously, our colleagues in other institutions-including pastors, teachers, and students—who use this textbook may have different preferences. Though individual favorites may differ, we have attempted to provide a list of sources widely accepted as the best currently available.

[3]Frankly, we lament the increasing tendency to omit the biblical languages from theological curricula, but that is another matter.

the biblical languages can usually omit purchasing most of these volumes. Readers will note, though, in our description of some of these original language tools we suggest that even students without knowledge of Hebrew or Greek can profit considerably by using them. Where possible, students should attempt to borrow or use such books from friends or theological libraries to gauge their personal value or usefulness prior to purchasing them.

As tools, books are only as good as the scholars who wrote or compiled them. But even scholars and editors are fallible; they can misjudge evidence and draw imprecise or incorrect conclusions. Some may also have an "axe to grind." So recognizing that biblical interpretation will never be a hard and fast process like the sciences whose tables of mathematical formulae are precise and accurate, it is wise to work with a variety of reference works to verify judgments and opinions.

This is especially important on controversial issues where reasonable scholars differ. Readers must ask pointed questions: Is the burden of proof there? Do other reputable scholars agree? Is the evidence upon which the conclusion is based clear? Was the evidence examined fairly and objectively? Though we might like to believe that a reference book contains only accepted "truths," this is not always the case. We are certainly not advocating complete agnosticism or skepticism; clearly the state of our knowledge today exceeds that of any time in human history. The alternative-to reject all resources and tools-would be far more harmful. Rather, we hope to plant seeds of common sense and healthy questioning that refuse to embrace anything less than the best possible answers to the questions of interpretation.

Of course, the references and footnotes in the preceding chapters have already suggested some of the books in the following list. Here we attempt to collate in an organized fashion the better tools for doing biblical research and interpreting the Bible responsibly and accurately. We limit the list only to works in English, with a few exceptions (mostly original language tools) as noted. The focus is on the ***practice of interpretation,*** not on its theory or defense-we have already accomplished that and cited many works in the footnotes. Generally, books are listed in order from less advanced to more advanced (as precisely as possible) and from those based on the English text of the Bible to those that employ or require the original languages. Usually, OT sources precede NT sources. The annotations should make these factors clear. So, for many categories, students with the least background should begin by consulting the initial volumes. Then work down the lists as more expertise is gained and more in-depth information is required.

Annotated Listing

Biblical Texts-English Language

See the discussion in Chapter Three on canon and translations for help here.

Biblical Texts-Original Languages

Old Testament

*Kohlenberger, J. R., ed. ***NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. This work presents the Hebrew text and the NIV in parallel columns. It also appends English glosses to each word of Hebrew text. Among other uses, it enables readers to locate appropriate Hebrew words for further study.

Elliger, K., and Rudolph, W. eds. ***Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*** [BHS]. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1967-77. Produced by a wide variety of collaborators, this is the standard text of the OT in Hebrew and is conveniently available through the various national Bible Societies. Its footnotes list the important textual variants, including occasional ones from the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as suggested improved readings by the editors.[4] For students and pastors, we recommend the handy smaller edition of BHS.

Rahlfs, A. ***Septuaginta*** [LXX], 9th ed. 2 vols. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1984. This is the standard text of the OT in Greek today. All "editions" since the first in 1935 are actually reprints. The United Bible Societies also issued a reduced-size one-volume edition in 1979. Its major weakness is Rahlfs' use of a limited number of manuscripts-namely, A, B, and S-to reconstruct his text. Yet its convenience has made it the most popular text. In addition to its translation of the OT into Greek, the Septuagint includes the Greek text of the OT Apocrypha.[5]

New Testament

*Douglas, J. D. ed. ***NRSV Greek-English Interlinear New Testament.*** Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1990; and Green, J. ***Interlinear New Testament.*** Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984. Both works provide in horizontal lines literal English translations for each word in the Greek NT.

*Nestle-Aland, **Novum Testamentum Graece. 26th** ed. [NA-26]. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979. First edited by E. Nestle in 1898 and now revised and edited by B. and K. Aland, along with others, this volume is the standard text used by NT scholars. Representing the latest scholarly consensus of the original text of the NT documents, it records virtually all the places in the NT where alternative readings occur in different manuscripts. Its introduction and appendices also provide a wealth of information. It cites the textual traditions in a more limited fashion than the UBS Greek NT (see next entry).

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[4]Some problems yet remain, and a supplementary guide was produced by R. I. Vasholz, *Data for the Sigh of BHS* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983). Further help is found in R. Wonneberger, *Understanding BHS: A Manualfor the Users of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Rome: Biblical Institute. 1984; 1990).

[5]F. W. Danker, "The Use of the Septuagint," in *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*, 3d. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 81-95, provides a useful discussion of the value of studying the LXX.

*Aland, K. et al. eds. ***Greek New Testament. 3d*** ed. [***UBSGNT]. New*** York, et al.: United Bible Societies, 1975; corrected in 1983. The Greek text is essentially identical to that of Nestle-Aland's 26th edition, apart from periodic differences in paragraphing or layout. But unlike its counterpart, the UBS textual apparatus cites only those places where it deems there are variants that significantly affect translation, providing relatively complete manuscript evidence for each alternative reading. In addition, a "rating system" helps readers see the editors' preferences for the various alternative readings.

Metzger, B. M. ed. ***A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. New*** York: United Bible Societies, 1971. Written as a companion volume and reading like the minutes of a committee, this manual provides the details and reasoning the textual critics used in resolving the textual problems in producing the UBSGNT, 3d ed. The editor also assesses about 25 percent more variants not noted in the UBS Greek NT.

Aland, K. ed. ***Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum.*** 13th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1985. This is the standard Greek synopsis for studying the Gospels. Printed in vertical columns, the Gospels can be studied in comparison to each other. For each section (pericope) of the text, appropriate parallels from the other Gospels are cited as often as they occur. The text and symbols are identical to Nestle's 26th edition. In addition to the texts of the Gospels, this synopsis cites numerous parallels in other early Christian literature, including NT Apocrypha and the works by early church Fathers, plus the entire text of the Gospel of Thomas in an appendix. This tool also exists in a strictly English edition, ***Synopsis of the Four Gospels,*** ed. K. Aland (RSV; New York: United Bible Societies, 1982) and a ***Creek-English Synopsis of the Four Gospels,*** ed. K. Aland (RSV) diglot edition, (5th ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1982) with texts in the two languages on facing pages. These latter editions lack the extensive parallels in Christian literature or appendices of the Greek volume.

Textual Criticism

General

The Cambridge History of the Bible. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. These volumes present the history of the transmission of the text of the Bible from its origins to the modern period. They provide help in sorting out the problems of the texts and ancient versions. Volume 1, ***From the Beginnings to Jerome,*** ed. I? R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, 1970; Volume 2, ***The West from the Fathers to the Reformation,*** ed. G. W. H. Lampe, 1969; and Volume 3, ***The West from the Reformation to the Present Day,*** ed. S. L. Greenslade, 1963.

Old Testament

Klein, R. W. ***Textual Criticism of the Old Testament.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974. A part of the Guides to Biblical Scholarship series, this brief but helpful book provides a good introduction for students to the science of OT textual criticism. See also the fine methodological summary in C. E. Armerding, The ***Old Testament and Criticism.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 97–127.

Würthwein, E. ***The Text of the Old Testament. 4th*** ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. This is the definitive **book on the text of the OT. It offers a detailed overview of the OT texts with which textual critics work, including illustrative pictures of the texts themselves. It also suggests a methodology for deciding which textual variant should be reckoned as the earliest. This book is** more technical than the volume by Klein and, hence, will be of interest to the more serious student.

Jellicoe, S. The ***Septuagint and Modern Study. New*** York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968. Repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1978, 1989. This work treats the origins of the LXX, its transmission, its text, and its language. It also surveys the modern study of the LXX.

New Testament

Greenlee, J. H. *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964. Not an advanced or technical treatment, Greenlee's book provides the beginner an overview of the principles of textual criticism and how critics determine the original text of the NT. Another worthy text is I?. W. Comfort, ***The*** Quest ***for the Original Text of the New Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

Aland, K. and Aland, B. The ***Text of the New Testament. 2d ed. **Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989. A standard text, it presents the discipline and methods of the textual criticism of the NT. These German scholars lead readers through the technicalities of making decisions concerning the many manuscripts and versions to determine what were most likely the original readings (the so-called autographs) of the NT documents. They survey modern editions of the NT and the transmission of the Greek text of the NT through its history. This is an advanced text for the serious student.**

Metzger, B. M. *Text of the New Testament.* 3d ed. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. This is an alternative to the previous volume by the Alands. Also highly recommended, this work introduces readers both to the history and study of textual criticism and demonstrates how its techniques are actually performed. Again, this volume is not for the novice, though those interested in the subject can learn much here.

Versions and Translations

Lewis,** J. I? ***The English Bible from KJV to NIV. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991. This volume not only details the story of the English Bible up to the NIV, as the title suggests, but also includes chapters on the NKJV, REB, and NRSV.

Bruce, F. F. ***History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest Versions.*** 3d. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. This is a readable introduction to the formation of our English Bibles.

Kubo, S. and Specht, W. So ***Many Versions? Twentieth Century English Versions of the Bible.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975. Though now slightly dated, this work frankly assesses fifteen English versions produced since 1900.

Beekman, J. and Callow, J. ***Translating the Word of God.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974. A fine work, it provides an illuminating primer on the process and theory of translation of the Bible into other languages. It also yields numerous insights into various grammatical features of the Greek NT.

For more advanced students, the United Bible Societies publishes an inexpensive series "Helps For Translators" on many individual biblical books. Aimed for people actually preparing translations, each volume provides linguistic and cultural background useful to translators and discusses how best to render the original text in other languages.

Studying Words and Their Theological Significance

In the following list the reader will discover various sources that presume the user can find the "lexical form" of Hebrew or Greek words. In a later section we include theological dictionaries and encyclopedias that students who do not want to engage the original languages may consult.[6] For students without a sufficient knowledge of the biblical languages, but who do know the alphabet to find Hebrew or Greek words, say in a interlinear OT or NT, helpful tools exist. For the OT see, e.g., J. J. Owens, ***Analytical Key to the Old Testament., 4*** vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990-93, or A. B. Davidson, ***Analytical Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon,*** Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, reprint of 1848 ed. For the NT see H. K. Moulton, ed., ***The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised,*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990. These volumes list every word occurring in the Hebrew and Greek testaments in alphabetical order. Each term is analyzed grammatically and is listed with the lexical form (sometimes called a "lemma"). The reader needs to know how to locate it in one of the following tools.

Lexicons

Hebrew, Aramaic, and Old Testament Lexicons

Holladay, W. L. ***Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.*** Leiden: Brill, 1971. An abbreviated form of KB below, this work provides briefer access to the meaning of OT words. It functions well for students beginning their study of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.

*Brown, F., Driver, S. R. and Briggs, C. A., ***A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.*** [BDB], corrected impression. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952, 1962.

[6]We hesitate to mention word study works based entirely on English, not because of scholarly arrogance, but because we sincerely feel that all are horribly outdated or have serious deficiencies. In the second category see, for example, the review of N. Turner, *Christian Words* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980) by M. Silva, *TrinJ* n.s. 3 (1982): 103–09. Far better to learn to use *NIDNTT* listed below.

This has been the standard Hebrew lexicon, the revision and translation of the monumental work begun by Gesenius (18 1 O-l 2) .[7] Showing uncommon thoroughness, BDB gives the meanings not only of individual words but of common phrases and idioms as well. It also lists related roots and words that occur in the sister languages of biblical Hebrew. To help find words in BDB, some students consult B. Einspahr, ***Index to Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon.*** Chicago: Moody Press, 1976. Organized just like the Bible (i.e., by books, chapters, and verses), it gives the meaning and location in BDB of every Hebrew word (for which BDB gives a biblical reference). Using this ***Index*** one can locate the page and section in which BDB discusses a Hebrew word, see where it occurs in the OT, and discover its meaning.

Koehler, L. and Baumgartner, W. eds. ***Lexicon in Veteris Testament; Libros. [KB], 2*** vols. Leiden: Brill, 1951-53, with a supplement in 1958; 2d. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1985. Presently under revision, this is the modern counterpart to BDB. KB surpasses BDB on two counts: words are listed alphabetically and not by root, and it employs Ugaritic sources to which BDB did not have access. The descriptions are in both German and English, though the English is clearly the weaker of the two. It assumes at least an introductory knowledge of Hebrew. One must constantly use the supplement to augment the main entries. Many consider the Aramaic section superior to the Hebrew sections.

For Aramaic words, the best lexicon in English is M. Jastrow, ***A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature. 2*** vols.; 2d ed. New York: Pardes, 1950. Most students, however, will find that the Aramaic sections of the above three lexicons will easily meet their needs.

In reading the Septuagint, the best lexicon to use is H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, ***A Greek-En&h Lexicon*** (on which see next section).

Greek and New Testament Lexicons

Liddell, H. G. and Scott, R. ***A Greek-En&b Lexicon.*** [LS], ***9th*** ed. with supplement, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1925–40; repr. 1968. This is the standard comprehensive lexicon for the entire range of the Greek language in the ancient world. It specializes in the classical period of ancient Greek (up until 330 B.C.), but also traces meanings into the Hellenistic period. It provides valuable help in studying the history and etymology of words that occur in the NT.

*Bauer, W., Arndt, W. F., Gingrich, F. W., and Danker, F. ***A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.*** [BAGD], 2d English ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. This is the standard lexicon specifically devoted to the Hellenistic Greek of the NT and parallel literature. One can hardly over-estimate the wealth of information encompassed in BAGD. The authors often provide succinct meanings, trace uses of the words through the Hellenistic period, and dispense perceptive evaluations of the significance of words

[7]A recent edition exists, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), with the words coded to Strong's *Concordance* (see below).

in specific uses. But not all entries are uniformly organized or equally helpful. In places words are not defined at all; in others, the authors offer theological conclusions that are not strictly lexicographical or based on word usage. Still, it remains indispensable. Words are listed in Greek, and one must know the lexical form (lemma) of Greek words to look them up.[8]

*Louw, J. I? and Nida, E. A. ***A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains.*** 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988. As the title implies, these volumes employ linguistic principles to organize the vocabulary of the NT Greek into its various semantic fields or domains of meaning. They provide the best source for actually defining words, seeing the range of meaning of individual words, finding the most likely sense for a given word in a context, and understanding synonyms. Though not yet as well known as Bauer, this lexicon will take its rightful place among the standard, important tools for doing Greek word studies. It is a necessary companion to BAGD.

Moulton, J. H. and Milligan, G. ***Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament, Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources.*** [M&M], 2d ed. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957. This volume provides examples of specific uses of Greek in Hellenistic times from nonliterary papyri. Begun in 1914, it has been reprinted several times. Far from exhaustive, this volume cites only those words employed in nonliterary sources and so sheds light on how they were understood in everyday use about the time of the NT. The editors provide dates for the citations and often translate them into English. The work is somewhat outdated (since many sources have surfaced since 1930), but a revision is under way.

Lampe, G. H. W. ed. ***A Patristic Greek Lexicon.*** Oxford: Clarendon, 1961. This work complements NT usage by showing meanings of words in the subsequent era of the early church Fathers (to about A.D. 826). It sometimes proves instructive to see changes in word meanings as the Church developed in its first few centuries, though, of course, later meanings cannot be imposed upon NT uses.

Theological Dictionaries

Old Testament

*Harris, R. L. et al., eds. ***Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.*** [TWOT], 2 vols. Chicago: Moody, 1980. This book comprises a compact discussion of key Hebrew words. Its authors are all evangelical scholars, and the work is readily accessible to most readers, even those without a working knowledge of Hebrew. It attempts to investigate each Hebrew word and its cognates and synthesize the meaning of words in context in a concise format. Each entry has a number that corresponds to the numbers assigned Hebrew words in Strong's concordance (on which see below). This makes *TWOT* an easy source to consult, and the student will find it a welcome and useful guide.

[8] **A helpful supplement to BAGD was produced by J. R.** Alsop, *An Index to the Revised Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Greek Lexicon,* **2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,** 1982). **This index enables students working on individual passages to locate word meanings in BAGD quickly.**

`Van Gemeren, W. et al., eds. New ***International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology. [NIDOTT].*** This is a projected three-volume work to be published by Zondervan in the mid-1990s. It aims to be the OT counterpart to C. Brown, ed., New ***International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (see*** below), and, hence, is organized topically around English words or biblical book titles. Its contributors are evangelicals from throughout the English-speaking world, and it has the potential to become a standard work on Hebrew words. (For the use of Brown and G. Kittel for OT word studies, see below).

Botterweck, G. J. and Ringgren, H. eds. Theological ***Dictionary of the Old Testament. [TDOT], 6*** vols. to date out of 12 vols. expected. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–.[9] This is the OT counterpart to ***TDNT (see*** below). ***TDOT*** assesses key OT terms and their theological significance-occasionally going on to postbiblical developments (e.g., Qumran and the rabbis) and employing cognate languages where possible (especially, though not only, Akkadian and Ugaritic) to explain the meaning. A knowledge of Hebrew is useful, if not essential, to get the most out of this source. Its orientation is less conservative theologically than ***TWOT,*** building upon a form-critical and tradition-historical framework. Read critically, however, there is no better source for Hebrew word studies.

New Testament

*Brown, C. ed. New ***International Dictionary of New Testament Theology. [NIDNTT] 4*** vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–78.[12] This is a work similar to *TDNT* that discusses the theological significance of words over time. However, the words are better **organized around semantic fields of meanings, countering some of Barr's criticisms of *TDNT*. It aims to provide help for theologians, pastors, and teachers, and omits some of the historical research that characterizes *TDNT*. Generally, the articles in *NIDNTT are* briefer, more up to date, and written from a more conservative viewpoint than *TDNT*. Overall this is a valuable resource and one that is more accessible than *TDNT* to the student who knows only English or a bit of Greek. Like *TDNT*, it is also useful for studying OT Hebrew words since most articles discuss the Hebrew background of NT words. The final volume consists wholly of indexes that expedite a variety of searches.**

Kittel, G. and Friedrich, G. (since 1954), eds. Theological *Dictionary of the New Testament. [TDNT*], English translation by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1978.[10] A knowledge of Greek is very helpful, though

[9] **This English edition translates the ongoing German original,** *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* **(Stuttgart: Kohlhammer,** 1970–).

[10] **The German original is** *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* 10 vols. (Stuttgart: **Kohlhammer, 1933-79).**

probably not essential to obtain its basic insights. Following a discussion of a word's etymology, this "dictionary" traces its uses in its various contexts through the ancient world-classical Greek, Hellenistic Greek, LXX Greek, and Jewish writers-all as background for the uses in the NT. If a Greek word has a Hebrew counterpart in the OT, the authors provide discussion of that too. Indeed, it is often useful for studying OT Hebrew words since many articles treat the usage of their Greek counterparts in the Septuagint. (Of course, this requires the student to find the Greek word for the Hebrew word under study). The words are organized according to their etymological roots, a cause for some criticism among reviewers and users. Though this makes locating some terms in *TDNT* a challenge, the final volume contains various indexes that facilitate various searches in this massive storehouse of research. Not all its conclusions can be taken at face value, particularly in some of the early volumes.[11] The translator of this multivolume work, G. Bromiley, has produced an abridged and edited one-volume distillation of the entire work-about one sixth of the original, also called *TDNT* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). Known as "little Kittel," users who know little or no Greek will find it easier to use.

Balz, H. and Schneider, G. eds. ***Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament.*** [*EDNT*], *3* vols. to date. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–.[13] The most recent addition to the genre that includes *TDNT* and *NIDNTT, this* work, however, presupposes the historical background found in these predecessors. In particular ***EDNT*** traces the development of the meanings of theologically significant words in their NT contexts to assess their significance for exegesis.

Concordances

Organized according to the alphabetical order of the words occurring in the Bible or a Testament, a concordance quotes the specific line in which a given word occurs and identifies the reference where the line may be found. Bible students have access to concordances in both the original and English languages. Concordances enable students to study the biblical use of individual words ("sin," "salvation," etc.) as well as phrases ("in the latter days," etc.).

"Volumes 1–4 were done between 1933 and 1942 and need updating For an important critique of the methodology employed in *TDNT,* see J. Barr, The *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), especially pp. 206–262. Barr rightly assails the untenable view that in studying specific Greek words employed in the NT one is investigating the stock of key theological concepts of the early Christians, as if there is a direct correlation between lexemes and theological concepts (207). For appropriate correctives in doing Greek word studies see M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

[12]Brown translates, but also provides additions and revisions to, the German work done by L. Coenen, et al., eds., *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament,* vols. *I,* II/1–2 (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1967, 1969, 1971).

[13]This is the English translation of *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978, 1981, 1983).

English Concordances

With regard to concordances for English Bibles, the student must acquire one (or more) that parallels the version of the Bible used for study. Now the Bible market is such that each translation has a corresponding concordance. To cite three examples, see the New ***American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible.*** Nashville, TN: Holman, 1981; The ***NIV Exhaustive Concordance,*** ed., E. Goodrick and J. R. Kohlenberger. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990; and The ***NRSV Concordance Unabridged,*** ed. by J. R Kohlenberger. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991. This latter text includes all occurrences of all words in the NRSV, including the apocryphal books and alternate and literal translations found in the footnotes. All these enable one to discover specific words that occur in these versions in all their biblical locations.

The old "standbys" for the KJV were those by R Young, ***Analytical Concordance to the Bible,*** reprinted. Peabody, MA: Hendricksen and, revised, Nashville: Nelson, 1982; and J. Strong, ***Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. New*** York: Hunt Eaton; Cincinnati: Cranston Curts, 1894; and by Hendricksen and Nelson recently, both still in print and in use. They also enable readers without the knowledge of the biblical languages to correlate specific Hebrew or Greek words with their corresponding English terms in the KJV and to compare in the concordance itself uses of the same Hebrew or Greek terms, not simply English translations.[14]

As a bridge between Hebrew or Greek concordances and those based on English language versions are two older works: G. V. Wigram, The ***New Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament, 5th*** ed., 1890, reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1984; and G. K. Gillespie, *The* New ***Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament,*** ed. by G. V. Wigram, 1903, reprinted. Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1982. Arranged the same way, they list Hebrew or Greek words alphabetically and indicate the references where they occur with brief excerpts from the KJV. The "new" Hebrew/Chaldee is keyed, like the new BDB and *TWOT,* to Strong's numbering system. For the NT also see I? Clapp, et al., ***Analytical Concordance to the Greek NT, 2*** vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, and R. Winter's, ***Word Study New Testament and Concordance, 2*** vols. Wheaton: Tyndale, 1978. Winter's entries are also keyed to Strong's concordance noted above.

Hebrew and Aramaic Concordances

Davidson, A. B. ***A Concordance of the Hebrew and Chaldee Scriptures.*** London: Samuel Bagster, 1876. This covers all the Hebrew and Aramaic words of the OT. It is designed for students who know little or no Hebrew and cites texts in English translation.

[14]As we have noted, various lexical reference tools have included Strong's numbering system enabling students to locate words who would not be able to do so otherwise. See descriptions of the tools themselves.

Even-Shoshan, A. ***A New Concordance of the Old Testament.*** 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989. This is a mammoth work, more comprehensive but harder to use than Davidson's, which lists every word in the Hebrew Bible alphabetically under its root. To use it requires at least a seminary-level knowledge of Hebrew because all of its citations are in Hebrew (with vowels) and its meanings are given in modern Hebrew. One important feature commends it over Mandelkern and Lisowsky (see below): it groups together identical grammatical forms, phrases, and words of similar meaning. The introduction by J. H. Sailhamer enables the beginner to take advantage of this remarkable resource.

Mandelkern, S. ***Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae Hebraicae atque Chaldaicae.*** Leipzig: Veit et Comp., 1876; 2d ed., 1925; reprinted. Graz: Akademischer Druck, 1955; with corrections and additions, New York: Schulsinger, 1955; 3d ed. with corrections and supplements by M. H. Gottstein, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959. This is a massive and outstanding work, more comprehensive but less manageable than Even-Shoshan's. Rather than merely listing citations (which may be all a student wants), Mandelkern enables the student to study words in collaboration with various grammatical distinctions. All the wealth this work has to offer clearly belongs to the advanced student and scholar.

Greek Concordances

Hatch. E. and Redpath, H. E. ***A Concordance to the Septuagint and Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament. 2*** vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1897; volume 3, a supplement, 1906; reprinted [with supplement] in 2 vols., Graz: Akademischer Druck, 1954; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983. This constitutes the standard concordance for the LXX. It lists each Greek word in the Greek OT and apocryphal books along with its Hebrew counterpart. Passages are given in Greek. Its drawback is the limited number of manuscripts (four, in fact) that lie behind the citations. The work requires a working knowledge of Greek and is indispensable for a study of the LXX.

Moulton, W. F. and Geden, A. S. ***Concordance to the Greek Testament according to the Texts of Westcott and Hort, Tischendorf and the English Revisers.*** Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897; 5th ed. revised and supplemented by H. K. Moulton, 1978. This is the time-honored work based upon the older Greek text of Westcott and Hort, which is also its major drawback. It is extremely complete and truly serviceable when compared with a modern Greek NT, for it provides grammatical helps, Greek citations from the LXX and Apocrypha, and Hebrew quotes if a citation comes from the OT. It also attempts to classify various uses of words. H. K. Moulton's revision includes keys to Strong's English concordance (listed below).

A computer-generated, exhaustive concordance based upon the *UBSGNT*, 3d ed. and Nestle-Aland, 26th ed. Greek NT is now available: K. Aland, ***Vollständige Konkordanz zum griechischen Neuen Testament: Unter Zugrundelegung aller kritischen Textausgaben und des Textus Receptus, [VKGNT] 2*** vols. Berlin/New **York: de Gruyter, 1975–83, 1978. *VKGNT* has become the standard Greek concordance for serious NT studies, providing all variants for the modern critical editions of the**

NT. Citations are full, in Greek, and include word frequencies for each word—book by book-and alphabetically. Words are categorized as to uses. Unfortunately, its excessive cost limits it to libraries.

*Fortunately, a fully serviceable "slimmer" (less expensive) version is also available: H. Bachmann and H. Slaby, eds., ***Computer Concordance*** *to the* ***Novum Testamentum Graece of Nestle-Aland, 26th edition and to Greek New Testament, 3rd Edition.*** Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1980.[15] It omits citations for twenty-nine frequently occurring words, though it does list the passages for these words in an appendix. For personal use this replaces Moulton and Geden.

Since citations in all the preceding concordances occur in the original languages, students wishing to use them will need to have language facility or will need to use these volumes along with an English Bible for finding references (a time-consuming but often worthwhile project).

Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

Douglas, J. D. ed., The ***Illustrated Bible Dictionary. 3*** vols. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980. Produced by evangelicals, this extensive dictionary provides much help over a full range of topics that interest Bible students.

Butler, T. C. ed. ***Holman Bible Dictionary.*** Nashville: Broadman, 1991. Providing exhaustive definitions, it is beautifully illustrated with color photographs, maps, and charts. It is the most up-to-date of the semi-popular dictionaries.

Achtemeier, I? J. ed. ***Harper's Bible Dictionary. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985. This dictionary reflects mainstream biblical scholarship and was authored by members of the Society of Biblical Literature. It covers the Bible and its world, the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha of the OT and NT, and the early church Fathers.

*Bromiley, G. W. ed. ***International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.*** [*ISBE*], ***4*** vols., revised edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-86. This work's recent revision makes it the ongoing standard for extensive treatment of virtually every biblical topic. This masterpiece must be consulted in any biblical study.

Freedman, D. N. ed. ***The Anchor Bible Dictionary. [ABD], 6*** vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992. This dictionary provides the scholarly world and the general public a current and comprehensive treatment of all biblical subjects and topics in a readable though authoritative manner. It is both multicultural and interdisciplinary in scope and reflects the current state of mainstream biblical scholarship. Over 800 scholars contributed to this massive work.

Buttrick, G. A., ed., The ***Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. [IDB], 4*** vols. Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1962. Subsequently a ***Supplementary Volume [IBDS]*** appeared ed. K. Crim. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976. ***IDB*** was the essential source, though now is becoming dated in many places. A revision has begun.

Tenney, M. C. ed. ***Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible.*** [*ZPEB*], 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975. Its approach is similar to ISBE, though *ZPEB*

[15] The German title is *Computer-Koncordanz zum Novum Testamentum Graece von Nestle-Aland, 26. Auflage, und zum Greek New Testament.*

is perhaps more conservative theologically in its orientation. Though very valuable, like ***IDB*** it has been eclipsed by ***ISBE.***

Roth C. et al., eds. ***Encyclopedia Judaica. 16*** vols. Jerusalem: Keter; New York: Macmillan, 1972. This work assumes the place of standard resource for all issues concerning the Jewish faith and history. It also has some excellent entries on biblical topics.

Grammatical Analysis

Hebrew

Williams, R J. ***Hebrew Syntax: An Outline.*** 2d ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976. A standard work, it presents a useful, simple overview of Hebrew syntax.

*A more recent entry into the field is B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, ***An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.*** Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989. It is based upon modern linguistic principles and serves as both a reference grammar and a resource for self-study. Though not as "user friendly" as it might be, it is an indispensable tool for the student with a seminary-level knowledge of Hebrew. It contains numerous examples and excellent indexes. Its somewhat technical language may limit its usefulness to only advanced students.

The standard reference grammar of OT Hebrew in English remains W. Gesenius and E. Kautzsch, ***Gesenius' Hebrew*** Grammar. 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910, based on the 28th German edition of W. Gesenius, ***Hebräische Grammatik.*** It is still authoritative for philology and morphology, however, its treatment of syntax is outdated in many places.

Greek

Dana, H. E. and Mantey, J. R ***A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament.*** Toronto: Macmillan, 1927, 1955. This is an enduring intermediate level reference grammar. It follows the outmoded but popular eight-case system. Many students and their teachers praise its thoroughness, but the explanations are increasingly misleading and the examples far from adequate in light of recent understanding of languages.

Porter, S. E. Idioms ***of the Greek New Testament.*** Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992. This is an intermediate-level grammar based on modern linguistic principles. Porter's treatment of Greek tenses as "aspectual" breaks new ground.

*Blass, F., Debrunner, A., and Funk, R W. ***A Greek*** Grammar ***of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.*** [BDF] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961. This is the standard grammar for making exegetical decisions about the Greek text.[16] The indexes often help the student gain assistance in specific verses

[16]BDF is a translation and revision of the 9th-10th edition of F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, *1954, 1959).* Translator R. Funk also had access to and employed additional notes of A. Debrunner. He also employed his own findings, so BDF goes beyond the printed German edition.

or grammatical issues. Unfortunately, the work is not "user-friendly," and finding specific help is not always easy. This work requires a good grasp of Greek.

Turner, N. ***Syntax.*** Vol. 3 (1963) of J. H. Moulton and F. W. Howard, eds., ***A*** Grammar ***of New Testament Greek. 4*** vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929- 1976. This provides a helpful complement to BDF, and the student knowing Greek will want to consult both.

Moule, C. F. D. ***An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek.*** 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963. This work alerts the reader to a wide variety of Greek idioms. An index of verses helps locate instances where idiomatic uses convey special nuances of meaning. This is not an exhaustive compendium of Greek grammar. A knowledge of Greek is an important prerequisite.

Geography

Though smaller and less comprehensive, two paperback works merit mention as useful for much basic geography: H. G. May and J. Day, ***Oxford Bible Atlas,*** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, and H. T. Frank, ed., ***Hammond's Atlas of the Bible Lands,*** Maplewood, NJ: Hammond, 1984.

*Beitzel, B. ***The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands.*** Chicago: Moody Press, 1985. This is similar in size to Aharoni-Avi-Yonah and Rasmussen (see below) but seems the best atlas in its class. Conservative in viewpoint, it also has fine color maps and pictures.

Rasmussen, C. G. ***The Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989. This is another excellent volume produced from an evangelical viewpoint.

Pritchard, J. B. ed. The ***Harper's Atlas of the Bible. New*** York: Harper, 1987. Representing a more mainline scholarly viewpoint, this is perhaps the most definitive atlas to emerge in recent decades and may become a standard. Students must decide, however, if their library can accommodate its large size.

Wright, G. E., and Filson, F. V. The ***Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible.*** Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956. Formerly the paragon of biblical atlases, this work has been eclipsed by the following book. Nevertheless, the student will find useful discussions of historical events and an attempt to integrate the findings of archaeology to clarify the biblical text.

Aharoni, Y., and Avi-Yonah, M. ***The Macmillan Bible Atlas.*** Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1977. This atlas takes pride of place as one of the best available. The authors, Jewish scholars, identify biblical sites and events, though Evangelicals may disagree at times with their dating. For obvious reasons it concentrates more on Palestine and less on the Roman world and so is less helpful in studying the expansion of the early church.

History of the Ancient World

We face a major difficulty in recommending useful volumes that will serve the student in basic research into the history of the ancient world. Simply put, the field is vast. Nevertheless, we suggest a basic list. Though we divide the section into three subgroups, various works overlap.

Ancient World History and Near Eastern History

Coogan, M. ed. ***Stories from Ancient Canaan.*** Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978. This handy paperback gives the general reader introductory background and the translation of several important texts from Ugarit, the center of pre-Israelite Canaanite culture. It offers a literary glimpse of the religion with which Israel's faith had to contend in Canaan.

Hallo, W. W. and Simpson, W. K. ***The Ancient Near East: A History. New*** York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. This work offers an excellent history of the ancient world aimed at the general reader with a particular focus on Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Hammond, N. G. L., and Scullard, H. H. eds. The ***Oxford Classical Dictionary.*** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. This dictionary provides a reliable window into the world of the classical period.

Edwards, I. E. S., et. al. eds. ***The Cambridge Ancient History.*** 3d ed. 5 vols. (often in two or more parts) to date. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970–. This represents, without challenge, the most comprehensive study of the political, economic, and social world out of which emerged the OT and NT.

Pritchard, J. B. ed. ***Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*** [*ANET*]. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. This volume offers an enormous collection of ancient writings organized by culture (Mesopotamia, Egypt, etc.) and literary type (law, history, wisdom, etc.). The general reader will probably prefer the handy two-volume paperback set, The ***Ancient Near East,*** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, 1976, which combines texts from the above book as well as pictures from Pritchard's ***The Ancient Near East in Pictures (see*** below).

Beyerlin, W. ed. Near ***Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament,*** OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978. This is the translation of a German original that focuses specifically on ancient religious texts that illumine the OT.

Gould, G. P. et. al., eds. ***The Loeb Classical*** Library. Founded by J. Loeb. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann. In more than 450 vols., these works furnish the standard original language (Greek or Latin) editions of major classical works with English translations on facing pages. They include classical Greek writers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle), Jews (Phi10 and Josephus), and post-biblical Christian and secular writers (e.g., Augustine, Eusebius, Cicero, and Ovid).

Old Testament History

*Bright, J. ***A History of Israel.*** 3d ed., greatly revised. Philadelphia: Westminster, 198 1. This text systematically presents Israel's history according to the principles of the Albright school.[17] Highly praised, the book represents an outstanding accomplishment in history-writing. At the same time, some scholars disagree with its stance.

[17] **"Bright sets out his principles for writing the early history of Israel in J. Bright,** *Early Israel in* **Recent** *History Writing,* **SBT 19 (London: SCM, 1956). See also W. F. Albright,** *From the Stone Age to Christianity,* **2d ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957); and id.** *The Biblical Periodfrom Abraham to Ezra: An Historical Survey (New* York: Harper & Row, 1963).

Miller, J. M., and Hayes, J. H. ***A History of Ancient Israel and Judah.*** Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986. Here we find a portrait of Israelite history that departs significantly from that of Bright. Conservative readers may find themselves less at home with its treatment of the patriarchs and the conquest of Canaan than with Bright's.

Merrill, E. H. ***Kingdom of Priests.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987. This is a history of Israel by a conservative scholar.

Hayes, J. H., and Miller, J. M. eds. ***Israelite and Judaean History.*** OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977. This work surveys the history of Israel from its beginnings to A.D. 132 in the Roman era. These learned articles for advanced readers, written by an international group of fourteen scholars, discuss the sources of historical data and the current state of scholarly discussions about Israelite history. This work signals a radical departure from the Bright/Albright tradition that relied much on archaeology to reconstruct history and hence will not find favor with those who prize that approach.

History of Inter-testamental Times

*Russell, D. S. Between ***the*** Testaments. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965. This volume is a classic treatment of the intertestamental period.

Cohen, S. J. D. **From *the Maccabees to the Mishnah.*** Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987. Cohen presents the Jewish perspective on the world in which the NT developed. Setting the stage for the emergence of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, it makes a useful companion to the following work by Austin.

Austin, M. M. ***The Hellenistic World from*** **Alexander to the Roman Conquest: *A Selection of Ancient Sources in Translation.*** Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981. The author presents a selection of ancient literary sources in English translation to illustrate the development of Hellenism, its institutions, societies, and economies. Sources concentrate on written materials from Macedon, Greece, the Aegean, Asia, and Egypt.

Hengel, M. **Judaism *and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period. 2*** vols. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, repr. 1991. These volumes provide the author's (often idiosyncratic) insight into the interaction between Judaism and the Greek world that set the stage for Judaism as it existed in the first century A.D. Its updated summary is entitled ***Jews, Greeks and Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980.

History of New Testament Times

*Bruce, F. F. New ***Testament History.*** **London: Nelson,** 1969; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972. This work begins with ***the*** **events** that brought about the

close of the OT era and traces Jewish and secular history right through the age of the NT events. No other work matches Bruce's readability and concise coverage over this essential terrain.

*Ferguson, E. ***Backgrounds of Early Christianity.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. Well organized and providing extensive additional bibliographic resources all along the way, this text gives brief but highly useful explanations of numerous aspects of the religious, political, philosophical, and social world of the NT.

*Reicke, B. The New ***Testament Era.*** Philadelphia: Fortress; London: Black, 1968. This volume provides a superb introduction to the various features-economic, social, and political-of the period that preceded and included the appearance of Jesus and the Church. Taking conservative positions on dating, the author discusses the three foci of Judaism, Hellenism, and Rome and includes maps and bibliographies.

Schiirer, E. ***The History of the Jewish People in the&e of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135).*** Rev. and ed. by G. Vermès, F. Millar, and M. Goodman, 4 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87. This massive study discusses the entire NT period from both historical and sociological perspectives. It includes extensive bibliographies. The revision has toned down many of Schürer's opinions that did not accord with the best modern scholarship.

Nicklesburg, G. W. E. ***Jewish Literature Between The Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981. The title says enough. With the following volume by Barrett the student has an excellent list of valuable primary sources (in English translation!).

Barrett, C. K. ed. ***The*** New ***Testament Background: Selected Documents. Rev.*** ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987. This is a wide-ranging compilation of sources that provide helpful background for a variety of NT issues. A similar work, D. R. Cartlidge and D. L. Dungan, ***Documents for the Study of the Gospels,*** Cleveland, OH: Collins, 1980, collects texts from pagan, Jewish, and Christian authors to portray form-critical categories employed in modern research on the Gospels. One may then compare other forms with those that appear in the Gospels (e.g., parables).

Koester, H. ***Introduction to the New Testament: History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age.*** Berlin/New York: de Gruyter; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982. This first volume provides abundant information about the history of the Greek and Roman worlds. The second volume, ***History and Literature of Early Christianity*** rounds out the picture. In places Koester's pet theories skew his analyses, and he has received some criticism on that score.

Safrai, S., and Stern, M. et al., eds. ***The Jewish People in the First Century*** (Section One of ***Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum) 2*** vols. Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, 1976. One part of a massive project written by Christian and Jewish scholars to study the relationship between Judaism and Christianity through the centuries, this section concentrates on the first century A.D. These scholarly articles are of uneven quality and must be used cautiously.

Customs, Culture, Society

Pre-Christian Era

Thompson, J. A. ***Handbook of Life in Bible Times.*** Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1986. This is a handy resource for insight to both eras.

Blaiklock, E. M., and Harrison, R. K. eds. The New ***International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983. This useful reference **book, written by conservative scholars, is organized by subject. Easily accessible, it offers an entrance into the ancient biblical world as illumined by archaeology.**

Pritchard, J. B. ed. ***The Ancient Near East in Pictures.*** **2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. This is a collection of pictures of ancient** Near Eastern artifacts with a commentary on each. By stressing daily life in ancient times, it gives an excellent visual glimpse of the ancient world from which the Bible came.

de Vaux, R ***Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions. New*** **York/Toronto/London: McGraw-Hill, 1961, repr. 1967.[18] Intended for the non-specialist, this text surveys a wide range of topics for understanding life in ancient Israel. It covers nomadism, family structures, civil institutions, the military, and religion-all as revealed in the OT, ancient secular history, and archaeology. Now it is available in an inexpensive two-volume paperback set.**

Wiseman, D. ed. ***Peoples of Old Testament Times.*** **Oxford: Clarendon, 1973. This volume contains chapters on the nations with which Israel interacted. Though the authors are all scholars of international renown, they speak to the general reader.**

Aharoni, Y. The ***Land of the Bible.*** **Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979. From the pen of a well-known Israeli archaeologist, this volume offers extensive information about the geography of ancient Israel.**

Noth, M. ***The Old Testament World.*** **Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966. The student will find here a wealth of background information for understanding the geography of Palestine, its archaeology, cultures, languages, and even non-Israelite peoples.**

The Christian Era

Tidball, D.** ***The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis. **Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984. This is an extremely readable, though brief, introduction to a sociological approach to the study of the NT.**

*Malina, B. J. ***The*** New ***Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology.*** Atlanta: John Knox, 1981. Extremely insightful, this book provides windows of understanding into certain values, practices, and perspectives of inhabitants of the first-century world.

Jeremias, J. **Jerusalem** ***in the Time of*** **Jesus: *An* Investigation *into the Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969. Though in places idiosyncratic, this work offers a wealth of information about

[18] **This text translates the French original,** *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament,* **2 vols., 2d *ed.* (Paris: Cerf,** 1961, **1967). The ET employs notes, corrections, and additions provided by de** Vaux.

the personnel and institutions-focusing on economic and social conditions—operating in the Judea of Jesus' time.

Sherwin-White, A. N. ***Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament.*** Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963. This book provides insights into various legal features of the NT world.

*Meeks, W. ***The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul.*** ***New*** Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. This work takes a sociological approach to analyzing the institutions and practices of the first century world and the early Christians' presence within it.

Finegan, J. ***Myth &Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989. Finegan surveys the spectrum of religious beliefs in the world during the emergence of the NT.

Theissen, G. ***Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978. A sociological analysis of the Jesus movement, this work attempts to describe the social attitudes and behaviors typical of people in Palestine at the time of Jesus' appearance.

Malherbe, A. ***Social Aspects of Early Christianity.*** 2d ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983. This volume investigates the social dimensions of early Christianity, paying special attention to Christianity as a literary culture and to the phenomenon of the house churches.

Chronology

*Walton, J. H. ***Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. Offering attractive, nontechnical chronological tables that cover biblical and ancient Near Eastern history, this text also provides other background charts to help Bible readers sort out complex biblical topics (e.g., Israel's main sacrifices, etc.).

*Thiele, E. R ***The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings.*** Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983. This work has useful chronological charts for the monarchy period of Israel and Judah and detailed discussions of the major chronological problems besetting biblical dating. Its technical discussions, however, make it more useful for the advanced student than for the general reader.

Hayes, J. H., and Hooker, P.K. ***A New Chronology for the Kings of Israel and Judah.*** Atlanta: John Knox, 1988. These authors set aside Thiele's solutions and proposes an alternative chronology for the same period from a less conservative perspective.

Finegan, J. ***Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible.*** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964. The work details both principles for determining chronology in biblical studies as well as attempted solutions to specific problems of dating. It does a better job with the NT than with the OT.

Hoehner, H. W. ***Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977. This is a helpful guide to the **variety of issues and questions of dating events in the Gospels.**

*Bruce, F. F. ***Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. The product of many years of research and teaching, Bruce presents the best "life of Paul" along with a wise clarification of many Pauline issues.

Introductions and Surveys

These works provide information on a variety of background issues-authorship, recipients, dating, provenance, purpose, and integrity. They collect in single volumes the essential data to begin the study of a biblical book. The wise student will consult several, along with appropriate commentaries or other sources, to secure a balanced perspective, especially where several options exist for issues of interpretation. Some of these go on to survey the contents of the books.

Old Testament

Hill, A. E., and Walton, J. H. ***A Survey of the Old Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991. This college-level survey of the OT emphasizes its content, background, and literary nature. Its perspective is somewhat more conservative than the following volume.

*LaSor, W., Bush, F., and Hubbard, D. ***Old Testament Survey.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982. Another outstanding introduction produced by evangelicals, this superb text treats issues of OT authority, revelation and inspiration, canon, and the formation of the OT. It also provides specific introductions and surveys of all the OT books.

Anderson, B. W. ***Understanding the Old Testament. 4th*** **ed.** Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986. Nonevangelical in its orientation, this volume continues to serve students since its appearance in 1957. The OT books are set against their historical background. The author employs the recent findings of OT scholars and considers the insights of archaeologists. The book uses charts, illustrations, and maps to excellent advantage. In contrast to Eissfeldt, this book appeals to beginning students.

Harrison, R K. ***Introduction to the Old Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969. This comprehensive work provides more than introduction, including OT history, archaeology, chronology, and historiography. This work by an outstanding evangelical scholar is vast in scope; even those from more liberal perspectives will gain much from this weighty volume.

Eissfeldt, 0. ***The Old Testament:*** **An** ***Introduction Including the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and also the Works of*** **Similar** ***Type from Qumran.*** Oxford: Blackwell; New York: Harper & Row, 1965. An enduring standard, this work was translated from the 1964 German edition, which in turn was revised from editions of 1934 and 1956. Many consider it the best critical OT introduction. It assesses preliterary materials as well as the prehistory of the OT books and goes on to provide detailed introductions to each book as indicated in the title. This is a technical **work designed for specialists.**

New Testament

Gundry, R *A Survey of the New Testament.* Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981. This volume includes both brief treatments of introduction as well as a survey of the contents of the NT books. A new revision is in progress.

*Carson, D. A, Moo, D. J., and Morris, L. ***An Introduction to the New Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. This work places primary focus on the background issues of the NT books such as authorship, date, sources, purpose, destination, et al. The authors include, as well, brief outlines of each book plus brief accounts of recent studies on and the theological significance of each NT document. The bibliographies are particularly helpful.

Collins, R F. ***Introduction to the New Testament.*** Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983. Collins presents the best of modern Catholic scholarship. A fine discussion of introductory issues, this work is readable and well-organized.

Martin, R I? New ***Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students. 2*** vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 1978; Rev. ed., 1986. Martin furnishes helpful guides to understanding various introductory issues. Though generally conservative, his conclusions sometimes represent the progressive wing of evangelical scholarship.

Kümmel, W. G. ***Introduction to the New Testament.*** Rev. English ed. from the 17th German ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1975.[19] This standard introduction represents the best of recent moderate German scholarship.

*Guthrie, D. New ***Testament Introduction. 4th*** ed. Leicester, UK; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990. This is the most comprehensive conservative discussion of introductory issues. Guthrie is both more thorough, but also less readable than Carson, et al., above. As well, Guthrie may be inordinately critical of some contemporary NT scholarship.

The New Testament Use of the Old Testament

Students will find this a hotly debated field with abundant articles and essays that present the various perspectives on the discussion. Thus, students should consult bibliographic sources (in the following) for additional entries. The following is a list of helpful books.

*Longenecker, R N. ***Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975. This work covers not only Jewish hermeneutical methods but also discusses how the various writers of the NT may or may not have employed such tactics themselves.

Carson, D. A., and Williamson, H. G. M. eds. ***It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture.*** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. This volume is actually a wide-ranging collection of essays on various aspects of the topic (esp. pp. 191-336).

[19]The German edition, ***Einleitung in das Neue Testament*** (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1980) is now the 20th edition. It was begun by P. Feine in 1913, continued by J. Behm (1939, 8th ed.), and was then thoroughly revised by W. G. Kümmel in 1963 (12th ed.). The 17th ed. bore Kümmel's name alone, so thorough has been his reworking of the text.

Ellis, E. E. Paul's Use ***of the Old Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981; and id., ***Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Earliest Christianity.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Both books provide useful analyses of the troublesome issues, particularly in helping to survey Jewish methods of interpretation at the time of the writing of the NT.

France, R T. ***Jesus and the Old Testament.*** London: Tyndale; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1971. France investigates the various ways in which Jesus used the OT as recorded in the Gospels-how those uses agree with the LXX or the Hebrew text, examples of typology uses, predictive materials, and finally the influences that Jesus' uses may have had on others' uses.

Biblical Theology

Old Testament

*Dyrness, W. Jr. ***Themes in Old Testament Theology.*** Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1979. A survey of the main theological themes of the OT in a topical format, this well-written volume provides the general reader with an excellent overview of the subject.

*Raiser, W. C. Jr. ***Toward an Old Testament Theology.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. Providing a survey of OT theology, Raiser believes that the OT's central theme is that of God's promise; so he traces the development of that theme chronologically through the OT and (more briefly) into the NT.

*Goldingay, J. ***Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation.*** Rev. ed. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990. The author focuses on key questions with which most Christians who take the OT seriously wrestle. He suggests helpful working solutions to them. The book is an excellent answer to the question: How can the OT be a Christian book?

Eichrodt, W. ***Theology of the Old Testament. 2*** vols. London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967. This is the classic modern OT theology using a systematic cross-section approach to the subject that is centered in the concept of covenant. Its strength is its combination of topical and historical approaches to OT theology. In reaction to this G. von Bad composed his own theology (see below).

Von Rad, G. ***Old Testament Theology. 2*** vols. Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965. In writing this recent major OT theology, Von Bad rejects the ready-made categories of systematic theology and attempts to synthesize the OT's own theological categories within a historical framework. He rejects any possibility for a unifying theology across the entire OT, preferring to elucidate the specific theologies of individual biblical writers or of OT books.

At present, OT theology is the subject of great scholarly debate on many difficult issues. Gerhard Hasel, ***Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate,*** 4th ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, offers the advanced student an overview of the complex discussion as well as his own attractive solution.

New Testament

Morris, L. New ***Testament Theology.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986. This is a short treatment of the topic, longer on some issues than others.

Richardson, A. ***An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament.*** London: SCM; New York: Harper & Bros., 1959. Surely this volume proves its enduring worth by remaining in print. It represents a conservative British treatment of NT theology, appreciably distinct from Bultmann's approach. It deserves a sympathetic reading despite its advancing age.

*Ladd, G. E. ***A Theology of the New Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974. Ladd compiles the theology of the various sections or writers in the NT as they occur canonically in the NT. So, for example, part I treats the "Synoptic Gospels" with individual chapters covering all the theologically significant issues in the Synoptics. Part II follows with "The Fourth Gospel" with its key issues. The remaining parts of the book cover "The Primitive Church," "Paul," "The General Epistles," and "The Apocalypse." Ladd's exceptional volume offers the student a trustworthy guide through the mazes of intricate issues. An update is due soon, ed. D. Hagner.

*Guthrie, D. New ***Testament Theology.*** Leicester, UK; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1981. This volume presents the culmination of the lifelong study of this leading, conservative British scholar. Organized on the basis of theological categories, Guthrie's work lists topics and then his discussion of the theologies of the various writers in the NT under each one. Unfortunately, the work is weakened by this method of organization and by some of Guthrie's rather idiosyncratic views. For us it proves less useful than Ladd.

Goppelt, L. Theology ***of the New Testament. 2*** vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 1982. Though reflecting Bultmann's[20] influence, this work offers a much more moderate German theology. Volume 1 covers the theological significance of Jesus' ministry while Volume 2 surveys, in briefer scope, the important theological contributions of various other NT writers, particularly in their testimony to Christ. Two others in the Bultmann tradition, though more radical than Goppelt, are J. Jeremias, ***New Testament Theology I: The Proclamation of Jesus, New*** York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, and W. G. Kümmel, The ***Theology of the New Testament,*** Nashville: Abingdon, 1973.

Literary Criticism

*Ryken, L. ***Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987; and ***Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987. These are among the best introductions to the Bible from a literary perspective.[21] Companion volumes that cover both testaments, both

[20] R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New* Testament, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1951, 1955) is an older standard presenting radical NT scholarship. We do not list it as a main entry since it is now so dated.

[21] See also the earlier works, L. Ryken: *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) and *Reading the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

should be consulted to get the full picture of Ryken's original and insightful discussion of the literary features of the entire Bible. The first volume divides into three sections: Biblical narrative, Biblical poetry, and other literary forms in the Bible, and includes a helpful glossary of literary terms at the end. The second volume covers specific literary features found in the NT.

Longman, T. III. ***Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. Longman explains the literary dimensions of the Bible with more emphasis on the OT than the NT.

*Alter, R The ***Art of Biblical Narrative,*** New York: Basic Books, 198 1, and ***The Art of Biblical Poetry, New*** York: Basic Books, 1985. Alter has published two extremely popular books that explain the literary dimensions of biblical narrative art and poetry. Both have become standard introductions to their respective subjects and both are available in paperback. They represent the perspective of modern literary criticism.

*Bailey, J. L., and Vander Broek, L. D. ***Literary Forms in the New Testament.*** Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992. The work surveys the multiple literary features of the NT in three sections: the Pauline tradition, the Gospels and Acts, and other NT writings. This work not only describes the various forms but goes on to show the value of understanding them for interpretation. It provides good examples and bibliographies for further study.

Bar Efrat, S. ***Narrative Art in the Bible.*** Sheffield: Almond, 1989. An Israeli scholar, the author discusses the specific techniques of biblical narrative and illustrates his points with numerous biblical examples.

*Petersen, D. L., and Richards, K. H. ***Interpreting Hebrew Poetry.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992. This is a recent addition to the "Guides to Biblical Scholarship" series. In touch with the latest scholarship on biblical poetry, it provides the beginning student with an up-to-date introduction to the subject with many biblical illustrations.

Alter, R, and Kermode, F. eds. ***The Literary Guide to the Bible.*** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. In this volume specialists discuss the literary aspects of each book of the Bible. The result is a valuable reference book that presents the best fruits of a modern literary critical approach as practiced by internationally known scholars from diverse backgrounds.

Sternberg, M. ***The Poetics of Biblical Narrative.*** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. The definitive, technical book on OT narrative, this work makes available for a wide audience a series of influential journal articles by a noted Israeli scholar, but its highly technical discussions will probably scare away all but the most advanced students.

Watson, W. G. E. ***Hebrew Poetry.*** Sheffield: JSOT, 1985. This is the definitive discussion of its subject, especially since it compares OT poetry to its ancient Near Eastern counterparts. Its thoroughness makes it of interest mainly to the advanced student, but the author's numerous examples and clear writing keep the book from sounding technical.

Guides to Studying the Bible: Methods and Principles of Exegesis

Old Testament

*Stuart, D. A. ***Old Testament Exegesis.*** 2d ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984. This volume explains to the beginning seminary student how to exegete an OT passage. It also offers an excellent bibliography. Though most busy pastors will probably find Stuart's procedures too lengthy, there is no better book on the subject.

Hayes, J. H. ***Biblical Exegesis. Rev. ed.*** Atlanta: John Knox, 1987. This is also the explanation of the process of exegesis from the perspective of a mainline, critical scholar.

Westermann, C. ed. Essays ***on Old Testament Hermeneutics.*** Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1963. Westermann translates a German original in which world-renowned scholars discuss the problems involved in interpreting the OT. Though somewhat dated and highly technical, this is still the best single volume on the subject, and most of the chapters have become classics.

New Testament

Fee, G. D., and Stuart, D. A. ***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible.*** 2d. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993. This is a popular-level guide to biblical interpretation with particular emphasis on genres.

Marshall, I. H. eds., New ***Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods.*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. This volume offers essays from a variety of evangelical scholars who present introductions to the various critical disciplines employed in the advanced study of the NT. It includes examples of the practice of biblical interpretation in addition to theoretical chapters.

*Black, D. A., and Dockery, D. S. eds. New ***Testament Criticism and Interpretation.*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991. Though similar to the previous work edited by Marshall, in this volume many scholars write chapters explaining the various dimensions of the interpretation of the NT. The authors all subscribe to a high view of Scripture and have produced essays especially useful for serious students.

Under the rubric, "Guides to New Testament Exegesis," Baker (Grand Rapids) is publishing several volumes edited by S. McKnight. Helpful editions already appearing include, S. McKnight, ed., ***Introducing New Testament Interpretation, 1989; S.*** McKnight, ***Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels, 1988;*** T. R Schreiner, ***Interpreting the Pauline Epistles, 1990; G.*** M. Burge, ***Interpreting the Gospel of John, 1992,*** and J. R Michaels, ***Interpreting the Book of Revelation, 1992.*** Baker projects other volumes to address Acts and Hebrews.

*Fee, G. D. New ***Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors.*** Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983. Fee guides students through a process of doing **Greek exegesis in** various kinds of NT literature. He presents a systematic approach

to exegesis for sermon preparation and includes helpful bibliographies. This is a practical guide, though some consider it unrealistic for the busy pastor.

Fortress (Philadelphia) also has an ongoing series entitled, "Guides to Biblical Scholarship" (1969–). Edited by D. 0. Via, Jr., the series seeks to explain to the nonspecialist the most common interpretive methods of modern biblical scholars. Unlike the Baker series, this one spans both testaments. Some provide genuine and helpful insights; others have met dubious reactions from readers, for the methods are not uniformly sanctioned by scholars. Volumes that treat generally accepted methods (e.g., form, redaction, and textual criticism, etc.) provide **useful instructions from the perspective of mainstream critical scholarship.**

Periodicals and Journals

Bibliography and Abstracts

These tools enable interpreters to locate items specific to questions or issues under investigation. Indexes in these tools further enable the interpreter to locate articles (and books) on specific biblical texts. Many such tools exist; we list only four we consider to have the most ongoing usefulness.

Religion Index One: Periodicals and ***Religion Index Two: Multi-Author Works.*** Evanston, IL: American Theological Library Association, 1975–;1960–. These serve as excellent sources for resources in biblical studies as well as wider topics in religion. Not only in printed copies, these indexes **also** appear in CD-ROM and online formats. See your local library.

Old Testament Abstracts [OTA] is published thrice yearly by the Catholic Biblical Association of America (Washington, DC). It first appeared in February 1978. Though less comprehensive than ***Elenchus*** (below), it provides abstracts of periodical articles and notices of recently published books on the full range of issues relevant to the study of the OT.

New ***Testament Abstracts*** [NTA] is published three times yearly by Weston School of Theology, Cambridge, MA. First appearing in 1956, it abstracts all periodical literature on topics relevant to the study of the NT. Abstracts are written in English, though reviewers abstract important articles written in all modern languages. Each issue closes with brief comments on major books recently published in NT studies. One can hardly overestimate the value of NTA for researching issues, topics, and texts concerning the NT.

Elenchus bibliographicus biblicus. Rome: Biblical Institute, 1968–. This work catalogs important biblical materials the world over. A massive, annual resource, **it can** be daunting for the initial user. It suffers from being chronically late (often 3 or more years late!), so searches of recent literature prove impossible.

Biblical/Theological Periodicals (with common abbreviations)

The **number of journals currently published--even if we limit ourselves to biblical and theological studies-is enormous.** Out **of that vast number we list** the-

following major journals because of their focus on the study of biblical texts, their popularity, and their ready availability in most theological libraries. They run the gamut from those devoted more exclusively to the technical work of scholars writing for other scholars to those oriented to nonspecialists and practitioners. Their theological orientations also differ-from those with clear boundaries, which publish only work acceptable to their constituencies, to those that publish all work they consider worthy. We list them in two general categories, giving their common abbreviations in parentheses.

For General Readers

1. *Biblical Archaeologist (BA)*
2. *Biblical Archaeology Review (BAR)*
3. *Bibliotheca Sacra (BSac)*
4. *Expository Times (ExpT)*
5. *Evangelical Quarterly (EvQ)*
6. *Interpretation (Int)*
7. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*
8. *Themelios*
9. *Trinity Journal (TrinJ)*
10. *Tyndale Bulletin (TynB)*
11. *Westminster Theological Journal (WTJ)*

For Advanced Students and Specialists:

12. *Biblica (Bib)*
13. *Biblical Theology Bulletin (BTB)*
14. *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester (BJRL)*
15. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly (CBQ)*
16. *Jewish Quarterly Review (JQR)*
17. *Journal of Biblical Literature (JBL)*
18. *Journal for the Study of the NT (JSNT)*
19. *Journal for the Study of the OT (JSOT)*
20. *Journal of* Theological *Studies (JTS)*
21. *Neotestamentica (Neot)*
22. *New Testament Studies (NTS)*
23. *Novum Testamentum (NovT)*
24. *Scottish Journal of Theology (SJT)*

Commentaries

A wealth of information resides in commentaries, which are useful in single volumes or as sets. Hundreds are currently in print from all segments of the theological spectrum and serve a variety of purposes. Bible students must be clear on their purposes in employing specific commentaries, for the commentary genre covers an array of approaches to commenting on the books. All commentaries reflect the presuppositions and theological commitments (or their lack) of the writers. They are written for various purposes. Some are devotional and stress personal application; others aid preachers or teachers by focusing on illustrating truth or on the "preachability" of biblical texts. Some scholars write commentaries only for other scholars and those who want precise and technical citations of parallel ancient literature and sundry such findings. Others write them so lay people, or pastors, or advanced students can understand the meaning of the biblical books. Some commentaries stress history and the technical details of the ancient world; others focus on the texts' theological significance. Some writers attempt to adopt several agendas to provide help for a variety of readers' needs. Commentaries present Bible students with a tremendous variety of choices.

Our advice to the beginning interpreter is to know what you need or want and use those commentaries that will meet your needs. Since commentaries represent a major investment, choose wisely-preferably after "hands-on" scrutiny. For specific advice, consult D. Stuart, ***A Guide to Selecting and Using Bible*** *Commentaries,* Dallas: Word, 1990; T. Longman, III, Old ***Testament Commentary Survey,*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 199 1; B. S. Childs, ***Old Testament Books for Pastor and Teacher,*** Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977; and D. A. Carson, New ***Testament Commentary Survey, 4th.*** ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993. Beyond that we will list the major, current, English language series, recognizing that other series and fine individual volumes exist outside of series. We will omit older series.[22] Space simply does not permit our listing individual works. Single volume commentaries on the entire Bible suffer in that their enforced brevity often precludes significant help for interpreters.[23] Note that commentary series, understandably, may contain members of varying quality.

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[22]To omit older series is a difficult decision, but it is made on the grounds that this bibliography is already lengthy. We urge readers to consult the work of our theological predecessors. Among those we consider worthy are: G. A. Buttrick, ed., ***The Interpreter's Bible, 12*** vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954); P. R. Ackroyd, et al., eds., *Cambridge Bible Commentary, NEB* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963–1979); W. Barclay, ***The*** *Daily* ***Study Bible New Testament*** (Philadelphia: Westminster); various authors also contribute to ***The Daily Study Bible Old Testament*** (Philadelphia: Westminster); J. Calvin, ***NT Commentaries*** [Torrance edition] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); and C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, ***Old Testament Commentary,*** 10 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson).

[23]If you can buy only a one volume commentary the best include W. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical* ***Commentary on the Bible*** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); and D. Guthrie, et al., ed., ***The Eerdmans*** *Bible* ***Commentary,*** 3d ed. [previous editions entitled ***The*** New ***Bible Commentary***] ***(Grand*** Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) on the evangelical side; and J. L. Mays, ed., ***Harper's Bible Commentary*** (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) for mainstream scholarship. An important new survey of each book of the Bible--providing mini-commentaries-is D.S. Dockery, ed., *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville: Broadman,1992).

Simply because one volume is excellent (or poor) does not mean the others will follow suit. Our list will be subdivided to aid in our descriptions.[24]

Series Commenting on the English Bible (practical emphasis)

Motyer, J. A., and Stott, J. R W. eds. ***The Bible Speaks Today*** **[*BST*].** Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, UK: **InterVarsity, 1968–.** This is a popular-level, paperback series on selected books in both testaments. Most of the authors are British **evangelicals.** Not all are well-written, but they consistently provide practical help for living.

Ogilvie, L. J., ed. The ***Communicator's Commentary. 33*** **vols.** Dallas: Word, **1980–.** These commentaries focus on how to proclaim the meaning and application of the text in detail. Profitable for pastors, teachers, and Bible-study groups, they are often written by the best recent (USA) evangelical expositors or preachers.

Mays, J. L., ed. ***Interpretation.*** Atlanta: John Knox. This series has volumes in both testaments. Written by mainline scholars, these focus on the meaning and application of the texts for preachers and teachers.

Osborne, G. R., ed. New ***Testament Commentary. [NTC].*** Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, UK: Intervarsity, **1991–.** This is a new series of brief commentaries that vows to link the pastoral heart with the scholarly mind, emphasizing the significance of the biblical text for today's church in its analyses of the NT Books.

Krodel, G. A., ed. Proclamation Commentaries. Philadelphia: Fortress, **1978–.** Short paperback commentaries on the NT, they are designed especially for the preacher. They come **from** the front rank of critical scholars.

Series Commenting on the English Bible with References to the Original Languages

Chadwick, H., ed. ***Black's*** (or ***Harper's) New*** **Testament** Commentaries. ***[BNTC; HNTC].*** London: A. **&** C. Black; New York: Harper and Row, **1957–,** some volumes later reprinted by Baker and by Hendrickson. These volumes were written mostly by British authors of the previous generation. They contain excellent material designed to be accessible to readers without a knowledge of Greek.

Gaebelein, F. E., ed. ***Expositor's Bible*** Commentary **[*EBC*] *12*** **vols.** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, **1976–92.** This series includes commentaries on the entire Bible, plus introductory articles, in twelve volumes. These are all written by **evangelicals,** some better than others, for a wide audience. They aim to explain the meaning of the Bible, not to engage technical or obscure issues.

Three other series in progress merit brief mention here: ***The Believer's Church Bible Commentary*** (Scottdale: Herald), an important Mennonite/Anabaptist set starting to emerge, with rather substantial comments on the English Bible text with Greek employed in the background; ***Sacra Pagina*** (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical) from a Roman Catholic perspective; and *Reading the New Testament (New* York: Crossroad), an ecumenical series focusing specifically on the literary flow of the final form of the biblical text against its historical background.

Dockery, D. S. and Clendenen, R, eds. New ***American Commentary [NAC].*** Nashville: Broadman, **1991–.** A new series sponsored by the Southern Baptists but including a few contributors beyond that circle, it is projected to encompass all biblical books in 40 volumes. The target readers are pastors, though students and laypersons alike can profit from these detailed but not overly technical works.

Hendriksen, W., and Kistemaker, S., eds. The New ***Testament*** Commentary Grand Rapids: Baker, **1953–.** This is basically a "two-man" series on the New Testament books begun by Hendriksen and continued by Kistemaker. The contents are strongly Reformed in orientation and often major on devotional aspects. Interpretations in the Hendriksen volumes can be very idiosyncratic and are sometimes polemical; the Kistemaker ones are solid though they seldom break new ground.

Harrison, R **K.,** ed. New ***International Commentary on the Old Testament. [NICOT].*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, **1965–;** and F. F. Bruce, ed., succeeded by G. D. Fee, ed. New ***International Commentary on the New Testament. [NICNT].*** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, **1952–.** Work on these volumes is ongoing. All the original NT volumes are being revised by their original authors or completely replaced. The NT set is virtually complete, while many gaps still remain on the OT side. They represent a high level of conservative evangelical scholarship, more technical than popular, though scholarly details are often relegated to footnotes. Most readers will discover these to be extremely useful tools.

Gasque, W. W., ed. The New ***International Biblical Commentary.*** [*NIBC*]. Peabody, **MA:** Hendrickson, **1988–.** Currently under production, this commentary replaces the earlier Good News Commentary on New Testament books. Well-known **evangelicals** write to make the best scholarship accessible to a wide audience. They tend to be much briefer than other entries in this category. The series also plans to publish OT commentaries, eds. R L. Hubbard, Jr., and R **K.** Johnston.

Clements, R E., and Black, M., eds. The New ***Century Bible*** Commentary. [***NCB].*** **Grand** Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan **&** Scott, **1966–.** This series will provide volumes on all biblical books. Several early submissions have now **been revised. They fall in the middle of the theological spectrum-the NT volumes tending to be more conservative than the OT volumes. Brief at some points, they provide many fine analyses of the biblical books. They are written for a wide audience.**

Mays, J. L., et. al., eds. The *Old Testament Library. [OTL].* Philadelphia: Westminster, **1962–.** This series includes both commentaries on OT books as well as specialized works on a variety of topics of concern to students of the OT. Some of the commentaries are translations of German originals, some appearing previously in other series. Overall these books reflect good mainline scholarship, and most include theological comments useful to teachers and preachers.

Carson, D. A., and Fee, G. D., eds. ***Pillar New Testament Commentaries.*** Leicester, UK: **InterVarsity;** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, **1988–.** Just under way, this series represents a major mid-range series and spans a perceived gap between most of the series in this category and those in the next.

Wiseman, D. J., ed. ***The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. [TOTC].*** **L&es**ter, UK; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, **1964–,** and L. Morris, ed., The *Tyndale* **New *Testament Commentaries. [TNTC].*** Leicester, UK; InterVarsity; Grand Rap-

ids: Eerdmans, 1956–. They represent mainstream evangelical scholarship from both Britain and North America, written for layperson and pastor alike to present the theological significance of the biblical books. They include helpful historical introductions and prove to be reliable guides for interpretation. Many of the earlier NT volumes have been revised. The NT series is complete; the OT series is ongoing and nearing completion. They are comparable to the NICOT/NT in quality, though briefer.

Series Commenting on the Original Languages Texts

Albright, W. F., and Freedman, D. N., eds. ***Anchor Bible. [AB].*** Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964–. This ongoing series will cover the OT and the NT plus Apocryphal books. Of uneven size, from slim to very detailed, many volumes are highly technical in nature and only for advanced students and scholars. Their quality varies widely, though several are truly superior. Contributors include Catholics, Jews, and Protestants.

Olsen, R, and Hausman, R., et al., eds. ***Continental Commentaries.*** Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984–. This is a collection of English translations of major German works-often with important histories of investigation of issues and theological excurses. To date, most are OT volumes.

Cross, F. M., and Koester, H., et al., eds. ***Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical*** Commentary ***on the Bible.*** Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972–. This series has projected volumes on books in the OT, the NT, plus apocryphal books and early church Fathers. The most liberal of all the series, it also often provides the most detailed treatment of books available by front-line scholars. The works are highly technical and focus on historical and critical issues with little emphasis on theology. Many volumes printed to date are translations of German works. Due to their high level of scholarship, it is likely that only specialists will find much use for most of these.

Emerton, J. A., and Cranfield, C. E. B., eds. ***International Critical Commentary, Old and New Testaments.*** [*ICC*]. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895–. Begun in the last century though never completed, the project ground to a halt when the volume on Rings appeared in 1951. The project was revived with the revision of Romans by C. E. B. Cranfield, 2 vols. (1975, 1979), the appearance of the first volume of Jeremiah (1986), two volumes on Matthew (1988, 1991), and the promise of further volumes. Highly technical and stressing critical and philological matters, the volumes are written by the first rank of scholars. Cranfield's work on Romans stands among the best single commentaries in existence. However, the older volumes are rather dated.

Gasque, W. W., and Marshall, I. H., eds. New ***International Greek Testament*** Commentary. [*NIGTC*]. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–. This series reflects a high level of conservative scholarship, though at a level to make the set accessible to all with a background in Greek. The initial volumes reflect superb scholarship.

Hubbard, D. A, ed. ***Word Biblical*** Commentary. [*WBC*]. Waco and Dallas: Word, 1982–. This series will eventually comment on all books in both testaments. Two (or even three) volumes are devoted to several of the longer biblical books. Their format includes sections that provide textual and literary analysis, highly technical exegesis, and conclusions about the meaning and significance of the texts. These are not for average readers, though almost anyone could profit from the "Explanation" sections to obtain the results of the technical exegeses.

Barker, K., ed. ***Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary*** [***WEC].*** Chicago: Moody, 1988–. Projected to comment on all books of both testaments, the series was abandoned after only a few volumes appeared. They were written from a conservative, evangelical viewpoint and provided in-depth exegesis of the original language texts. Baker Book House will continue the series for the NT books under the name ***Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.*** Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992–.

If students want to buy an entire commentary set (one complete or nearing completion)-given our cautions at the outset-we recommend considering:

1. ***Tyndale OT Commentaries*** and ***Tyndale NT Commentaries*** (for general readers plus pastors, teachers);
2. ***Expositor's Bible Commentary*** (general readers plus pastors, teachers);
3. New ***International*** Commentary *OT* and New ***International Commentary NT*** (for pastors, teachers, and scholars); and
4. ***Word Biblical*** Commentary (for teachers and scholars).

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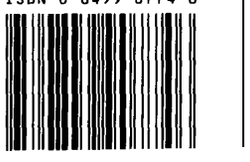

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