

Biblical Interpretation

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Introduction

God has revealed Himself and His will to His prophets in specific statements of truth, and through His Spirit He has inspired the biblical writers to record the divine revelation as the trustworthy and authoritative Word of God. The Spirit also illuminates the minds of those who seek to understand and interpret the divine revelation.

The need for interpreting Scripture arises because of the finite human mind in contrast with the infinite God who reveals Himself, and because of the darkening of the human mind through sin. The necessity for the interpretative process is further mandated by our separation in time, distance, language, and culture from the scriptural autographs.

The study of the basic principles and procedures for faithfully and accurately interpret-

ing Scripture is called biblical hermeneutics. The task of this discipline is to understand what the human writers and the divine Author of Scripture intended to communicate and also how to communicate and apply the biblical message to modern humanity.

The final goal of interpreting Scripture is to make practical application of each passage to one's individual life. The interpreter must seek to understand how each passage applies personally. The Scriptures should ultimately be read and accepted as if personally addressed to the interpreter. They are God's living and active Word for the soul.

This chapter first presents foundational principles and specific guidelines for biblical interpretation, followed by a brief history of biblical hermeneutics.

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I. Interpreting the Word of God

A. *Revelation-Inspiration-Illumination*

The doctrine of revelation-inspiration is foundational to the whole enterprise of biblical interpretation (see Revelation/Inspiration, especially IV and V). According to the biblical record God has revealed Himself and His will in specific statements of truth to His prophets (Heb. 1:1). Through the inspiration of the Spirit He has enabled His prophets to communicate the divine revelation as the trustworthy and authoritative Word of God (2 Tim. 3:15, 16; 2 Peter 1:19-21). The same Spirit who has inspired the prophets has been promised to illumine the minds of those who seek to understand the meaning of the divine revelation (John 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:10-14).

B. *The Need for Interpretation*

The Bible's message is not hidden or obscure, requiring some esoteric external key to unlock its mysteries. Scripture was given by God as a revelation for all humankind. How-

ever, finite human beings are unable on their own to comprehend the mind of the Infinite One (Job 11:7-9; Isa. 55:8, 9; Eccl. 3:11; Rom. 11:33, 34). Furthermore, sin has darkened and even blinded the minds of human beings (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18; John 9:39-41) so that they of themselves are not capable on their own to interpret God's Word rightly. Because of the human problem of comprehension, God has provided in Scripture the keys to explain its meaning, and the Holy Spirit to guide into biblical truth (John 16:13). After His resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus Himself "interpreted [*diērmēneuō*] to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Already in the Old Testament the priests and Levites had the responsibility of teaching God's Word to the people (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7) and interpreting the law of God in different situations (Deut. 17:8-11; Eze. 44:23, 24). In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Levites "read from the book,

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from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). This involved translating from Hebrew to the more familiar Aramaic and explaining the meaning to the recently returned exiles.

The NT witness is clear that the interpretation of Scripture is the task of the entire church, not restricted to a few specialists (see Acts 17:11; Eph. 3:18, 19; 5:10, 17). Philip interprets the meaning of Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30, 31). The apostle Paul instructs Timothy to be sure he is “rightly handling” (*orthotomeō*, “to cut straight”) or “handling accurately” (NASB) the Word of God (2 Tim. 2:15). In 2 Corinthians 2:17 Paul affirms that he is not like many who “adulterate” God’s word. The Greek word here is *kapēleuō*, “to peddle,” alluding to the peddlers who used such deceptive tricks that the term came to signify “adulterate.” The presence of those who adulterate or corrupt the Word implies the need for careful interpretation.

The necessity for interpretation of the Scriptures today is further indicated by the separation in time, distance, and culture from the scriptural autographs. The biblical canon closed almost 2,000 years ago. Most of us are also separated geographically from the place where Scripture was written. Even the present inhabitants of the Middle East live in a very

different culture from that of biblical times.

Different languages—biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—require translation and interpretation. Different social customs; different civil, military, and political institutions; different economic and technological conditions; different patterns of thought—all these and more mandate the hermeneutical process.

C. Hermeneutics: Definition and Scope

The Greek word translated “interpret” in Luke 24:27 is *diermēneuō* (*dia* + *hermēneuō*), related to the English “hermeneutics.” Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the basic principles and procedures for faithfully and accurately interpreting God’s Word. From the biblical data we may deduce three major tasks of biblical hermeneutics: (1) to understand what the human writers of Scripture intended to convey to their hearers or readers (see Acts 2:25-31); (2) to grasp what the divine Author intends to communicate through the words of Scripture, which may not always have been fully understood by the human writer or his contemporaries (1 Peter 1:10-12); and (3) to learn how to communicate and apply both form and content of the biblical message to human beings today (see Matt. 5:17-48; 1 Peter 1:15, 16).

II. Foundational Principles for Biblical Interpretation

A. The Bible and the Bible Only

A fundamental principle set forth by Scripture concerning itself is that the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) is the final norm of truth. The classical text expressing this basic premise is Isaiah 8:20: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (NIV). The two Hebrew words *tôrāh* (law) and *te‘ūdāh* (testimony) point to the two loci of authority in Isaiah’s day. These now constitute holy Scripture: the Pentateuch and the testimony of the prophets to the

previously revealed will of God in the Torah. Jesus summarized the two divisions of OT Scripture similarly when He referred to the “law and the prophets” (Matt. 5:17). The NT adds the authoritative revelation given by Jesus and His apostolic witnesses (see Eph. 2:20; 3:5).

1. The Primacy of Scripture

Isaiah warned apostate Israel against turning from the authority of the law and the prophets to seek counsel from spiritist mediums (Isa. 8:19). In NT times other sources of authority were threatening to usurp the final

authority of the biblical revelation. One of these was tradition. But Jesus clearly indicated that Scripture is over tradition (Matt. 15:3, 6). Paul emphatically rejected tradition and human philosophy as final norms of truth for the Christian (Col. 2:8). Likewise he rejected human “knowledge” (Gr. *gnōsis*) as the final authority (1 Tim. 6:20).

Nature, rightly understood, is in harmony with God’s written revelation in Scripture (see Ps. 19:1-6, revelation of God in nature; and verses 7-11, revelation of the Lord in Scripture); but as a limited and broken source of knowledge about God and reality, it must be held subservient to, and interpreted by, the final authority of Scripture (Rom. 2:14-16). Both OT and NT writers point out that since the Fall nature has become depraved (Gen. 3:17, 18; Rom. 8:20, 21) and no longer perfectly reflects truth.

The mental and emotional faculties of human beings have also become depraved since the Fall; but even before the Fall, neither human reason nor experience could safely be trusted apart from God’s Word. Eve fell because she trusted her own reason and emotions above the word of God (Gen. 3:1-6). The wisest man in history perceptively observed, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 14:12; see Sin V. A).

2. The Sufficiency of Scripture

The principle of *sola scriptura* implies the corollary of the sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible stands alone as the unerring guide to truth; it is sufficient to make one wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15). It is the standard by which all doctrine and experience must be tested (Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Heb. 4:12). Scripture thus provides the framework, the divine perspective, the foundational principles, for every branch of knowledge and experience. All additional knowledge, experience, or revelation must build upon and remain faithful to the all-sufficient foundation of Scripture.

Thus is confirmed the battle cry of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*—the Bible and the Bible only as the final norm for truth. All other sources of knowledge must be tested by this unerring standard. The appropriate human response must be one of total surrender to the ultimate authority of the Word of God (Isa. 66:2).

B. The Totality of Scripture

A second general principle of biblical interpretation is the totality of Scripture (*tota scriptura*). It is not enough to affirm the primacy of Scripture. Those who, like Martin Luther, called for *sola scriptura* but failed to accept the Scriptures fully in their totality have ended up with a “canon within the canon.” For Luther this meant depreciating the book of James (as an “epistle of straw”) and despising other portions of Scripture (as presenting the way of law and not the gospel).

The self-testimony of Scripture is clear in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

All Scripture—not just part—is inspired by God. This certainly includes the whole OT, the canonical Scriptures of the apostolic church (see Luke 24:44, 45; John 5:39; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 2 Peter 1:21). But for Paul it also includes the NT sacred writings as well. Paul’s use of the word “scripture” (*graphē*, “writing”) in 1 Timothy 5:18 points in this direction. He introduces two quotations with the words “scripture says”: one from Deuteronomy 25:4 and one from the words of Jesus in Luke 10:7. The word “scripture” thus is used to refer to both the OT and the Gospel of Luke. Peter, by noting that some ignorant people “twist” Paul’s writings “as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15, 16), puts the apostle’s writings into the category of Scripture. Thus the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul are understood as “Scripture” already in NT times.

The NT is the apostolic witness to Jesus

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and to His fulfillment of the OT types and prophecies. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to bring to remembrance what He had taught (John 14:26). Paul states that “the mystery of Christ” was “revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:4, 5). Paul calls himself an apostle (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1). He also claims to “have the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 7:40), to write “[commands] of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37), and to preach a gospel that is not human but was revealed to him by Jesus Christ Himself (Gal. 1:11, 12). The NT thus embodies the witness of the apostles, either directly (2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3) or indirectly, through their close associates, such as Mark or Luke (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37; Luke 1:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24), to the life and ministry of Jesus.

All Scripture, both OT and NT, is “inspired by God,” literally “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). The picture is of the divine “wind,” or Spirit, coming upon the prophet, so that Scripture is a product of the divine creative breath. Thus it is fully authoritative, “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

1. Inseparable Union of the Divine and Human

A corollary of the *tota scriptura* principle is that all Scripture is an indivisible, indistinguishable union of the divine and the human. A key biblical passage that clarifies the divine nature of Scripture in relation to the human dimensions of the biblical writers is 2 Peter 1:19-21: “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will [*thelēma*] of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along [*pherō*] by the Holy Spirit” (NIV).

Several related points are developed in

these verses. Verse 19 underscores the trustworthiness of Scripture: It is “the prophetic word made more sure.” In verse 20 we learn why this is so: Prophecy is not a matter of the prophet’s own interpretation. The context primarily points to the prophet giving the message, who does not intrude his own ideas into the message, although the statement may also be heeded by the noninspired interpreter of Scripture. Verse 21 elaborates on this point: Prophecy does not come by the *thelēma*—the initiative, the impulse, the will—of the human agent; the prophets are not communicating on their own. Rather, the Bible writers were prophets who spoke as they were moved, carried along, even driven [*pherō*] by the Holy Spirit.

This passage makes clear that the Scriptures did not come directly from heaven, but that God utilized human instrumentalities. The Holy Spirit did not abridge the freedom of the biblical writers, did not suppress their unique personalities, did not destroy their individuality. Their writings sometimes involved human research (Luke 1:1-3); the writers sometimes gave their own experiences (Moses in Deuteronomy, Luke in Acts, the psalmists); they present differences in style (contrast Isaiah and Ezekiel, John and Paul); they offer different perspectives on the same truth or event (e.g., the four Gospels). And yet, through all this thought-inspiration, the Holy Spirit is carrying along the biblical writers, guiding their minds in selecting what to speak and write, so that what they present is not merely their own interpretation, but the utterly reliable word of God, the prophetic word made more certain. The Holy Spirit imbued human instruments with divine truth in thoughts and assisted them in writing so that they faithfully committed to apt words the things divinely revealed to them (1 Cor. 2:10-13).

This first corollary of the *tota scriptura* principle, that the human and divine elements in Scripture are inextricably bound together, is reinforced by comparing the written and incarnate Word of God. Since both Jesus

and Scripture are called the “Word of God” (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:13), it is appropriate to compare their divine-human natures. Just as Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, was fully God and fully man (John 1:1-3, 14), so the written Word is an inseparable union of the human and the divine.

2. The Bible Equals, Not Just Contains, the Word of God

A second corollary of the *totality of Scripture* principle is that the Bible *equals*, not merely *contains*, the Word of God. The testimony of Scripture is overwhelming. In the OT alone there are about 1,600 occurrences of four Hebrew words (in four different phrases with slight variations) that explicitly indicate that God has spoken: (1) “the utterance [*n^eum*] of Yahweh,” some 360 times; (2) “thus says [*’āmar*] the Lord,” some 425 times; (3) “and God spoke [*dibber*],” some 420 times, and (4) the “word [*dābār*] of the Lord,” some 395 times. Numerous times the equivalency between the prophet’s message and the divine message is recorded: the prophet speaks for God (Ex. 7:1, 2; cf. Ex. 4:15, 16); God puts His words in the prophet’s mouth (Deut. 18:18; Jer. 1:9); the hand of the Lord is strong upon the prophet (Isa. 8:11; Jer. 15:17; Eze. 1:3); or the word of the Lord comes to him (Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1). Jeremiah rebukes his audience for not listening to the prophets (Jer. 25:4), which is equated with not listening to the Lord (verse 7).

The sending of prophetic messages to Israel is summarized in 2 Kings 21:10: “And the Lord said by his servants the prophets.” In 2 Chronicles 36:15, 16 we read, “The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers . . . ; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets.” The prophets’ message was God’s message. For this reason the prophets often naturally switched from a third-person reference to God (“He”) to the first person (“I”) of divine speech, without any “thus saith the Lord” (see Isa. 3:1-4; Jer.

5:3, 4; Hosea 6:3, 4; Joel 2:23, 25; Zech. 9:4, 7).

Numerous times in the NT “it is written” is equivalent to “God says.” For example, in Hebrews 1:5-13, seven OT citations are said to have been spoken by God, but the OT passages cited do not always specifically ascribe the statement to God (see Ps. 45:6, 7; 102:25-27; 104:4). Again, Romans 9:17 and Galatians 3:8 (citing Ex. 9:16 and Gen. 22:18, respectively) reveal a close identification between Scripture and the Word of God: the NT passages introduce the citations with “scripture says,” while the OT passages have God as the speaker. The OT Scriptures as a whole are viewed as the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2).

Though the Bible was not verbally dictated by God so as to bypass the individuality of the human author, and thus the specific words are words chosen by the human writer, yet the human and divine elements are so inseparable, the human messenger so divinely guided in his selection of apt words to express the divine thoughts, that the words of the prophet are called the Word of God. The individual words of Scripture are regarded as trustworthy, accurately representing the divine message.

This is illustrated by a number of NT references. Jesus says, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word [Gr. *panti rhēmati*, “every word,” translating the Heb. *qōl*, “everything”] that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Paul says of his own inspired message, “And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13). The same apostle writes, “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13).

What is stated explicitly in the NT is also indicated by the instances when Jesus and the apostles based an entire theological argu-

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ment upon a crucial word or even grammatical form in the OT. So in John 10:34 Jesus appeals to Psalm 82:6 and the specific word “gods” to substantiate His divinity. Accompanying His usage is the telling remark, “And scripture cannot be broken [*luō*]” (verse 35). It cannot be *luō*—loosed, broken, repealed, annulled, or abolished—even to the specific words. In Matthew 22:41-46 He grounds His final, unanswerable argument to the Pharisees upon the reliability of the single word “Lord” in Psalm 110:1. The apostle Paul (Gal. 3:16) likewise bases his Messianic argument upon the singular number of the word “seed” (KJV) in Genesis 22:17, 18. Paul is recognizing the larger Messianic context of this passage, as it moves from a collective plural seed to a singular Seed. Jesus shows His ultimate respect for the full authority of the OT Torah when He affirms its totality: “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18).

C. *The Analogy of Scripture*

A third general foundational principle of biblical interpretation may be termed “the analogy (or harmony) of Scripture” (*analogia scripturae*). Since all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit and all of it is the Word of God, there is a fundamental unity and harmony among its various parts. The various parts of OT Scripture are considered by the NT writers as harmonious and of equal divine authority. NT writers may thus support their point by citing several OT sources as of equal and harmonious weight. For example, in Romans 3:10-18 we have scriptural citations from Ecclesiastes (7:20), Psalms (14:2, 3; 5:10; 10:7), and Isaiah (59:7, 8). Scripture is regarded as an inseparable, coherent whole. Major OT themes are assumed by the NT writers and further developed (see III. E. 1).

The two Testaments have a reciprocal relationship in which they mutually illuminate each other. Jesus described how the OT illuminates the NT (and Himself in particular) in John 5:39:

“You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.” Elsewhere Jesus describes how He is the illuminator, even the fulfillment, of the OT: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt. 5:17).

Neither Testament is superseded by the other, although the later revelation is tested by the former, as illustrated by the example of the Bereans, who “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Even Jesus insisted that the conviction of His disciples not be based primarily upon sensory phenomena alone, but that they believe in Him because of the testimony of OT Scripture (Luke 24:25-27).

The “analogy of Scripture” principle has three main aspects: (1) Scripture as its own expositor (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), (2) the consistency of Scripture, and (3) the clarity of Scripture.

1. “Scripture Is Its Own Interpreter”

As Martin Luther put it, “Scripture is its own light.” Because there is an underlying unity among the various parts of Scripture, one portion of Scripture interprets another, becoming the key for understanding related passages.

Jesus demonstrated this principle on the way to Emmaus when, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Later that night in the upper room, He pointed out “‘that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (verses 44, 45).

Paul expresses this same principle in 1 Corinthians 2:13: “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches,

comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (NKJV). This text has been translated in different ways, but certainly the apostle’s own use of Scripture indicates his adoption of the principle. We have already noted the whole catena of OT quotations cited in Romans 3:10-18. The same phenomenon may be observed in Hebrews 1:5-13; 2:6, 8, 12, 13.

Applying this principle that the Bible is its own expositor, Jesus, on the way to Emmaus, showed how all that Scripture says about a given topic should be brought to bear upon the interpretation of the subject (Luke 24:27, 44, 45). This does not mean the indiscriminate stringing together of passages in “proof-text” fashion without regard for the context of each text. But since the Scriptures ultimately have a single divine Author, it is crucial to gather all that is written on a particular topic in order to be able to consider all the contours of the topic.

2. The Consistency of Scripture

Jesus succinctly stated this aspect of the analogy of Scripture: “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Since Scripture has a single divine Author, the various parts of Scripture are consistent with each other. Thus scripture cannot be set against scripture. All the doctrines of the Bible will cohere with each other; interpretations of individual passages will harmonize with the totality of what Scripture teaches on a given subject.

While the different Bible writers may provide different emphases on the same event or topic, this will be without contradiction or misinterpretation. This is evidenced especially with parallel passages such as in the four Gospels. Each writer recorded what impressed him most under the inspiration of the Spirit, and each facet of the whole is needed to obtain the full and balanced picture.

3. The Clarity of Scripture

The principle of the analogy of Scripture also involves the clarity of Scripture. The biblical principle is that the Bible is perspicuous

and does not require any ecclesiological magisterium to clarify its meaning. The biblical testimony encourages readers to study the Bible for themselves in order to understand God’s message to them (e.g., Deut. 30:11-14; Luke 1:3, 4; John 20:30, 31; Acts 17:11; Rom. 10:17; Rev. 1:3).

The meaning of Scripture is clear and straightforward, able to be grasped by the diligent student. Jesus illustrates this in His dealing with the lawyer, whom He asked, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” (Luke 10:26). In other words, He expected that the Bible could be understood. When the lawyer cited Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus commended him for having answered correctly (Luke 10:28). Numerous times Jesus made the same point: “Have you never read in the scriptures?” (Matt. 21:42); “Have you not read?” (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3); “Let the reader understand” (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14).

The consistent example of the Bible writers shows that the Scriptures are to be taken in their plain, literal sense, unless a clear and obvious figure is intended. Note especially Jesus’ own distinction, and the disciples’ recognition, of the difference between literal and figurative language (John 16:25, 29). There is no stripping away of the “husk” of the literal sense in order to arrive at the “kernel” of a mystical, hidden, allegorical meaning, that only the initiated can uncover.

Scripture also maintains that there is a definite truth-intention of the biblical writers, and not a subjective, uncontrolled multiplicity of meanings. Jesus and the apostles spoke with authority, not giving one of many possible interpretations of a passage, but its true meaning as intended by the human writer and the divine Author (see, e.g., Acts 3:17, 18, 22-24). At the same time, the NT interpretation does not claim to exhaust the meaning of a given OT passage; there is still room for careful exegesis. There are also instances in which the biblical writer intentionally used terminology or phraseology with a breadth of meaning that

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encompasses several different nuances indicated by the immediate context of the passage (see John 3:3).

The specific truth-intention is vividly illustrated with regard to apocalyptic prophecy: the angel interpreter consistently gives a definite interpretation of each symbol (see Dan. 7:16-27; 8:15-26; Apocalyptic II. E). Another illustration involves those of Jesus' parables in which Jesus Himself interpreted the meaning of each part (see Matt. 13:18-23, 36-43).

This is not to deny that some parts of Scripture point beyond themselves (e.g., typology, predictive prophecy, symbols, and parables) to an extended meaning or future fulfillment. Even in these cases the extended meaning or fulfillment arises from, is consistent with, and in fact is an integral part of the specific truth-intention of the text; Scripture itself indicates the presence of such extended meaning or fulfillment (see III. E. 3).

It is also true that not every portion of Scripture was fully understood by the original hearers or even by the inspired writers. In 1 Peter 1:10-12 the apostle indicates that the OT prophets may not have always clearly understood all the Messianic implications of their prophecies. Thus Peter suggests another facet of the principle of the clarity of Scripture, i.e., that additional clearer revelation becomes a key to fuller understanding of the less clear passages. This same point seems implied also in 2 Peter 3:16, where Peter writes that some of the things Paul has written are "hard to understand." These difficult passages are not to be the starting point, which "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction," but are to be viewed in the larger context of clearer scriptural statements of truth (verse 18; cf. verse 2).

The clarity of Scripture corollary also involves the concept of "progressive revelation." Hebrews 1:1-3 indicates this progress in revelation from OT prophets to God's own Son (see also John 1:16-18; Col. 1:25, 26; etc.). This is not progressive revelation in the sense that later Scripture contradicts or nullifies pre-

vious revelation, but in the sense that later revelation illuminates, clarifies, or amplifies the truths presented previously. So Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), does not nullify the precepts of the Decalogue, but strips away from them the accretions of erroneous tradition and reveals their true depth of meaning and application. The basic insights into this fuller import of the law were already in the OT, and Jesus enables these gems of truth to shine with even greater brilliance as they are freed from the distorted interpretations of some of the scribes and Pharisees. Progressive revelation also occurs in the sense that Jesus is the fulfillment of the various types and prophecies of the OT.

A final practical application of this principle of clarity is to recognize the increasing spiral of understanding as one passage illuminates another. On one hand, later biblical authors write with conscious awareness of what has been written before and often assume and build upon what comes earlier (sometimes called the epigenetic principle or analogy of antecedent Scripture). A close reading of a later passage may indicate echoes of, or allusions to, earlier passages, which thus become the key to interpreting the fuller meaning of the later. This is especially evident in the book of Revelation. On the other hand, earlier passages may not be fully understood until seen in the light of the later revelation. This is true in particular with typology and prophecy (see Matt. 12:6, 42, 43; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Thus the spiral of understanding grows as later illuminates earlier, and earlier illuminates later.

D. "Spiritual Things Spiritually Discerned"

A fourth general principle of biblical interpretation concerns the issue of pre-understanding or objectivity. In modern hermeneutical approaches to the Bible, it is often assumed that the original intent of the Bible writer can be ascertained by the rigorous application of hermeneutical principles and exegetical tools, quite apart from any su-

pernatural spiritual assistance. Thus non-Christians can determine the meaning of Scripture as well as Christians, if they use the tools and apply the principles correctly.

However, scriptural data leads to a different conclusion. We note in particular 1 Corinthians 2:11, 14: “For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

1. The Role of the Holy Spirit

Since the Bible ultimately is not the product of the human writer’s mind but of the mind of God revealed through the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 2:12, 13), both the original meaning and its present application involve the thoughts of God, which according to Paul can be adequately comprehended only if we have the aid of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:13, 14; 2 Cor. 3:14-18; cf. John 6:45; 16:13).

Some have resisted letting the Spirit have a place in the hermeneutical spiral because it seems to allow the subjective element to overcome solid exegetical/hermeneutical research. It is true that “spiritual exegesis” *alone*, attempting to rely totally on the Spirit without conscientiously applying principles of exegesis and hermeneutics arising from Scripture, is likely to lead to subjectivism. But the proper combination of dependence upon the Spirit with rigorous exegesis based upon sound hermeneutical procedures, far from leading to subjectivity, constitutes the only way of escape.

Increasingly, modern scholars concede that all come to the Scriptures with their own preunderstandings, presuppositions, and biases. This cannot be remedied by approaching the text “scientifically,” without a “faith bias.” In fact, since the Scriptures call for a response of faith, an attempted “neutral” stance is already at crosscurrents with the in-

tent of Scripture (cf. Matt. 13:11-17; John 6:69).

Believing and Spirit-led interpreters also come with their own biases and preunderstandings and are not impervious to error (cf. Acts 11:2-18). But Christians who believe the promises of Scripture can ask God to transform their minds so that they increasingly adopt and incorporate the presuppositions of Scripture and not their own (see Rom. 12:1, 2). The Spirit of truth was promised to the disciples and to us: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). It must be noted that the “you” here is plural; the Spirit directs interpreters together within the fellowship of the church body (Ps. 119:63; Acts 2:42; 4:32; Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:3-6), where they may be benefited by exchange with and the correction of other believers.

Interpreters must make a decision that their preunderstandings will derive from and be under the control of the Bible, constantly open to modification and enlargement of their ideas on the basis of Scripture. They must consciously reject any external keys or systems to impose on Scripture from without, whether naturalistic (closed system of cause and effect without any room for the supernatural), evolutionary (the developmental axiom), humanistic (human beings the final norm), or relativistic (rejection of absolutes). Bible interpreters must ask the Spirit, who inspired the Word, to illuminate, shape, and modify their preunderstandings according to the Word, and to keep their understandings faithful to the Word.

2. The Spiritual Life of the Interpreter

“Spiritual things are spiritually discerned” implies not only the need of the Spirit to aid in understanding, but also that the interpreter be spiritual. The Spirit must not only illumine the mind, but also must have transformed the interpreter’s heart. The approach of the interpreter must be that called for by Scripture, an attitude of consent or willingness to follow what Scripture says. Jesus stated, “If any

man's will is to do his [God's] will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (John 7:17).

There must be diligent, earnest prayer for understanding, after the example of David: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I will keep it to the end" (Ps. 119:33; cf. verses 34-40; Prov. 2:3-7). There must be an acceptance by faith of what the prophets say (2 Chron. 20:20; cf. John 5:46, 47).

In summary, the Bible cannot be studied as

any other book, with sharpened tools of exegesis and honed principles of interpretation. At every stage of the interpretative process, the book inspired by the Spirit can be correctly understood only "from above," by the illumination and transformation of the Spirit. God's Word must be approached with reverence. Perhaps the best encapsulation of the interpreter's appropriate stance before Scripture is recorded by Isaiah: "But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2).

III. Specific Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture

The specific guidelines for interpreting biblical passages arise from and build upon the foundational principles thus far described. These guidelines encompass essentially the grammatico-historical method that is dictated by common sense and the laws of language to ascertain the meaning of any writing. But more than from the common interpretative sense, all these guidelines also either explicitly or implicitly arise from Scripture itself. Thus for each guideline discussed below, we will first note how it arises from Scripture. We will also provide one or more biblical examples illustrating its application in biblical interpretation.

A. Text and Translation

The first and most basic task in interpreting Scripture is to ensure that one has access to what is indeed the Holy Scriptures—both in the original languages and in modern translation. This requires attention to textual studies and to principles of translation.

1. Textual Studies

a. The preservation of the biblical text. Since the hermeneutical enterprise focuses on the written Word, the original text of the Bible must be ascertained as far as possible. The Bible itself underscores the necessity of preserving the words of sacred Scripture. Moses wrote with regard to the Torah, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it" (Deut. 4:2; cf. 12:32). The book of

Proverbs expands this principle to the whole Word of God: "Every word of God proves true. . . . Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar" (Prov. 30:5, 6). At the close of the biblical canon, a similar warning is found: "If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city" (Rev. 22:18, 19).

In OT Israel, provision was made for preserving the Torah by depositing "the book of the law" in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary beside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:26). There was to be public reading of the Torah every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles (verses 9-13).

Unfortunately, no autograph copies of either OT or NT Scriptures remain. But the history of textual transmission reveals how carefully and painstakingly the biblical text has been preserved down through the centuries to the present day. Before the end of World War II critical scholars had a very low estimate of the accuracy of the received (Masoretic) Hebrew text, since its earliest manuscript dated back only to about A.D. 900 and critical editions of the Hebrew Bible proposed thousands of conjectured emendments to the text. But since 1947 and the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, which contained manuscripts or fragments of every OT book except Esther, schol-

ars have been amazed to discover how the Masoretes had handed down virtually without change the textual tradition from a thousand years earlier.

The amount of MS evidence for the Greek text of the NT is far more abundant than for any other document of the ancient world. There are more than 3,000 Greek MSS of part or all of the NT text, in addition some 2,000 ancient Greek lectionaries (NT readings arranged in order of liturgical usage), about 8,000 Latin MSS, more than 2,000 MSS in other ancient versions such as Syriac and Coptic, and thousands of quotations—virtually the whole NT—in citations by the various early Church Fathers (Greenlee 697, 707). The actual amount of substantive variation among these many manuscripts is very small. F. F. Bruce affirms, “The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice” (19, 20).

b. The need for textual studies. Although the past 150 years of diligent textual study assure us that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written, there are small variations among the many ancient biblical MSS. The science (or art) of coming as close as possible to the original text of the Old and New Testaments is textual study, often called “textual criticism.” This study, as practiced by one who accepts the full authority of Scripture, rejects the presuppositions of the historical-critical method (see IV. F, G) and insists that the final norm for determining the authentic text of Scripture is found within Scripture itself.

Basic articles on textual study are found in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* and need not be reproduced here. The standard Hebrew and Greek Bibles give detailed information on major textual variants in the apparatus at the bottom of each page of text.

2. Translations and Versions

The Scriptures themselves give numerous

examples of translation to make meaning clear. Among these are Nehemiah 8:8; Matthew 1:23; Mark 5:41; 15:22, 34; John 1:42; 9:7; Acts 9:36; 13:8; Hebrews 7:2. The emphasis given to the need for understanding Scripture (see Acts 8:30-35) suggests the importance of faithful translation.

a. The challenges involved in translation. It is difficult to represent accurately the form and content of the original languages of the Bible in the modern target languages because in the process the translator must seek to bridge various barriers, such as gaps of time, culture, and geography; changed socio-economic-political situations; and different thought patterns.

The most significant challenge to the translation process lies in the differences in the languages themselves. The range of meaning of a word in the original language may be larger or smaller than its equivalent in the target language. Thereby the connotations of the original word are distorted by the unrelated meanings associated with the closest modern equivalent.

Grammatical and syntactical features of the original languages are not always possible to adequately represent in the modern translation. For example, the Hebrew verb stresses state, the Greek verb stresses kind of action, while the English verb emphasizes time.

At times the meaning of the original is ambiguous. The translator must decide whether to leave the translation ambiguous or attempt to remove the ambiguity—which could be potentially misleading if the incorrect meaning is chosen.

b. Translation types. Three major philosophies or theories concerning what makes the best translation result in three very different kinds of translations. *Formal translations* emphasize word-for-word equivalency in the translation process. This process gives a more exact and literal rendering of the original Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek. The result is an excellent study Bible. However, its readings are often rather wooden and stilted, and the aes-

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thetic quality and cadences of the original may be lost. *Dynamic translations* emphasize meaning-for-meaning instead of word-for-word equivalence. The translator restructures the translation into idiomatic usage that represents the equivalent thought or meaning. The advantage of the dynamic translation is its idiomatic contemporaneity, its readability and clarity. Its drawback is that the interpretation may be misleading or erroneous—depending upon the correctness or incorrectness of the translator’s interpretation. A *paraphrase* is far more free with the original than the dynamic translations. It is often intended more for devotional use than serious doctrinal study. Because a paraphrase is often more interpretation than translation, readers need to be careful how they use it.

Given the difficulties in translation and the different ways translation can be done, Bible students should be cautious in their choice of translations. A Bible translation prepared by a single denomination may be slanted or even skewed to support certain doctrines. A similar weakness also exists in a one-translator Bible, without the balance and input of many minds. Caution is also in order with regard to Bibles with systems of notes or interpretation. Likewise, translations into simplified modern language for children run the risk of distorting crucial biblical themes. The more interpretative versions should be diligently compared with a formal word-for-word translation, if not with the original Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek.

B. Historical Context

In order to understand the Scriptures, we must first seek to determine what they meant in their original setting. We must see in what situation each teaching was launched—the historical background; who said what, to whom, and under what circumstances. When we grasp these things, it will be easier to apply the Bible message to current situations.

1. The Bible as Reliable History

All the persons, events, and institutions in

the flow of the OT and NT are presented as part of a record of authentic and reliable history. The later OT prophets, Jesus, and the NT writers repeatedly refer back to the accounts of Creation and the Flood. In fact, *every* NT writer explicitly or implicitly affirms the historicity of Genesis 1-11 (see Matt. 19:4, 5; 24:37-39; Mark 10:6; Luke 3:38; 17:26, 27; Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 6:16; 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:31; 1 Tim. 2:13, 14; Heb. 11:7; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5; James 3:9; 1 John 3:12; Jude 11, 14; Rev. 14:7). Later biblical writers also refer to the time of the patriarchs, the Exodus, and other events of OT and NT history, interpreting these as reliable descriptions of God’s real space-time interrelationships with His people.

The historical context of biblical accounts is accepted as true, with no attempt to reconstruct history in a different way from that presented in the biblical record. The NT writers, in their interpretation of the OT, show a remarkably clear acquaintance with the general flow and specific details of OT history (see Acts 7; 1 Cor. 10). The typological arguments of the NT writers assume the historical veracity of the persons, events, and institutions that were types of these historical realities (see 1 Cor. 10:1-11; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Peter 3:18-22).

Likewise, in contrast with most current critical scholarship, but in harmony with the precedent of the NT writers in their interpretation of the OT, a Bible-based hermeneutic accepts at face value the biblical accounts of the creation of this world occurring in six literal, consecutive, 24-hour days (Gen. 1, 2), and a literal, worldwide Flood (Gen. 6-9). It accepts also the historicity of the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 12-50), the fifteenth-century B.C. Exodus from Egypt (Exodus-Deuteronomy; 1 Kings 6:1), the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 1-12), and the other historical assertions of Scripture, including the supernatural, miraculous events of both OT and NT.

2. Questions of Introduction

In the inner-scriptural hermeneutic of biblical writers, attention is drawn to various

“questions of introduction” (date, authorship, and life setting of biblical books), and these questions sometimes become crucial to the inspired writer’s argument. Where given, the declaration of the text is accepted as accurately portraying the authorship, chronology, and life setting for the text. For example, the Davidic authorship of Psalm 110 (as stated in the superscription of the psalm) is crucial to Jesus’ argument concerning His Messiahship (Matt. 22:41-46). Davidic authorship is also crucial to Peter’s Pentecost sermon to convince the Jews of the predicted resurrection of the Messiah (Acts 2:25-35). The “life setting” of Abraham’s justification by faith in the Genesis account is significant in Paul’s argument to the Romans, to show that this had happened before Abraham had been circumcised (Rom. 4:1-12).

Contrary to the assertions of much of modern critical scholarship, a Bible-based hermeneutic accepts the Pentateuch as written by Moses, not a late redaction of various source documents (see Ex. 24:4, 7; 34:27; Deut. 31:9-11; Joshua 1:7, 8; 1 Kings 2:3). Isaiah is accepted as the writer of the entire book (Isa. 1:1; see Matt. 3:3; 8:17; 12:17-21). David is the writer of the psalms that are attributed to him in their superscriptions or referred to as Davidic by NT writers (73 psalms; Matt. 22:41-46; Acts 2:25-35; etc.). Solomon is the writer of the majority of the Proverbs, of the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; S. of Sol. 1:1; Eccl. 1:1, 12, 13). Daniel, the sixth-century captive and statesman in Babylon, authored the book that bears his name (Dan. 8:1; 9:2; see Matt. 24:15). Zechariah wrote the entire book that bears his name (Zech. 1:1). Peter the apostle was the writer of 2 Peter (2 Peter 1:1), and John the Gospel writer authored the Apocalypse (Rev. 1:1-4).

It must be recognized that some of the books of the Bible do not explicitly indicate the writer, time, or historical circumstances of writing. The best solutions to the questions of introduction for these books must be based upon, and in harmony with, all relevant bibli-

cal data, seen in the light of available extrabiblical evidence.

3. Historical Backgrounds

The historical background for any given passage is given by the data presented by Scripture and the illumination provided by extrabiblical sources. Thus, an acquaintance with the whole of sacred history, as well as the setting of each individual event, is crucial to unfolding the historical setting of Scriptures. This knowledge is vital to understanding later allusions to prior events. For example, when Jesus speaks of Moses’ lifting “up the serpent in the wilderness” (John 3:14) He was clearly referring to Numbers 21:4-9. Likewise, the drying up of the Euphrates River (Rev. 16:12) must be seen in the light of the fall of Babylon, predicted in Jeremiah 51 and accomplished by diverting the river Euphrates to make way for the Medo-Persians.

The historical background material in Scripture is augmented by the wealth of literature from antiquity. Especially useful are the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, as well as the Targums and later rabbinic materials. Individual authors, such as Philo and Josephus, also contribute to a better understanding of Scripture.

In the past 200 years, archaeological discoveries throughout the Near East have shed light on persons, events, and lifestyles of Bible times. Various customs of the patriarchal period are illuminated by texts found at Mari, Nuzi, and Ebla. While the high standard of morality and the grounding of law in the character of the divine lawgiver in the laws of Moses are different from other codes of the time, the laws of Moses show some similarities with second-millennium-B.C. codes such as that of Hammurabi. Even though their content is unique, the structure of the covenants of Scripture between God and human beings resembles that of second-millennium-B.C. suzerain treaties between Hittite overlords and their vassal kings. Babylonian cuneiform documents show why “king” Belshazzar could of-

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fer Daniel only the third place in the kingdom (Dan. 5:29): his father, Nabonidus, was still the legitimate, though absent, king of Babylon.

Likewise, the understanding of the NT is greatly aided by a knowledge of the religious-sociopolitical matrix of first-century Judaism and of the Roman world in which the NT was written. For example, the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees are illuminated by the study of the Jewish factions. The athletic games of 2 Timothy 4:6-8 and the triumphal entry of the emperor in 2 Corinthians 2:14 make sense when seen against the background of period customs.

Many other factors must be included in the historical background. Chronology—when things happened—and geography—where events took place—contribute to an understanding of Scripture. In addition, weights, measures, and monetary systems deserve attention. Among others, the following should be taken into account: the Hebrew calendar and cycle of festivals; plant and animal life; urbanization, military tactics, climate, and agriculture.

4. Seeming Discrepancies With the Findings of Secular History

For centuries some biblical scholars have questioned the accuracy or veracity of numerous historical details in the biblical record, such as the historicity of the Exodus and conquest of Canaan, and the existence of Darius the Mede mentioned in Daniel. It is important to recognize, first of all, that many of these supposed historical inaccuracies of Scripture have evaporated in the light of further study. For example, until late in the nineteenth-century scholars pointed out that the Hittites mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 15:20, etc.) never existed. Then in the early decades of the twentieth-century excavations uncovered evidence for an entire Hittite civilization. Again, many nineteenth-century scholars insisted that the customs of the patriarchal period were anachronistic; but discoveries at Nuzi, Mari, Ebla, and elsewhere from the patriarchal times have

provided parallels to virtually all the customs portrayed in the patriarchal narratives.

It has now been shown that the Exodus narrative can fit well within the history of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty. Recent reanalysis of the excavation data from ancient Jericho has shown that (contrary to earlier conclusions and the modern scholarly consensus built on that work) the city was destroyed about 1410 B.C., and the details involved in the destruction fit precisely the biblical account. Likewise, the analysis of Medo-Persian records has shown room for Darius the Mede in the historical record.

Not all the apparent discrepancies between the biblical record and the findings of secular history have yet been resolved. A Bible-based hermeneutic involves faith in the historical reliability of Scripture and confidence that in these points, as in so many others, additional archaeological or historical study may reconcile these tensions. At the same time, it is important that Scripture not be held hostage to the findings of secular science. Many accounts in Scripture will never be corroborated by secular history—especially the miraculous events that have left no prints. The events of Scripture ultimately are accepted not because secular historical science confirms them, but because they are recorded in the trustworthy Word of God.

5. Seeming Discrepancies in Parallel Biblical Accounts

In the historical material of Scripture, especially the OT books of Samuel/Kings and Chronicles and the NT Gospels, parallel accounts at times provide differences in details or emphases (e.g., Matt. 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; and Luke 20:9-18). Several principles help us with these apparent discrepancies.

a. Recognize the different purposes in the different writers. The four Gospels were written with slightly different overall purposes and plan. Matthew often arranges his material in topical, not chronological, order. Mark gives an almost breathless account of the activities

of Jesus. Luke seems to be introducing Jesus to the Gentiles. And John's Gospel is unique—written, he admits, to foster faith.

b. Recognize that each writer may be relating the parts of the incident that must be combined with other accounts to form a whole. The parallel accounts of David's purchase of the threshing floor on Mount Moriah (2 Sam. 24:24; 1 Chron. 21:25) give different amounts of money paid and a different name for the owner. But the two descriptions are not necessarily in contradiction. The 50 shekels of silver were paid for the two oxen and the wooden threshing cart (and possibly the small plot of the actual threshing floor), while the 600 shekels of gold were the payment "for the place," which involved the entire site. Araunah and Ornan are simply alternative spellings of the same name.

Again, the parallel introductions to Jesus' sermon on the mount as recorded by Matthew and Luke seem on the surface to be in contradiction: Matthew says Jesus "went up on the mountain" (Matt. 5:1), while Luke says "he came down with them and stood on a level place" (Luke 6:17). Ellen White combines both of these perspectives and also the insight of Mark, as part of a larger scene: "After the ordination of the apostles [on a mountain, Mark 3:13], Jesus went with them to the seaside. Here in the early morning the people had begun to assemble. . . . The narrow beach did not afford even standing room within reach of His voice for all who desired to hear Him, and Jesus led the way back to the mountainside. Reaching a level space that offered a pleasant gathering place for the vast assembly, He seated Himself on the grass, and the disciples and the multitude followed His example" (DA 298). Other examples of appropriate and plausible harmonization of the Gospel narratives include the parallel accounts of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30), the blind beggar (Matt. 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43), and the surrounding Resurrection (Matt. 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-10).

c. Recognize that historical reliability does not require that the different reports be identical. That we find different language used by the Gospel writers is evidence of their independent authenticity and integrity. Matthew cites the first two prayers of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which contained the same thought but slightly different words, and then in Matthew 26:44 records that Jesus "prayed for the third time, saying the same words."

d. Recognize that the accepted conventions for writing history were different in the first century. There was often a use of "phenomenological" or "observational" language, illustrated by such terms of ordinary language as "the sun set," or "the four corners" or "the ends" of the earth, without implying a geocentric cosmology or a flat earth. Often approximate numbers were used, such as the number who died at Mount Sinai (1 Cor. 10:8; cf. Num. 25:1-18). We must not expect greater levels of precision for measuring than were customary in biblical times.

e. Recognize that some similar miracles and sayings of Jesus recorded in the parallel Gospels may have occurred at different times. Jesus' ministry of three and one-half years no doubt involved repetition of teachings and duplication of miracles. One example is the feeding of the 5,000 and of the 4,000. One would be tempted to say that these are divergent accounts of the same event had not Jesus Himself referred to them as two separate occasions (Matt. 16:9, 10).

f. Recognize that there are some minor transcriptional errors in Scripture. This is particularly evident in the transcription of numbers in the parallel accounts of Samuel/Kings and Chronicles. Textual study can assist in determining the best reading.

g. Acknowledge that it may sometimes be necessary to suspend judgment on some seeming discrepancies until more information is available. An example is the chronological data regarding the kings of Israel and Judah in Kings and Chronicles. There seemed to be hopeless confusion until Edwin Thiele's doc-

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toral dissertation, published as *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (1951; revised 1983), showed how the application of four basic principles of chronological reckoning completely synchronizes biblical figures and extrabiblical data.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary is an invaluable resource when dealing with issues concerning the questions of introduction and historical backgrounds. In the introductory historical articles to each volume and in the introduction to each biblical book, there are excellent treatments of evidence for authorship, date, and life setting of the biblical material, consistently accepting at face value the Scripture's own claims and data about these issues, while at the same time providing archaeological, geographical, chronological, and cultural backgrounds to illuminate the biblical record.

C. Literary Analysis

To interpret the Bible properly, one must recognize that the literary context of the Scriptures is no less important than the historical context. Scripture is not only a history book, but a literary work of art. Recent study among biblical scholars has given increasing attention to the literary characteristics and conventions of Scripture.

Scripture itself gives us numerous explicit and implicit indicators of its literary qualities and the importance of recognizing these as part of the hermeneutical task.

1. Limits of the Passage

One of the first tasks in interpreting a given passage in its immediate literary context is to recognize the limits of the passage. This is important in order to grasp the total thought unit of which the passage is a part. One can then determine what comes before and what comes after, and better understand how this segment fits into the flow of the inspired document.

While the verse and chapter divisions of the Bible do not come from biblical times, the

Bible writers often provided indicators of passage limits and in their interpretation of antecedent scripture show awareness of the discrete units of Scripture. In the book of Genesis, for example, the book is divided neatly into 10 sections, each identified by the phrase "the generations of . . ." In the Psalms, along with the division into individual psalms, a number of psalms contain indicators of section divisions: (a) stanzas with refrains (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5), or (b) the word *selah* (71 times in Psalms; Ps. 46:3, 7, 11), or (c) an acrostic (such as Psalm 119, with succeeding verses starting with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet).

By NT times the Pentateuch (and probably also the Prophets) was divided into small sections to be read in the synagogue every Sabbath (cf. Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21). Jesus recognized these divisions of the Torah by referring to "the passage about the bush" (Luke 20:37; cf. Ex. 3:3-6).

Following the explicit references of biblical writers, and carefully examining their writings, we may establish the literary and logical limits of the passage under consideration. For example, the narration of Jesus' sayings and activities naturally separates into sections or pericopae. Recent works provide help for "charting" a book or portion of the Bible into natural divisions, and then delimiting and analyzing the individual paragraphs.

2. Literary Types

In studying any sample of written work—and this is no less true regarding the Bible—it is crucial to understand what type of literature is being examined. This involves the more general categories of poetry and prose, and specific literary types (or genres) such as legal documents, letters, hymns, love poems, biographies, and the like. Various literary forms serve different functions, and certain basic conventions are commonly used in each of these forms of literature. Comparison of different examples of the same genre of literature reveals the common conventions and also the unique features and emphases of each. Proper

interpretation is thus enhanced by the recognition of the literary form being employed.

The Bible writers frequently explicitly identify their written materials in terms of specific literary types or genres. Major literary types identified in Scripture include: “generation”/“genealogy”/“history”/“account” (Heb. *tôlēdôt*, Gen. 2:4, plus 14 times throughout Genesis), deathbed blessings (Gen. 49; Deut. 33), laws (statutes, ordinances, judgments; Ex. 21:1; Deut. 4:44, 45), legal contracts (Gen. 21:22-32; 26:26-31; Joshua 9:15; 1 Kings 5:6-12), covenantmaking and renewal (e.g., Ex. 24; the whole book of Deuteronomy; see Deut. 29:1, 14, 15; Joshua 24), riddles (Judges 14:10-18), royal decrees (Ezra 6:3-12; 7:11-26), letters (2 Sam. 11:15; 1 Kings 21:8-10; 2 Kings 5:5, 6; 10:1-3), psalms (with various psalm types, indicated in the superscriptions) or songs (S. of Sol. 1:1), prayers (Ps. 72:20; Dan. 9:4-19), proverbs (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1), prophetic oracles or “burdens” (Heb. *massā*, Nahum 1:1; Hab. 1:1; Mal. 1:1), visions (Dan. 8:1, 2; Obadiah 1), covenant lawsuits (Heb. *rîb*, Isa. 3:13; Hosea 4:1; Micah 6:1), lamentation or funeral dirge (Heb. *qînāh*, Eze. 27:32; Amos 5:1; Lamentations), gospels (Mark 1:1), parables (Mark 4:2), “figures” (Gr. *paroimia*; John 10:6; 16:25), epistles (Rom. 16:22; 1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:1, 16), and apocalyptic (the *apokalypsis* or Revelation of John; Rev. 1:1).

a. Prose. Many of the prose literary types have been explicitly identified and labeled by the biblical writers, as listed above. Others analyzed in modern study include such forms as speeches or sermons (Joshua 23, 24; 1 Sam. 12; 1 Kings 2:1-9; Jer. 7), lists (Gen. 10; Joshua 15-19; Num. 33; 1 Kings 4:7-19), and cultic ordinances (Lev. 1-7). Of special significance is biblical narrative, which includes such genres as history (Joshua through 2 Chronicles, Acts), reports or annals (1 Kings 11:41; 14:19, 20), autobiography (Ezra and Nehemiah), accounts of dreams and visions (Gen. 37:5-10; 40:9-19; 41:1-7; Zech. 1-6), and prophetic autobiography (Isa. 8:1-3; Jer. 36; Dan. 1-6).

Recent study has focused particularly upon

the narrative as a literary type involving intricate artistry. While much of modern critical study tends to regard the narrative as fictional, the Bible student who accepts the account as factual history can benefit by examining carefully how the inspired writer has set forth the narrative to emphasize crucial points. Basic elements of narrative required to understand the “flow” of the account include: the implied author (or invisible speaker) and the implied reader, the overall point of view or perspective, the order of events and their interrelationship (“story time”), the plot, the characters and their characterization, the setting, and the implicit commentary or rhetorical techniques used in relating the narrative.

b. Poetry. The poetic sections of Scripture (approximately 40 percent of the OT and scattered sections of the NT) are arranged in verse in many modern Bible versions. Biblical poetry has special features that call for brief attention here.

The main characterizing element of Hebrew poetry is called “parallelism,” or “thought rhyme” (as opposed to “sound rhyme”). Poetic parallelism traditionally has been subdivided into three major kinds: (a) synonymous, in which two succeeding lines of poetry repeat a similar thought (Ps. 1:2, 5; 103:10); (b) antithetical, in which two succeeding poetic lines present contrasting ideas (Ps. 1:6; 37:21; and many proverbs); and (c) synthetic, in which the second poetic line adds to the first by completion, enlargement, or intensification (Ps. 2:6; 103:11). This fundamental aspect of Hebrew poetry is readily apparent in modern translations as well as in the original language.

Hebrew poetry also contains meter (“measured lines”), although these are not as rigidly defined as in Greek poetry. The meter is defined by stress accents: each accented Hebrew word gets one count. One special type of meter is the *qînāh*, or “lament,” which has a line of three stress accents followed by a line with two (3:2). Many of the “lament” psalms, where the writer agonizingly petitions

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God for help, and virtually the whole book of Lamentations, have this “long-short” meter, which some see as approximating the “long-breath-in and short-breath-out” in the sighing of the lamenter. The metrical element of poetry is not so apparent in translation, although the long-short meter often translates into long and short lines of verse.

Many other literary devices and stylistic elements are utilized by the biblical writers, especially in poetic sections of Scripture. We find the employment of *inclusio* or “envelope construction” (the same expression at the beginning and at the end: Psalms 8, 103), acrostic (verses or groups of verses start with successive letters of the alphabet: Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 119, 145), simile (comparison using like or as: Hosea 7:11), metaphor (one reality standing for another: Ps. 23:1; Hosea 10:1; John 10:7, 9, 11), synecdoche (the part standing for the whole: Isa. 52:1, 2), onomatopoeia (words sounding like what they describe: Jer. 19:1,10; Isa. 17:12, 13; Ps. 93:4), assonance (repetition of vowels: Isa. 5:7), paronomasia (pun/play on words: Amos 8:2, 3; Micah 1), and personification (Prov. 8). All of these literary elements contribute to the framing and forming of the message.

Each of these specific literary types has special characteristics, which are often significant in interpreting the message transmitted. Literary form and theological interpretation go hand in hand: identifying and understanding the literary type will make it possible to clarify the intended theological significance.

Several literary forms (parable, prophecy, and apocalyptic) involve an extended meaning or fulfillment that will be discussed below in the section on theological context and analysis (see III. E. 3).

3. Literary Structure

The literary structure, both of the passage and its larger literary frame, is important to the analysis. It often provides a key to the flow of thought or central theological themes.

In prose portions of Scripture, such as the

NT Epistles, it is helpful to outline the passage, organizing the major units of information under topics and subtopics. From this outline meaningful thought patterns emerge. Many of the same steps employed to establish the limits of the passage (see III. C. 1) are also useful in identifying smaller patterns within the paragraph.

Close analysis of the biblical material reveals that biblical writers often carefully structured verses, chapters, books, or even blocks of books into an artistic literary pattern. Often the literary structure follows the basic elements of the literary form of the passage. So, for example, the prophetic covenant lawsuit (Heb. *rib*) typically contains certain elements; the literary structure of Micah 6 (which the prophet specifically identifies as a *rib*, Micah 6:1, 2) follows this basic lawsuit pattern.

Two kinds of literary structure that build upon poetic parallelism call for special attention. One common literary structuring device is “block parallelism” or “panel writing,” which follows the pattern of synonymous parallelism in individual verses of poetry. We find “block parallelism” or “panel writing” as the structuring technique for such biblical books as Joshua and Jonah: the order of the first half of the book is repeated in the second half. Another common literary structuring device in Scripture is reverse parallelism (or chiasm, named after the Greek letter *chi*, which is shaped like an X), which follows the pattern of antithetical parallelism in the smaller unit of two succeeding lines of poetry. An example of the ABCB¹A¹ pattern of chiasm in an individual verse is evident in the “mirror image” reference to cities in Amos 5:5:

- A. Do not seek *Bethel*;
- B. and do not enter *Gilgal*
- C. or cross over to *Beersheba*;
- B¹. for *Gilgal* shall surely go into exile,
- A¹. and *Bethel* shall come to nought.

This verse has been analyzed as part of a larger chiastic structure including Amos 5:1-17, which in turn is part of an even larger chiasm,

the whole book of Amos. Chiasmic structures have been pointed out in more than 50 individual psalms, as well as in sections of Scripture involving several chapters (the Flood narrative of Gen. 6-9; the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7, and Heb. 6-10). Recent studies have also recognized the chiasmic arrangement of various entire biblical books and blocks of books.

A biblical writer's use of a chiasmic arrangement often shows the major emphasis of the inspired writer, since frequently this climactic emphasis is placed at the midpoint or heart of the chiasm. For example, in Psalm 92, the Song for the Sabbath, there are seven verses on either side of the central verse, each containing a pair of lines in poetic parallelism; but the central affirmation of the psalm, "But thou, O Lord, art on high forever" (verse 8), is placed alone at the heart of the chiasm with no matching parallel line of poetry. Thus is highlighted the climax of the psalm, both in literary structure and theological meaning.

Parallel structures in Scripture are also often illuminating because of the matching or repeating parts of the structure. What is clear in the first half of the structure may help to illuminate the matching structural element in the second half. So, for example, the chiasmic arrangement in Zechariah makes it possible to affirm the Messianic character of crucial passages because their matching structural elements are clearly Messianic. Again, in Hebrews 6:17-20 the reference to Jesus' entry "behind the curtain" is clarified by comparing it with the matching structural element of Jesus' entry "through the curtain" in Hebrews 10:19, 20, which clearly shows the setting of both passages to be the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary.

The interpreter must not import structures into the text that are not really present. There must be rigorous controls from within the text to ensure that the Bible student is not artificially imposing an outline or structure upon the biblical material. These internal controls include similar matching *themes*, concepts, or

motifs, and more important, matching *key words* and clusters of words. The more explicit the verbal and structural parallels, the more certain we can be that the structure is inherent within the passage. It is not always possible, however, to determine whether the human writer was consciously crafting the structure, or whether it was so much a part of their literary approach that the structure emerged spontaneously, or whether it came by direct inspiration of God.

D. Verse-by-Verse Analysis

The ultimate goal of the Bible student is to arrive at the plain, straightforward meaning of Scripture. Based on the principle of the clarity of Scripture (see II. C. 3) one should take the text in its natural sense unless there is clear evidence that figurative language is employed by the biblical writer. For example, in Revelation 1:7, where John writes that Jesus is "coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him," the context indicates literal clouds, not figurative representations of "trouble" or some other symbolic meaning. (On recognizing and interpreting symbols, see III. E. 3. a.)

In seeking to grasp the natural sense of a biblical passage, the interpreter must carefully analyze each verse, giving attention to important points of grammar and syntax (sentence construction), and to the meaning of key words in context.

1. Grammar and Syntax

The NT writers give examples of their concern to represent faithfully the grammatical-syntactical constructions of the OT original and thus set forth the plain meaning of the OT texts for the NT readers. A vivid example of grammatical-syntactical sensitivity on the part of a NT writer is the citation of Psalm 45:6, 7 in Hebrews 1:8, 9. The apostle recognizes that the Hebrew original points to One who is God and at the same time is anointed by God, thus implying the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Godhead ("Thy throne, O God. . . . Therefore God, thy

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God, has anointed thee”). Another example is the citation of Psalm 110:1 by Jesus and NT writers (Matt. 22:44 and Synoptic parallels; Acts 2:34, 35; Heb. 1:13). The inspired interpreters clearly grasped the Messianic implications from the syntax of David’s words, “The Lord [the Father] said unto my Lord [the Messiah], Sit thou at my right hand” (KJV).

Following scriptural precedent, the modern interpreter should pay close attention to the grammar and syntax of the passage under consideration in order to grasp the intended meaning. For this it is helpful to consult formal (word-for-word) translations of the passage to get a feel for the sentence construction and note any unusual or difficult elements of grammar or syntax.

A thorough acquaintance with Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek grammar and syntax is, of course, ideal, but a number of study tools now available introduce the interpreter to the basic features of the Hebrew and Greek verbal system and other unique grammatical features of each language and provide an analytical key for the whole OT and NT with word-for-word grammatical and lexical information and English translation. Preparing a grammatical diagram or syntactical display based on the original language or modern versions is helpful in order to grasp the flow of thought in the passage. Such mechanical layouts may be especially beneficial for the NT Epistles, for example, where the sentence constructions are often quite complex.

2. Word Studies

Numerous examples in Scripture give evidence of the NT writers’ care to represent faithfully the meaning of crucial words in an OT passage. See Paul’s use of “the just shall live by *faith*” (Rom. 1:17 [KJV], citing Hab. 2:4); Matthew’s selection of the LXX *parthenos*, “virgin” (Matt. 1:23), to best represent the Heb. *’almāh* of Isa. 7:14 and Christ’s use of the word “gods” (John 10:34, citing Ps. 82:6).

Following NT precedent, the modern interpreter must engage in careful study of crucial

words in the passage under consideration. The word-study process today is more involved, yet even more crucial, for biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek are no longer living languages. A thorough study of a given word in a passage involves examining its etymology, root meaning, number and distribution of occurrences throughout Scripture, its semantic range, basic meanings, derivatives, and extrabiblical usage. The word must be studied in its multifaceted context: cultural, linguistic, thematic, canonical setting.

Fortunately, much of this research material is summarized in theological dictionaries and wordbooks that cover the basic vocabulary of the OT and NT. An analytical concordance makes it possible to look up all the occurrences of a word in the original language and thereby to study its varied uses.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember that the final determiner of the meaning of a word is the immediate context in which the word or phrase is found. For example, the term “angel of the Lord” in the OT can sometimes refer to a created angelic being, but in numerous instances the immediate context indicates that the reference must be to a divine being, i.e., the preincarnate Son of God (Gen. 16:7-13; 22:11-18; Ex. 3:2, 4, 6; Judges 13:3-22). Again, the Hebrew term *’elep* can mean “thousand” or “clan.” Some have suggested that Exodus 12:37 means that 600 clans rather than 600,000 Israelites left Egypt. Even though this is theoretically a possible translation, Exodus 38:25, 26 reports the total amount of silver collected from 603,550 Israelites for building the tabernacle, a half shekel from each man; the calculation works only if *’elep* means thousand, not clan.

Some examples of word studies that make a crucial difference in biblical doctrine include such words as “forever” (Heb. *’ōlām*, Gr. *aiōnios*), which does not mean “without end” in the context of the suffering of the wicked in hellfire; “repentance” on the part of God (*nāḥam* “to be sorry, moved to pity, relent”), which is different from man’s “re-

pentance” (*šûb*, “to turn about, repent”) and *ta hagia*, “the holies” in Hebrews 9:8, following the regular usage of the LXX and referring to the *whole* sanctuary, not just the Most Holy Place. Finally, the verb *enkainizo* in Hebrews 10:20, which is the LXX technical term for the “inauguration” of the sanctuary (Num. 7:10, 11, 84, 88), implies that Christ at His ascension entered the heavenly sanctuary to inaugurate its services, not to commence His day of atonement ministry.

E. Theological Analysis

The biblical writers provide abundant evidence for the need to ascertain the theological message of a passage as part of the hermeneutical enterprise. For example, Jesus lays bare the far-reaching theological implications of the Decalogue in His sermon on the mount (Matt. 5:17-28). The Jerusalem Council sets forth the theological import of Amos 9:11, 12—that Gentiles need not become Jews in order to become Christians (Acts 15:13-21). Paul captures the theological essence of sin in various OT passages (Rom. 3:8-20) and of righteousness by faith in his exposition of Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1, 2 (Rom. 4). Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2) delineates the theology of inaugurated eschatology found in Joel 2, and his Epistle explores the theological dimensions of the Messiah’s atoning work as set forth in Isaiah 53 (1 Peter 2:21-25).

1. Methods of Theological Study

In harmony with what Jesus and NT writers did in their interpretation of OT Scripture, a number of fruitful methods are available for apprehending the theological message of Scripture.

a. The book-by-book approach. Such inspired writers as John the revelator call for readers to study a complete biblical book (Rev. 22:18, 19). Each biblical writer has provided a unique perspective within the overall harmony of scriptural truth. Therefore, to grapple with an entire book and grasp its essential theological thrust is extremely rewarding. It is often

necessary to read and reread the book until the message of the writer grips the researcher and the various themes, concepts, and motifs emerge clearly. Sometimes the message will be a single overriding theme, with various sub-themes and motifs; other times there will be several parallel themes. It is helpful to outline the book, charting the flow of thought by the biblical writer. Often a grasp of the literary structure of the book will aid in this process (see III. E. 1. e).

b. Verse-by-verse exposition. The sermons of Peter and Paul (Acts 2; 3; 13) illustrate the method of verse-by-verse exposition of biblical passages. The emphasis in this study is on the basic theological principles and truths that emerge from the passage and that have practical application today. It is important to focus on one verse of Scripture at a time, until diligent study and reflection, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have made the meaning clear.

c. Thematic/topical study. The thematic approach is clearly illustrated in Jesus’ own preaching (Luke 24:25-27). This approach takes explicit biblical themes and lets Scripture interpret Scripture (see II. C), as all the biblical data setting forth a given theme are assembled and compared. The use of concordance and cross-references to trace key words and concepts is crucial. Examples of major biblical themes to be researched are Sabbath, Second Coming, death and resurrection, salvation, sanctuary, repentance, and judgment.

Sometimes this approach may take some contemporary life problem, some specific present need, some contemporary question, and seek to bring to bear all that Scripture has to say about that topic or issue. This kind of study may involve word study, use of cross-references in the Bible margins, or close examination of a single passage.

In any thematic or topical study, the four principles previously presented (II. A-D) must be respected. It is crucial to bring together *all* that Scriptures say about a given topic, in order not to distort their message. One passage

cannot be used to set aside another, since the principle of the consistency of Scripture views all parts of Scripture as coherent and harmonious. Likewise, the principle of clarity of Scripture is to be followed. When these principles undergird the thematic study, there is no place for the illegitimate “proof-texting” method that assembles passages from various parts of Scripture without regard for their original context, and uses them to “prove” what they do not teach.

d. The “grand central theme” perspective. The NT writers place their theological analyses of specific passages within the larger context of the multifaceted “grand central theme” of Scripture, as set forth in the opening and closing pages of the Bible (Gen. 1-3; Rev. 20-22). These include: Creation and the original divine design for this world, the character of God, the rise of the cosmic moral conflict, the plan of redemption-restoration centering in Christ and His atoning work, and the eschatological judgment and end of sin at the climax of history.

Various NT passages point to these themes as central. Jesus sees the OT Scriptures as testifying of Him (John 5:39-47). Paul likewise understands the Christological focus of Scripture, as he determines to preach only “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) and the soteriological focus of the Scriptures: they “are able to instruct you for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). He further recognizes the cosmic scope and implications of the gospel of salvation that he expounds from Scripture (Col. 3:11). His single-minded life quest, formed from Scripture, has a decided eschatological focus (Phil. 3:13, 14).

A powerful way to observe the beauty and unity of Scripture is to ask about every passage that one studies, What does this passage contribute to the understanding of the grand central theme of Scripture? The “grand central theme” is thus an orientation point that gives underlying unity and harmony and ultimate meaning to the various other themes of Scripture.

e. Literary structural analysis. The literary structure of a book often becomes a key to understanding its theological message more clearly or determining the central theological thrust of a book (see III. C. 3). For example, the book of Deuteronomy has been analyzed by many OT scholars as structured after the pattern of the international suzerainty treaties of the day: (a) preamble or introduction of suzerain (Deut. 1:1-5); (b) historical prologue or statement of past benefactions of the suzerain to the vassal (Deut. 1:6-4:49); (c) general stipulations (Deut. 5-11); (d) specific stipulations (Deut. 12-26); (e) blessings and curses (Deut. 27; 28); (f) witnesses (Deut. 30:19; 31:19; 32:1-43).

Recognizing a literary covenant structure for this book highlights essential theological points about the divine-human covenant relationship. Just as in the Hittite covenants the call to obedience was based upon a motive of gratitude for what the suzerain had already done for the vassal, God’s commandments are set forth after reviewing how He had redeemed Israel at the Exodus. Thus the people are called to obey God, not in order to be redeemed, but because they are *already* redeemed and now can respond in gratitude for what God has already done. Deuteronomy thus rejects righteousness by works and upholds the priority of divine redeeming grace.

As a second example, the chiasmic structure of the Pentateuch points to Leviticus as the apex of God’s revelation. Within Leviticus, the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16 is the apex of the chiasmic structure. The holiest day of the Jewish year, in which the holiest person on earth (the high priest) goes into the holiest place on earth (the Most Holy Place) to perform the holiest work of all the year—this is reserved for the central chapter of the Torah. Its placement within Leviticus—flanked on one side (Lev. 1-15) by constant mention of blood and sacrifice and flanked on the opposite side (Lev. 17-23) by repeated calls to holiness—provides a balanced theological perspective on the Day of Atonement.

2. Problematic Theological Passages

In dealing with apparently problematic theological passages, particularly in regard to questions about the character of God or seeming distortions of the truth, the following questions may prove helpful:

a. What is the overall picture of the character of God in Scripture, especially as it is revealed at Calvary? It must be remembered that the Father and the Son have the same character (John 14:9) and the God of the OT is the same God as in the NT (John 8:58). Rightly understood in the overarching context of the great controversy, all passages of Scripture will present a coherent and consistent portrayal of God's character. (See Great Controversy I-V.)

b. What additional specific information relevant to the problematic passage is available elsewhere in Scripture or in extrabiblical material? Often a seeming difficulty in Scripture is clarified when all the biblical facts are taken into account. An example is the slaying of Uzzah. At first glance it seems that he innocently reached out to steady the ark from falling (2 Sam. 6:3-7), but the picture becomes clearer as one realizes that the ark had been in Uzzah's own house in Kiriathjearim for about 20 years under the care of his father, Abinadab (1 Sam. 7:1, 2; 2 Sam. 6:3). During this time Uzzah had apparently lost his sense of the sacredness of the holy ark: familiarity had bred irreverence. This disrespect for the sacred is further revealed in the violation of specific divine commands concerning the transport of the ark: only the priests were to touch the ark (Num. 4:15) and the Levites were to carry the ark on their shoulders, not upon a cart (Num. 7:9). Throughout Scripture God takes the sin of irreverence seriously (cf. 2 Kings 2:23, 24; Lev. 10:1-3), because respect for God is basic to the relation between human beings and God.

Another example of further biblical data illuminating a theological problem is seen in the imprecatory (or "cursing") psalms (Ps. 35; 58;

69; 109; 139). David, the anointed representative of God, is not merely exhibiting a human outburst of anger, but specifically and consistently invoking the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. He is praying for God to be faithful to His covenant by bringing the promised curses upon those who have rebelled against Him.

As an example of extrabiblical material illuminating a theological problem, we note the contemporary evidence for the wickedness of the Amorites at the time of the conquest (Gen. 15:16; Ex. 13:5). The Ras Shamra (Ugaritic) Tablets give us insight into the gross licentiousness and unbridled violence of the Canaanite religious ritual. Their debauchery had left the Canaanites incapable of responding to the Spirit of God. God in His mercy, as much as His justice, declared that there was nothing left but to execute judgment.

c. Is God acting as a divine surgeon, cutting out the infected part to save the whole body? God specifically gives this principle as the reason for the death penalty when children are totally given over to irreverence and rebellion: "And all Israel shall hear, and fear" (Deut. 21:21). The same was true with the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16). This principle also further explains God's actions against those mentioned under the previous principle and others such as Achan (Joshua 7) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). The judgment upon one or a few led others to repentance and respect for God and prevented the necessity of punishing the many.

d. Does an understanding of Hebrew thought resolve the difficulty in interpretation? OT writers do not accept—and often explicitly counteract—the mythological, polytheistic theology held by their Near Eastern neighbors. Likewise, the theological thought patterns of NT writers, though expressed in Greek, stay within the trajectory of biblical Hebrew thought and do not imbibe alien thought forms of the prevailing surrounding culture such as gnosticism and platonic dualism. It must be the studied aim of the inter-

preter not to read ancient Near Eastern, Greek, or modern thinking into the Hebrew thought of Scripture. Recognizing the patterns of Hebrew thought resolves many apparent problems in the text. For example, Hebrew thought often does not separate causality and function. In the strong affirmation of the sovereignty of God, biblical writers at times attribute responsibility to God for acts He does not directly perform but permits to happen. Thus the passages that state that God “hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Ex. 9:12) must be seen in light of passages in the same context that state that “Pharaoh hardened his [own] heart” (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34). God “caused” Pharaoh to harden his heart because Pharaoh refused to respond to repeated appeals to allow Israel to go free. God initiated the circumstances (appeals and plagues) that brought Pharaoh to a decision (hardening his heart). As another example, 2 Samuel 24:1 indicates that the Lord incited David to number Israel; 1 Chronicles 21:1 states that Satan did the inciting. God clearly does not directly cause Job’s misfortunes and affliction, but rather allows Satan to act within certain bounds (Job 1:6-12; 2:6); yet the Lord Himself said to Satan, “You moved me against him, to destroy him without cause” (Job 2:3). There is no conflict in Hebrew thinking: God is said to cause that which in His sovereignty He allows.

e. What is God’s ideal in the situation being described? God had given the Canaanites 400 years of probation to come to repentance (Gen. 15:16). Furthermore, He had intended to drive them out by the hornet and the Angel so that Israel need not destroy them by their own hands (Ex. 23:23, 28). But God condescended to Israel’s lack of faith and worked under less than ideal conditions, all the while seeking to bring them back to the ideal (see Ex. 14; 15; 2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 37, for glimpses of God’s ideal way of working).

The same principle helps to explain the divine permission for divorce in the Mosaic law. Jesus pointed out that God allowed divorce because of the hardness of their hearts,

but “from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8; Gen. 2:24).

f. Is God’s activity an attention-getting device, to wake up His people so that they will listen to Him? Sometimes God has to take what seem to be extreme measures to arouse His people from their lethargy and sins. Such were the various sign-actions of Ezekiel in the final days before the Babylonian captivity (Eze. 4; 5), and God’s command to Hosea to marry a “wife of harlotry” in the final days of the northern kingdom’s probation (Hosea 1:2).

This principle is perhaps a partial explanation of the dramatic display at Mount Sinai that caused all the people to tremble in terror (Ex. 19:16-19). In Exodus 20:20 Moses plays upon the Hebrew word for fear, which has a double connotation: “Do not fear [be in terror]; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear [reverence] of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.” At the same time, the power and majesty displayed on Sinai are not out of character for God. He *is* a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29) and the theophany at Sinai was only a faint reflection of His awesome holiness.

g. Are there still some points that are not fully explainable or understandable? It will not always be possible in this life to understand why God did certain things the way He did. Some issues, such as the innocent suffering and death of children and martyrs, and the unpunished cruelty of the wicked in this life, will remain unresolved until Christ comes and makes all things right. Some issues and divine actions will be understood fully only when in the hereafter God Himself reveals why He had to act, or refrain from acting, as He did in the light of the great controversy. But enough evidence and answers are given in Scripture so that the Bible student can echo the Song of Moses and the Lamb: “Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages!” (Rev. 15:3).

3. Scriptures Pointing Beyond Themselves

In this section we have in view those parts of Scripture that inherently point to a fulfill-

ment beyond themselves, as in prophecy and typology, or to an extended meaning beyond themselves, as in symbolism and parables.

a. Prophecy. Several general observations arising from the biblical self-testimony are foundational to the prophetic material. First, the Bible specifically claims that God is able to predict the near and distant future (Isa. 46:10; Dan. 2:45; 8:17-19; Rev. 1:19); the interpreter must not be influenced by modern rejection of future prediction and divine foreknowledge. Second, predictive prophecy was not given simply to satisfy curiosity about future events, but for moral purposes such as the establishment of faith (John 14:29) and the promotion of personal holiness in preparation for Christ's coming (Matt. 24:44; Rev. 22:7, 10, 11). Third, the controls for the interpretation of predictive prophecy must be found within Scripture itself; the fulfillment of prophecy must find complete correspondence with the prophetic data in order to be considered correct.

Fourth, understanding the literary structure of a prophetic book provides helpful corroborating support for the correct interpretation. For example, the chiasmic arrangement of Revelation contains two halves that portray respectively the historical and eschatological unfolding of the great controversy. Furthermore, the introductory sanctuary scenes that structure the whole book of Revelation reveal where in the flow of history each section begins. As another example, in the literary structure of Amos, the apex of the chiasm is chapter 5, where the prophet presents his impassioned calls for Israel's repentance, showing the clear conditional nature of Amos' prophecy.

Fifth, one should be especially cautious with regard to *unfulfilled* prophecy. Jesus' counsel regarding a primary moral purpose of all prophecy is pertinent: it is given so that *when it comes to pass, we may believe* (John 14:29). Before it comes to pass, we may not understand every detail of the predictions, even though the basic outline of events and issues is clear.

Within Scripture there are two different genres of prophecy: "classical" and "apocalyptic." The hermeneutical rules for these genres are different; therefore, it is important to distinguish one from the other. The distinctions are discussed in the article on biblical apocalyptic. (See Apocalyptic II. A-F.)

b. Typology. The basic characteristics of biblical typology emerge from within Scripture in passages where the NT writers explicitly label their interpretation of the OT with the word *typos*, "type," or the NT fulfillment as *antitypos*, "antitype" (see Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 10:6, 11; Heb. 8:5; 9:24; 1 Peter 3:21). Typology can be defined as the study of persons, events, or institutions in salvation history that God specifically designed to predictively prefigure their antitypical eschatological fulfillment in Christ and the gospel realities brought about by Christ.

Biblical typology may be clarified by contrasting it with other approaches to Scripture. Five distinguishing characteristics of typology are the following:

(1) **Typology is rooted in history.** It does not lose sight of the actual historical character of the persons, events, or institutions with which it deals. This is in contradistinction to allegory, which assigns meaning that denigrates or even rejects the plain historical sense.

(2) **A type points forward or predictively prefigures.** This is in contrast with a symbol, which is in itself a timeless representation of truth. Symbols may, however, also become types if used in a specific typological context. For example, a lamb in Scripture symbolizes gentleness and innocence; connected with the sanctuary, the lamb becomes a symbolic type of the Lamb of God, the Messiah.

(3) **A type prefigures, but not explicitly or verbally.** This is in distinction to predictive prophecy. Both typology and predictive prophecy refer to the future: a type, mutely (as a person, event, or institution) and a prediction, verbally. Typology and verbal prediction go hand in hand, since each type is

identified as such by some verbal indicator in Scripture.

(4) Typology involves a heightened correspondence—the antitype is greater than the type (see Jesus' announcing of Himself as "something greater than" the temple, the prophet, and the king [Matt. 12:6, 41, 42]). This is to be distinguished from a spiritual illustration or comparison, such as Peter's exhortation for women to be sober and modest as was Sarah (1 Peter 3:1-6). Sarah is an example, a model of behavior, but not a type.

(5) A type is divinely ordained to function as a prefiguration of the antitype. This is in contradistinction to a natural analogy, which many modern critical scholars have called typology. There are many analogous or similar situations in Scripture, but the NT writers reserve the word "type" for historical realities that God has divinely designed to foreshadow their antitypical fulfillment.

In their exploration of the typological fulfillment of OT persons, events, and institutions, the NT writers do not read back into the OT what is not there. Rather they remain faithful to the OT Scriptures, which have already indicated which persons, events, and institutions God has divinely designed to serve as types. The NT writers simply announce the antitypical fulfillment of what has already been indicated by the OT prophets. For example, John announces that Jesus is the antitypical Moses and refers to Deuteronomy 18:15-19, which predicts that the Messiah would be a new Moses (see John 1:21; 6:14). Again, Hebrews 8:5 announces the typological relationship between the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries, and substantiates the point by citing the OT indicator of sanctuary typology, Exodus 25:40.

The NT writers do not give an exhaustive list of OT types, but show the hermeneutical procedure, controlled by the OT indicators, of identifying biblical types. Furthermore, Jesus and the NT writers under inspiration point out NT events that God has divinely designed to be types of later events in the

plan of salvation (for example, the destruction of Jerusalem as a type of the end of the world [Matt. 24]).

The NT writers all work within the same eschatological framework in announcing the nature of typological fulfillment. There are three aspects of the one eschatological fulfillment of the OT types: (1) a basic fulfillment in Christ at His first advent; (2) the derived spiritual aspect of fulfillment in the church, both individually and corporately; and (3) the final, glorious fulfillment at the second coming of Christ and beyond. So, for example, Jesus is the antitypical Israel (Matt. 2:15); the church as Christ's body is the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16); and the apocalyptic 144,000 at the end of time are the antitypical 12 tribes of Israel (Rev. 7; 14:1-5; 15:1-4).

What is true of historical (or horizontal) typology is also true of typology involving a vertical dimension, namely, sanctuary typology: there are three aspects of the one eschatological fulfillment. Thus Jesus is the antitypical temple (John 1:14; 2:21; Matt. 12:6); the church as His body is the temple of God, both individually and corporately (1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 2 Cor. 6:16); and Revelation portrays the apocalyptic "dwelling of God" that is with men (Rev. 21:3). But there is an *additional* aspect in sanctuary typology: the heavenly sanctuary existed even before the earthly sanctuary (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5), and thus there is the overarching vertical dimension throughout both OT and NT history. The OT earthly sanctuary pointed upward to the heavenly original, as well as forward to Christ, to the church, and to the apocalyptic temple.

Not every minute detail of the type is significant. For example, there are descriptions of three different earthly sanctuaries/temples in the OT that corresponded typologically to the heavenly temple (the tabernacle of Moses, Solomon's Temple, and the eschatological temple of Ezekiel 40-48). Each was different (materials used, number of articles of furniture, dimensions, etc.), but certain basic contours were constant (number of apartments,

kinds of furniture, spatial proportions, rituals and participants, sacred times, etc.). These common elements point up the basic contours of sanctuary typology, which are summarized in Hebrews 9:1-7.

c. Symbolism. A symbol is in itself a timeless representation of truth. Thus a lamb symbolizes innocence; a horn, strength. But symbols in Scripture often become the building blocks of prophecy and typology. Thus the sanctuary lamb symbolizes Christ the Lamb of God (John 1:29); the four horns and the little horn of Daniel represent specific political or religiopolitical powers. (See Apocalyptic II. E.)

In interpreting the symbols of Scripture, basic principles may be derived from Scripture's own use of symbolism.

d. Parables. Fully one third of Jesus' teachings, as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are in parable form (some 40 different parables). We also find parables in the OT, such as Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-4) and Isaiah's parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7). The OT word for "parable," *māšal*, is also a common word for "proverb" in the book of Proverbs, thus revealing the Wisdom background of Jesus' parables. The NT word for "parable" is *parabolē*, with an etymological meaning of "placing alongside of" for the purpose of comparison.

The parable genre has a number of different forms: proverbs ("Physician, heal yourself" [Luke 4:23]), metaphors (uprooting the plant [Matt. 15:13]), figurative sayings (parable of the wineskins [Luke 5:36-38]), similitudes or similes (the parable of the mustard seed [Mark 4:30-32]), story parables (the ten virgins [Matt. 25:1-13]; the good Samaritan [Luke 10:29-37]), and allegorical parables (the parable of the sower [Mark 4:1-9, 13-20]). All the forms used by Jesus have one common element: the use of everyday experiences to draw comparisons with the truths of His kingdom.

Many of Jesus' parables have only one main point, stated by Jesus or reiterated by the Gos-

pel writers (Matt. 18:35; 20:16; Luke 15:7, 10; 16:31). But there are also those that have several points (e.g., the parable of the sower, Matt. 13:1-23). The assigning of meaning to the parts of the story obviously is justified in these instances, because Jesus intended the deeper level of meaning and indicated its interpretation. This is different from allegorizing, in which the later interpreter reads into the text a deeper level of meaning that was never intended or indicated by the original writer.

F. Contemporary Application

1. Scripture as Transcultural and Transtemporal

For Jesus and the NT biblical writers, the contemporary application arose naturally out of their theological interpretation of OT passages.

The biblical writers insist that the theological message of Scripture is not culture-bound, applicable for only a certain people and a certain time, but permanent and universally applicable. Peter, citing Isaiah 40:6-8, forcefully states this truth: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides for ever.' That is the good news which was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Most of the ethical instruction in the NT Gospels and Epistles may be seen as the practical application of OT passages: for example, Jesus' sermon on the mount applying the principles of the Decalogue; James' application of the principles of Leviticus 19; Peter's ethical instruction building on "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16, citing Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7).

2. Scriptural Controls for Determining Permanence

Certain parts of the OT, in particular the ceremonial and ritual laws and the enforce-

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ment of Israel's civil and theocratic laws, are no longer binding upon Christians. However, the NT writers do not arbitrarily decide what laws are still relevant, but consistently recognize the criteria within the OT itself that indicate which laws are universally binding and which have a built-in "statute of limitations."

The OT *mišpātim*, or civil laws, as applications of the Decalogue, are permanent in what they affirm, but the enforcement of these principles is tied to the theocratic government, and thus a built-in "statute of limitations" is involved. When the theocracy ended in A.D. 34 (in fulfillment of Daniel 9:24, and announced in the covenant lawsuit of Stephen in Acts 7), the end of the civil enforcement of these laws also arrived.

Likewise, the sacrificial/ceremonial laws were part of the typical system that reached its fulfillment in the antitype Jesus, who carried out in reality on Calvary and is carrying out in the heavenly sanctuary what was typified in the OT rituals. The built-in "statute of limitations" of these laws was also indicated in the OT (Ex. 25:9, 40 [cf. Heb. 8:5]; Ps. 40:6-8 [cf. Heb. 10:1-10]; and Dan. 9:27).

In other cases in which God condescended to bear with Israel's hardness of heart—such as allowing slavery and divorce—and did not immediately abolish these practices, Scripture clearly indicates the divine ideal in the beginning (Gen. 1-3). The Mosaic legislation, which was revolutionary for its times, leads back toward the Edenic ideal. The NT recognizes and applies this "from the beginning" hermeneutical criterion of permanence (see Matt. 19:8).

In some instances where it might not be clear whether a particular divine command is transtemporal and transcultural, the Bible gives clear indicators of the universal and permanent nature of the material. So, for example, the law of clean and unclean foods (Lev. 11) must be seen in the context of numerous lexical, structural, and theological indicators (both in OT and NT) to make plain that this is part of a universally binding legislation; the

same is true for the laws enjoined upon the Gentiles in Acts 15.

The general principle, then, articulated and illustrated by the NT writers in their application of Scripture, is to assume the transcultural and transtemporal relevancy of biblical instruction unless Scripture itself gives criteria limiting this relevancy. However, not all biblical *practice* is necessarily biblical *instruction*. The lives of God's OT and NT saints, exemplary in many ways, were also faulty and sinful: the Bible gives an accurate picture of their lives and characters for our encouragement and also for our admonition.

Although the biblical instruction is relevant to all cultures and times, it was given to a particular culture and time. Time and place must be taken into account in application. Certain forms or practices expressing a given meaning or principle in the first century may require a different form to express the same meaning today (e.g., greeting with a holy kiss [Rom. 16:16]).

Often in the context of a passage, the Bible provides controls for us to know when it is appropriate to seek for a principle and substitute another way of working out that same principle. For example, instructions for slaves and their owners (Eph. 6:5-9) are no longer specifically valid where slavery does not exist. Circumcision as a sign of belonging to the Jewish community has been replaced with baptism in the Christian church. In these cases the form, rather than the meaning, is modified.

Moreover, Scripture makes clear that certain forms are integrally bound up with their meaning and cannot be substituted by a compatible contemporary form. For example, the seventh-day Sabbath, rooted in Creation, cannot be replaced with Sunday; the ordinance of foot washing, rooted in Jesus' explicit example and command, cannot be replaced with another expression of humility.

3. Personalizing Scripture

The final goal of interpreting Scripture is to make practical application of each passage

to the individual life. Christ and the NT apostles repeatedly drove home the message of the gospel contained in the Scriptures in order to bring the hearers or readers to salvation and an ever-closer personal relationship with God.

It is essential for the interpreter to ask of the passage: What are the message and purpose of the passage that God wants me to apply personally? How does this passage impact upon my own spiritual life? What promises does it have for me to claim? What portrait of Jesus to praise Him for? What victory to experience? What sin or failure to avoid? What practical steps to take? What command to perform out of gratitude? In the description

of local situations, what timeless principles are applicable to me today?

At the Exodus God established that each succeeding generation of Israelites should consider itself to have personally come out of Egypt (Ex. 13:8, 9). This principle of personalization was repeated many times, both to OT Israel (Deut. 5:2-4; 6:20, 21) and to spiritual Israel (Gal. 3:29; Rev. 15:1, 2; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15, 21; Rom. 6:3-6; Eph. 1:20; 2:6; Heb. 4:3, 16; 6:19; 10:19, 20; 12:22-24). I should ultimately read and accept the Scriptures as if I were a participant in the mighty saving acts of God, as if God's messages were personally addressed to me—God's living and active Word to my soul.

IV. The History of Biblical Hermeneutics

A. The Inner-Biblical Hermeneutic

The history of biblical hermeneutics must begin with the way the Bible writers themselves interpreted antecedent Scripture. We have seen that the later OT writers called the people of Israel back to obedience to the standard of God's revelation in the Torah. The NT writers did not take the OT out of context in their hermeneutic, but following the example of Jesus, saw OT passages in the light of their larger canonical context. They presented a sound hermeneutical pattern to emulate.

B. Early Jewish Biblical Hermeneutics

1. Scribal Exegesis Before A.D. 70

In his dissertation David Instone Brewer analyzed all the extant writings of the scribes who preceded the Rabbinic period (A.D. 70). He concludes, "The predecessors of the rabbis before 70 C.E. did not interpret Scripture out of context, did not look for any meaning in Scripture other than the plain sense, and did not change the text to fit their interpretation, though the later rabbis did all these things" (Brewer 1). The attitude of these early scribes toward Scripture may be summarized under

five points: (a) Scripture is entirely consistent with itself, (b) every detail is significant, (c) Scripture must be interpreted according to its context, (d) there are no secondary meanings in Scripture, and (e) there is only one valid form of the Hebrew text of Scripture.

In order to interpret Scripture faithfully, the early scribal tradition developed rules of interpretation, which are neatly formulated in the seven hermeneutical rules of Hillel (d. c. A.D. 10). A number of these rules are utilized in the NT.

2. Later Rabbinic Interpretation

The later rabbis, after A.D. 70, continued the *pešat* or "plain, literal" interpretation of Scripture, but also began to mix this with a *šōd* or "secret, allegorical" approach. The 13 rules of Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (first half of second century A.D.) gave impetus to the development of the Midrashic method (from *derûš*, "searched") to expound the Jewish Halakah (civil and religious law). This method included embellishments of the text that departed from its plain sense. The 32 rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose (second century A.D.) were employed in the interpretation of Haggadah (popular homilies). These later rules included techniques of interpretation that

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involved embellishing the biblical text and departure from its plain sense. Later rabbis found multiple meanings in a single text: the plain meaning, the hint that points to a hidden meaning, the secondary or allegorical meaning, and a mystical meaning hidden in the letters.

3. Nonscribal Traditions: Qumran

Not all pre-A.D. 70 Jewish exegesis stayed with the plain meaning of the text. In the Essene community of Qumran, the community leader, the Teacher of Righteousness, was considered to be the inspired interpreter of the prophets; he explained the “mysteries” of the prophetic passages as they applied to his eschatological community. The characteristic hermeneutic developed was known as *rāz pēšer*, “mystery interpretation.” In the surviving samples of Qumran *rāz pēšer*, a typical approach would be to quote a biblical passage followed by the words “This means” or “Its *pēšer* is,” and a strict identification of the Essene community with the text of Scripture.

By means of an atomistic interpretation of each phrase, word, and even part of a word in the prophetic writings, all was made to refer to the Qumran community. The prophets were seen as having written riddles or cryptograms for the time of the eschatological fulfillment that the Qumran people thought was already in process.

4. Nonscribal Traditions: Philo of Alexandria

The Jewish scholar Philo (first century A.D.) popularized the allegorical approach to Scripture. His work was based upon a Platonic model of reality in which the inferior, transitory world of the senses was a reflection of the superior world of eternal ideas. In his allegorical approach to Scripture, wherever there were difficulties in the biblical text, he gave up the literal sense for an allegorical interpretation. The literal sense was the historical husk which must be stripped away in order to arrive at the kernel, the hidden spiritual meaning.

The basic hermeneutical assumption of

Philo was that the *interpreter* is as inspired as the biblical author. Thus, the interpreter is the final arbiter of the allegorical meaning of the text. If the text does not conform to the prevailing worldview, it is the interpreter’s responsibility to reinterpret the text. The final authority is not Scripture, but the interpreter’s subjective and inspired imagination.

C. Early Christian Hermeneutics

1. Early Church Fathers

A few of the early Church Fathers are noted for introducing or propounding specific hermeneutical approaches. Marcion the heretic caused a hermeneutic to be developed during the early second century, when he rejected the OT as binding Scripture for Christians. He developed the law-grace dualism, in which the OT presented a picture of law, vengeance, hate, and wrath, while the NT represented grace and love. This concept was even applied to the NT: only Luke was regarded as a true Gospel, while other portions of the NT were rejected. Many of the early Church Fathers wrote against Marcion’s heresy.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. 130-c. 200) utilized the principle of “rule of faith” to defend orthodox Christian doctrine. His rule of faith was the tradition preserved in the churches. Thus he became the father of authoritative exegesis. The final norm was not Scripture alone, but Scripture as interpreted by the authority of the church. About the same time Tertullian (c. 160-c. 240) used typology to defend the unity of Scripture, although at times his typological correspondences were mere allegory.

2. Alexandrian Hermeneutics

In the hermeneutical school of Alexandria, beginning with Clement (d. 215), the allegorism of Philo “was baptized into Christ.” Clement developed five senses of Scripture: the historical, the doctrinal, the prophetic, the philosophical, and the mystical. Origen of Alexandria (185-254) claimed that the text of Scripture has

three meanings patterned after the analogy with the threefold nature of man: (a) the bodily or literal meaning, which is least important; (b) the psychic or the moral (ethical) meaning; and (c) the spiritual or allegorical/mystical, which is most important and accessible to only the most mature interpreters. This threefold sense, building upon Platonic/Philonian dualism, tended to strip away the historical husk to arrive at the allegorical kernel.

3. Antiochene Hermeneutics

In contrast with the Alexandrian allegorical school, the interpreters at Antioch sought to uphold the plain, literal-historical sense of Scripture. Represented by such exegetes as Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and popularized by the preacher Chrysostom (347-407), the Antiochene hermeneutic was founded upon the same basic presuppositions set forth in this article. Its exegesis followed essentially the same guidelines as those utilized by the biblical writers in their interpretation of antecedent Scripture.

D. Medieval Hermeneutics

Unfortunately, the Antiochene hermeneutic was overshadowed and finally officially eliminated by the allegorical approach popularized by the Alexandrian school. John Cassian (c. 425) expanded Origen's threefold sense of Scripture to four: (a) historical (the literal meaning), (b) tropological (the moral meaning, from *tropos* [way of life]), (c) allegorical (mystical or Christological), and (d) anagogical (eschatological or heavenly, from *anagō*, "to lead up"). For 1,000 years the *quadriga* (the "four-horse chariot" of the allegorical method) held sway in the Roman Catholic Church. However, there were always a few who, despite persecution, accepted the full and sole authority of the Scriptures in their plain and literal sense.

E. Reformation Hermeneutics and the Historical-Grammatical Method

The Reformation interpreters of the six-

teenth century broke with the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Gradually Martin Luther gave up "driving" the *quadriga* through the Bible and called for understanding its plain sense. In his *Table Talk* 5285 he recalled that he had been an expert at allegorizing Scripture, but now his best skill was "to give the literal, simple sense of Scripture, from which come power, life, comfort and instruction."

Luther developed four principles of interpreting Scripture. The first was *sola scriptura*, "the Bible only," as the final authority over tradition and human philosophy. Luther, of course, did not invent this biblical principle but powerfully applied it. *Sola scriptura*, along with *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone), became the battle cry of the Reformation.

Luther's second hermeneutical principle was "Scripture is its own interpreter" (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), which also has solid biblical foundations. Luther rejected philosophy, as well as patristic interpretation and ecclesiastical teaching authority, as keys to interpret Scripture.

Third, Luther also applied what became known as the Christocentric principle. His key phrase was "what manifest Christ" (*was Christum treibet*). What began as a laudable enterprise to see how Scripture points, urges, drives to Christ became dangerous as Luther came to the conclusion that not all Scripture did drive to Christ. This led him to consider some parts of Scripture as less important than others. Accompanying the Christocentric principle was a fourth: dualism between letter and spirit (law and gospel, works and grace). Much of the OT was seen as letter and much of the NT as spirit, although not all in the NT was gospel nor all in the OT was law. Both of these last two principles deny the principle of the totality of Scripture (*tota scriptura*) and lead to subjectivism. The interpreter's own experience ultimately becomes the norm.

All the other Reformers accepted the first two principles of Luther, including Zwingli,

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Calvin, and the Anabaptists. These Reformers consistently upheld the Bible and the Bible alone as the standard of truth and sought to utilize Scripture, instead of tradition or scholastic philosophy, to interpret Scripture.

The biblical principles of interpretation recovered by the Reformers, coupled with the advances in textual and historical-grammatical analysis of the Renaissance (Erasmus and others), led to a robust Protestant hermeneutic that has carried on until now and has become known as the historical-grammatical-literary-theological approach or (for short) the grammatico-historical method or historical-biblical method. This method has had able proponents since Reformation times, including nineteenth-century exegetical giants such as Ernst Hengstenberg and Franz Delitzsch. It is currently the approach utilized by conservative evangelical scholarship.

F. The Enlightenment Hermeneutic and the Historical-Critical Method

1. Historical Development

In the seventeenth century Protestant interpretation fossilized into a rigid orthodoxy, with emphasis upon the precise formulations of right doctrine in creeds. This drove many to seek freedom from the stifling authoritarianism of the church. Some followed the path of pietism with its emphasis upon the individual spiritual life, but many others, in the wake of the Copernican revolution and the struggle between science and religion, decided to throw off all external authority. Thus empiricism, deism, and rationalism gained ground.

Richard Simon (1638-1712), a Protestant who became a Catholic priest, was the founder of biblical criticism. In his attempt to refute Protestantism, he raised issues that destroyed confidence in the authority of the Bible. Applying the principles of the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, Simon rejected the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in favor of a long process of redaction and compilation. His 1678

book was so radical that the Catholic Church placed it on the index of forbidden works.

Within a few years, in the wake of the rise of rationalism, a number of scholars began to view Scripture in the same way as any other book. The watershed of the Enlightenment came with Johann Semler (1725-1791) and his four-volume *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771-1775). He argued that the Bible was not entirely inspired and challenged the divine authority of the canon. The Bible was viewed from a purely historical perspective, to be studied like any other ancient document.

In the decades that followed, German scholars developed an approach to Scripture “from below,” without reference to its divine element. This approach steadily gained ground throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and became known as higher criticism or the historical-critical method. The goal of this method was to verify the truthfulness of the biblical data using the principles and procedures of secular historical science.

2. Presuppositions of Historical Criticism

The basic presuppositions of the historical-critical method—the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation—were articulated by Ernst Troeltsch in 1913. The principle most characteristic of the method is the principle of criticism. The word “criticism” is used here in the technical sense of Descartes’ “methodological doubt” and refers to the autonomy of the investigator to interrogate and evaluate the scriptural witness, to judge the truthfulness, adequacy, and intelligibility of the specific declarations of the text.

In close relation to the principle of criticism is the principle of analogy, which assumes that present experience is the criterion for evaluating events narrated in Scripture, inasmuch as all events are, in principle, similar. In other words, the interpreter is to judge what happened in biblical times by what is happening today; if one does not see a given phenomenon happening today, in all probability

it did not happen then. Since no special creation or worldwide flood occurs now, most probably neither happened then. The same is true with miracles and resurrection from the dead: these must be explained away as nonhistorical.

The principle of correlation states that history is a closed system of cause and effect with no room for supernatural intervention. Events are so correlated and interrelated that a change in any given phenomenon necessitates a change in its cause and effect. Historical explanations therefore rest on a chain of natural causes and effects. This is not to say that all historical critics deny the existence of God or the supernatural. But *methodologically*, historical criticism has no room for the supernatural; scholars using it bracket out the supernatural and look for natural causes and effects.

3. Procedures of Historical Criticism

The triumph of historical criticism was assured at the end of the nineteenth century in the influential works of Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), who popularized an approach of the historical-critical method known as source criticism. In the twentieth century additional procedures were developed: form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition history, and most recently, canon criticism. Each of these procedures calls for brief attention.

Source criticism attempts to reconstruct and analyze the hypothetical literary sources that underlie the biblical text. Wellhausen popularized this approach to the Pentateuch, known as the new documentary hypothesis. The Pentateuch was not viewed as written by Moses, as Scripture claims (John 1:45), but rather was seen as a composite of four later documents or sources: (1) the Jahwist (J), using the divine name Yahweh, written in the southern kingdom of Judah about 880 B.C.; (2) the Elohist (E), using the divine name Elohim, written in the northern kingdom of Israel about 770 B.C.; (3) the Deuteronomist (D), written in the time of Josiah, 621 B.C.; and

(4) the Priestly (P), which began to be drafted in the time of the Babylonian exile, and continued until the time of the final redaction (compiling and editing) about 450 B.C. This hypothesis brought about a totally reconstructed picture of Israel's history.

Source criticism of the Pentateuch was undergirded by several specific presuppositions: skepticism of the historicity of the recorded narratives, an evolutionary model of Israel's development from primitive to advanced forms, the rejection of supernatural activity in this evolutionary development, and the assumption that the sources were human products of the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the communities that produced them.

Various internal arguments for composite sources in the Pentateuch were employed by source critics: the use of different divine names, variations in language and style, alleged contradictions and anachronisms, and supposed doublets and repetitions. All of these arguments have been analyzed in detail by conservative scholars and found to be unconvincing. Even critical scholars today are in disarray over many aspects of the documentary hypothesis, which despite the shaking of its foundations, still has not been abandoned.

The same presuppositions undergirding Pentateuchal source criticism—plus the additional negation of predictive prophecy—have led to the hypothetical reconstruction of sources elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Isaiah has been divided into three major sources (Isaiah of Jerusalem [1-39], Deutero-Isaiah [40-55], and Trito-Isaiah [56-66]), and the book of Zechariah into two sections (1-8 and 9-14). Again, studies from those accepting the Scripture's own claims for the authorship of these books have shown the arguments of source critics to be ill-founded.

NT source criticism has focused largely on the "Synoptic problem"—the question of possible sources underlying the first three Gospels and the interrelationships among these. Several modern solutions have been suggested for the Synoptic problem. Developed

in the late eighteenth century, the Griesbach hypothesis presupposed the priority of Matthew, with Luke utilizing Matthew as a source and Mark utilizing both Matthew and Luke. The Lachmann hypothesis, developed in 1835, argued for the priority of Mark, followed by Matthew and then Luke. This hypothesis was modified a few years later to include two primitive, apostolic sources: Mark and the Logia (also called “Q” for *Quelle*).

The two-source hypothesis, with various modifications, is still the most widely accepted source-critical theory, although there have been numerous reactions against it in the latter part of the twentieth century. Further developments include a four-source hypothesis (B. H. Streeter, 1924, who adds to Mark and Q an L source [material unique to Luke] and the M source [material unique to Matthew]), various multiple-source hypotheses, and the Aramaic source hypotheses.

Recently Eta Linnemann, eminent Bultmanian scholar turned evangelical, has forcefully rejected the entire source-critical endeavor on the Gospels. She has argued that there is no Synoptic problem after all, that none of the Gospels is dependent on another, but all go back directly to the ear- and eyewitnesses of the words and deeds of Jesus (185, 186).

In the 1920s another approach of the historical-critical method was developed: form criticism (German *Formgeschichte*, literally “form history”). This critical procedure, pioneered by Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) in the OT and Rudolf Bultmann in the NT, retained many of the same naturalistic presuppositions used in source criticism, but focused upon the preliterate stage of oral traditions behind the written sources. Form critics assumed that the biblical material came into existence in much the same way as conventional folk literature of modern times and so adopted the basic principles of secular form critics like the Grimm brothers, who were studying German fairy tales.

Building upon the presuppositions of source criticism, form critics assumed that the sociological forces of the community (in its life set-

ting) shaped the form and content of the Christian traditions, and that this material developed from short and simple units to longer and more complex traditions. The specific form-critical task was to analyze the different forms or genres of biblical literature (e.g., the different literary forms in the Psalms), to divide them into their conjectured original smaller oral units, and then hypothetically reconstruct the life setting that brought forth these forms.

In this process of reconstruction, the form critics often took little notice of the plain statements of Scripture regarding the life setting behind the material. For example, the superscriptions of the Psalms were seen as added much later and therefore not historically reliable.

Neither early source critics nor form critics of the early twentieth century paid much attention to the role of the redactors or editors who put the preexisting material together into the final canonical form: these were viewed as compilers who left little or nothing of their own stamp upon the material. But this was to change by the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of a new procedure in historical criticism: redaction criticism (German *Redaktionsgeschichte*, literally “redaction history”).

Three NT scholars pioneered the approach of redaction criticism in their examination of the Synoptic Gospels: G. Bornkamm (1948, Matthew), Hans Conzelmann (1954, Luke), and W. Marxsen (1956, Mark). They began to focus upon the evangelists as full-fledged theologians. The aim of the redaction critic was to discover and describe the unique life settings (the sociological and theological motivations) of the biblical redactors/writers that caused them to shape, modify, or even create material for the final product that they wrote. The basic assumption underlying this approach is that each biblical writer has a unique theology and life setting that differs from, and may contradict, his sources as well as other redactors. This procedure tends to fracture the unity of Scripture, which is seen to contain not one but many differing, often contradictory, theologies.

A fourth procedure in historical criticism is

called tradition history (German *Traditionsgeschichte*). Pioneered by Gerhard von Rad in the 1930s for the OT, it built upon source and form criticism, attempting to trace the precompositional history of traditions from stage to stage, as passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, to the final written form. As redaction criticism became popular, tradition history came to encompass the entire history of the tradition, from oral traditions, to written sources, to final shaping by the creative redactor. The underlying assumption in this approach is that each new generation interpretively reshaped the material.

A recent procedure of the historical-critical method, called canon criticism, represents the logical conclusion to the attempt to hypothetically reconstruct the historical development of the biblical text. Pioneered by James Sanders in the 1970s and 1980s, this approach builds upon those that preceded it but focuses particularly upon the life setting (sociological and theological forces) in the synagogue and church that determined which documents were selected as canonical. As with the other historical-critical procedures, the assumption in this approach is that human, this-worldly forces can explain the process—in this case, that of canonization—without recourse to guidance by a supernatural Being.

4. Other Critical Approaches

Recently there has been a shift in critical biblical studies toward various new literary-critical hermeneutical approaches. These procedures usually do not deny the results of historical-criticism, nor do they abandon the central principle of criticism. Rather, they bracket out the historical questions concerning the historical development of the biblical text and concentrate on its final canonical shape.

Many of these literary-critical hermeneutical approaches focus upon the final form of the biblical text as a literary work of art. These include such overlapping procedures as rhetorical criticism (James Muilenberg), new literary criticism (Robert Alter), close reading

(Meir Weiss), and narrative criticism. Common to all of these is the concern for the text as a finished work of art. The literary productions of the Bible are usually divorced from history and regarded as works of fiction or myth, with their own “autonomous imaginative universe” and “imitation of reality.” Emphasis is placed upon the various literary conventions utilized consciously or unconsciously by the writer as he or she crafts the biblical story into a literary work of art.

Another recent synchronic approach (i.e., an approach that deals with the final form of the text) is structuralism. Biblical structuralism builds upon modern linguistic theory of Claude Levi-Strauss and has been developed in the United States by such scholars as Daniel Patte. Its main purpose is to “decode” the text in order to uncover the subconscious “deep structures” universally inherent in language. In this method the divine absolute is replaced by an absolute from below, the deep structures of language. A related literary approach is semiotics, or “sign theory,” fathered by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce, which focuses upon the linguistic codes that form the framework within which the message of the text is given (much like the musical staff on which the specific notes may be placed). The major concerns of these approaches are with layers of linguistic structures or sign systems underlying the message.

A number of other approaches to Scripture retain the critical presuppositions of the historical-critical method but focus upon goals other than hypothetically reconstructing the historical development of the biblical text. Some of these approaches build upon the new trends mentioned in previous paragraphs. Major examples include philosophical hermeneutics (the metacritical hermeneutical theory of Gadamer and the hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval of Ricoeur); hermeneutics of sociocritical theory, including sociological criticism (Gottwald), liberation (Gutierrez), and feminist hermeneutic (Trible); reader-response criticism (McKnight); and deconstructionism (Derrida).

All of these approaches tend to have some external norm—be it philosophy, sociology, Marxist political theory, feminism, postmodern pluralism, or the subjectivism of the reader—which replaces the *sola scriptura* principle and relativizes Scripture. No longer is there an objective, normative meaning of Scripture; rather there is a feminist reading, a Black reading, an Asian reading, a Lutheran reading. All are seen to have their own validity as the reader’s horizon merges with the horizon of the biblical text.

Historical-Critical Method

A. Definition: The attempt to verify the truthfulness and understand the meaning of biblical data on the basis of the principles and procedures of secular historical science.

B. Objective: To arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is the human author’s intention as understood by his contemporaries.

C. Basic Presuppositions

1. Secular norm: The principles and procedures of secular historical science constitute the external norm and proper method for evaluating the truthfulness and interpreting the meaning of biblical data.

2. Principle of criticism (methodological doubt): The autonomous human investigator may interrogate and evaluate apart from the specific declarations of the biblical text.

3. Principle of analogy: Present experience is the criterion for evaluating the probability of biblical events having occurred, since all events are similar in principle.

4. Principle of correlation (or causation): A closed system of cause and effect leaves no room for the supernatural intervention of God in history.

5. Disunity of Scripture: Since its production involved many human authors or redactors, Scripture cannot be compared with Scripture to arrive at a unified biblical teaching.

6. “Time-conditioned” or “culturally conditioned” nature of Scripture: The historical context is *responsible* for the production of Scripture.

7. The Bible contains but does not equal the Word of God: The human and divine elements of Scripture must be distinguished and separated.

G. Two Hermeneutical Methods Compared

The two major hermeneutical methods—the historical-critical method and the historico-grammatical or the historical-biblical—may be schematically compared by means of the following table. Admittedly, some scholars, who are dissatisfied with both methods, attempt to work somewhere between the two methodologies.

Historical-Biblical Method

A. Definition: The attempt to understand the meaning of biblical data using methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone.

B. Objective: To arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is what God intended to communicate, whether or not it is fully known by the human author or his contemporaries (1 Peter 1:10-12).

C. Basic Presuppositions

1. Sola scriptura: The authority and unity of Scripture are such that Scripture is the final norm with regard to content and method of interpretation (Isa. 8:20).

2. The Bible is the ultimate authority and is not amenable to criticism: biblical data are accepted at face value and not subjected to an external norm to determine truthfulness, adequacy, validity, intelligibility (Isa. 66:2).

3. Suspension of the compelling principle of analogy to allow for the unique activity of God as described in Scripture and in the process of the formation of Scripture (2 Peter 1:19-21).

4. Suspension of the principle of correlation (or natural cause and effect) to allow for the divine intervention in history as described in Scripture (Heb. 1:1, 2).

5. Unity of Scripture: Since the many human writers are superintended by one divine Author, Scripture can be compared with Scripture to arrive at biblical doctrine (Luke 24:27; 1 Cor. 2:13).

6. Timeless nature of Scripture: God speaks through the prophet to a specific culture, yet the message transcends cultural settings as timeless truth (John 10:35).

7. The Bible equals the Word of God; the divine and human elements in Scripture cannot be distinguished and separated (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

D. Basic Hermeneutical Procedures

1. Literary (source) criticism: The attempt to hypothetically reconstruct and understand the process of literary development leading to the present form of the text, based on the assumption that Scriptures are a product of the life setting of the community that produced them (often in opposition to specific scriptural statements regarding the origin and nature of the sources).

2. Form criticism: The attempt to hypothetically reconstruct the preliterate (oral) development behind the various literary forms, based on the assumption that the biblical material has an oral prehistory like conventional folk literature and arises from traditions that are formed according to the laws that govern the development of folk traditions.

3. Redaction criticism: The attempt to discover and describe the life setting, sociological and theological motivations that determined the basis upon which the redactor selected, modified, reconstructed, edited, altered, or added to traditional materials in order to make them say what was appropriate within his own life setting, according to his own theological concerns; each redactor had a unique theology and life setting differing from (and often contradicting) his sources and other redactors.

4. Tradition history: The attempt to trace the precompositional history of traditions from stage to stage as passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation to the final written form; based upon the assumption that each generation interpretively reshaped the material.

5. Canon criticism: The attempt to reconstruct the life setting (sociological and theological forces) in the synagogue and the early church that determined the present shape and contents of the biblical canon; assumes that human forces explain the canonization process.

Notice the differences in definition, objective, and basic presuppositions. The first presupposition of the historical-critical method ("secular norm") represents the basic orientation of the method: human reason is the ultimate criterion for truth. Presuppositions 2-4 indicate the crucial underlying principles of the method (see the classic formulation of these by Troeltsch). The last three indicate that the method leads to the diminution of the unity, timeless relevance, and full authority of Scripture.

D. Basic Hermeneutical Procedures

1. Literary analysis: Examination of the literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form, accepting as a unity those parts of Scripture that are presented as such, and accepting at face value the specific scriptural statements regarding the origins and nature of the biblical materials.

2. Form analysis: An attempt to describe and classify the various types of literature found in the canonical form of Scripture, accepting at face value the life setting for each form as indicated by the biblical data.

3. Theological analysis of biblical books: A study of the particular theological emphasis of each Bible writer (according to his own mind-set and capacity to understand), seen within the larger context of the unity of the whole Scripture, that allows the Bible to be its own interpreter and the various theological emphases to be in harmony with each other.

4. Diachronic (thematic) analysis: The attempt to trace the development of various themes and motifs chronologically through the Bible in its canonical form; based on the scriptural position that God gives added (progressive) revelation to later generations, which, however, is in full harmony with all previous revelation.

5. History of the canon: Examination of the process of canonization of Scripture, assuming that the criteria for canonicity are inherent in the biblical materials as inspired by God, and that the Holy Spirit guided the Jewish and Christian communities to recognize these canonical books, which preserved the witness of the Bible writers.

Based upon biblical evidence, the historical-biblical approach to hermeneutics rejects each of these presuppositions. With regard to the principle of criticism in particular, Gerhard Maier, a noted German scholar who broke with the historical-critical method, wrote, "A *critical* method must fail, because it represents an inner impossibility. For the correlative or counterpoint to revelation is not critique but obedience; it is not correction—not even on the basis of a partially recognized and applied revelation—but it is

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willingness to say, “let-me-be-corrected.”

Both methods analyze historical context, literary features, genre or literary type, theology of the writer, the development of themes, and the process of canonization. But the historical-biblical approach rejects the principle of criticism; it *analyzes* but refuses to *critique* the Bible; it accepts the text of Scripture at face value as true and refuses to engage in the threefold process of dissection, conjecture, and hypothetical reconstruction that is basic to historical-critical analysis.

Some evangelical scholars in recent decades have attempted to make the historical-critical method acceptable by removing its antisupernatural bias while retaining the method. However, this is not really possible, because presuppositions and method are inextricably interwoven. The basis of the historical-critical method is secular historical science, which by its very nature *methodologically* excludes the supernatural and instead seeks natural causes for historical events.

Central to the historical-critical method is the principle of criticism, according to which nothing is accepted at face value, but everything must be verified or corrected by reexamining the evidence. Thus regarding the Bible, the human interpreter is the final determiner of truth; reason or experience is the final test of the authenticity of a passage. As long as this basic principle is retained, the danger of the historical-critical method has not been averted, even though the supernatural element may be accepted. If the principle of criticism is removed, the historical-*critical* method ceases to be. The presence or absence of the fundamental principle of criticism is the litmus test of whether or not critical methodology is being employed.

Those who follow the historical-biblical method apply similar study *tools* utilized in historical criticism. Careful attention is given to historical, literary and linguistic, grammatical-syntactical, and theological details, as outlined throughout this article. But while

utilizing the gains brought about by the historical-critical method in sharpening various study tools for *analysis* of the biblical text, there is a consistent intent to eliminate the element of *criticism* that stands as judge upon the Word.

H. Bible-based Hermeneutics in the Advent Movement

William Miller developed a simple set of rules for interpreting the Bible. These appeared in the introduction to his *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843* (see Damsteegt 299; Hyde 112). These may be summarized as follows:

1. All Scripture is necessary and may be understood by diligent study by one who has faith.

2. Scripture must be its own expositor.

3. To understand doctrine, all the Scripture passages on the topic must be brought together.

4. God has revealed things to come by visions, in figures, and in parables; these must be studied together since one prophecy complements another. A word should be understood literally if it makes good sense; otherwise, one must discover from other passages its figurative sense.

5. A historical event is the fulfillment of prophecy only when it matches the prophecy in all details.

These hermeneutical principles all built upon the historico-grammatical method of interpretation espoused by the Reformers. Early Adventist pioneers used these principles. In 1884 Ellen White wrote, “Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel’s message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted” (RH Nov. 25, 1884). After quoting five of Miller’s rules, she added, “In our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.”

Ellen White’s writings strongly uphold all the basic presuppositions and specific guide-

lines for interpreting Scripture as advocated by the historico-grammatical (historical-biblical) method and as set forth in this article. (See the selected quotations in section V.)

She also demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the essential constitutive elements and the dangers involved in the use of the historical-critical method then known as "higher criticism": "The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives" (AA 474).

Although most Adventist scholars have adhered to the historico-grammatical (historical-biblical) method, since 1950 some voices within Adventism have advocated a shift toward a modified historical-critical method that accepts the supernatural but also retains the principle of criticism. In 1986 the Annual Council of SDAs voted to accept the report of the Methods of Bible Study Committee, which rejected the use of the historical-critical method.

V. Ellen G. White Comments

A. *Biblical Interpretation*

"In our time there is a wide departure from their [the Scriptures'] doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty" (GC 204, 205; see also 1SM 416).

"The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience. . . .

"The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested" (GC vii).

"But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the

According to the report, "Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists" (AR Jan. 22, 1987).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the hermeneutic of the biblical writers, of Antioch, and of the Reformation. It rejects the allegorical method of Alexandria and medieval Catholicism, and the historical-critical method of the rationalistic Enlightenment and its later developments.

In so doing, Adventists maintain the Reformers' historicist hermeneutic of prophecy, which has been abandoned by virtually all of Christendom today.

Seventh-day Adventists are the hermeneutical heirs of the Reformation. And as did the radical reformers of the sixteenth century, they continually seek to go "back to the roots," to base all their presuppositions, their principles of interpretation, their faith, and their practice upon the absolute authority of God's infallible Word.

deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain 'Thus saith the Lord' in its support" (*ibid.* 595; see also Ev 256; EW 78; COL 39; 5T 700; MH 462; COL 110, 111).

"The word of God is sufficient to enlighten the most beclouded mind and may be understood by those who have any desire to understand it" (5T 663; see also GC vii).

"But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ,

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that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us' (John 1:14)" (GC vi).

"The Bible is God's voice speaking to us, just as surely as though we could hear it with our ears. If we realized this, with what awe would we open God's Word, and with what earnestness would we search its precepts! The reading and contemplation of the Scriptures would be regarded as an audience with the Infinite One" (6T 393).

"There are some that may think they are fully capable with their finite judgment to take the Word of God, and to state what are the words of inspiration, and what are not the words of inspiration. I want to warn you off that ground, my brethren in the ministry. 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' There is no finite man that lives, I care not who he is or whatever his position, that God has authorized to pick and choose in His Word. . . .

"Do not let any living man come to you and begin to dissect God's Word, telling what is revelation, what is inspiration and what is not, without a rebuke. . . . We want no one to say, 'This I will reject, and this will I receive,' but we want to have implicit faith in the Bible as a whole and as it is" (7BC 919; see also COL 39).

"The Bible is its own expositor. One passage will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the Word" (FE 187).

"The Bible is its own interpreter. With beautiful simplicity one portion connects itself with the truth of another portion, until the whole Bible is blended in one harmonious whole. Light flashes forth from one text to illuminate some portion of the Word that has seemed more obscure" (OHC 207; see also Ed 190; COL 128; TM 106).

"There should be a settled belief in the divine authority of God's holy Word. The Bible is not to be tested by men's ideas of science. Human knowledge is an unreliable guide. . . . All truth, whether in nature or in revelation, is consistent with itself in all its manifestations" (PP 114; see also Ed 123, 124).

"The Bible was not written for the scholar alone; on the contrary, it was designed for the common people. The great truths necessary for salvation are made as clear as noon-day; and none will mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God" (SC 89).

"Even the prophets who were favored with the special illumination of the Spirit did not fully comprehend the import of the revelations committed to them. The meaning was to be unfolded from age to age, as the people of God should need the instruction therein contained" (GC 344; see also GC 598, 599; 7BC 920).

B. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

"A true knowledge of the Bible can be gained only through the aid of that Spirit by whom the Word was given" (Ed 189; see also 5T 704; COL 408).

"Whenever the study of the Scriptures is entered upon without a prayerful, humble, teachable spirit, the plainest and simplest as well as the most difficult passages will be wrested from their true meaning" (GC 521).

"When the word of God is opened without reverence and without prayer; when the thoughts and affections are not fixed upon God, or in harmony with His will, the mind is clouded with doubts; and in the very study of the Bible, skepticism strengthens. The enemy takes control of the thoughts, and he suggests interpretations that are not correct. Whenever men are not in word and deed seeking to be in harmony with God, then, however learned they may be, they are liable to err in their understanding of Scripture, and it is not safe to trust to their explanations. Those who look to the Scriptures to find discrepancies have not spiritual insight. With distorted vision they will see many causes for doubt and unbelief in things that are really plain and simple" (SC 110, 111).

"The Bible student must empty himself of

every prejudice, lay his own ideas at the door of investigation, and with humble, subdued heart, with self hid in Christ, with earnest prayer, he should seek wisdom from God" (CT 463; see also GC 599, 600; TM 108; CT 463; 2SM 114).

C. Specific Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation

1. Text and Translation

"I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible; yet when copies of it were few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition" (EW 220, 221).

"Some look to us gravely and say, 'Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?' This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. . . . All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth" (1SM 16).

2. Historical Context

"The lives recorded in the Bible are authentic histories of actual individuals. From Adam down through successive generations to the times of the apostles we have a plain, unvarnished account of what actually occurred and the genuine experience of real characters" (4T 9).

"An understanding of the customs of those who lived in Bible times, of the location and time of events, is practical knowledge; for it aids in making clear the figures of the Bible and in bringing out the force of Christ's lessons" (CT 518).

3. Literary Analysis

"Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers" (GC vi).

"The Lord gave His Word in just the way He wanted it to come. He gave it through different writers, each having his own individuality, though going over the same history. Their testimonies are brought together in one Book, and are like the testimonies in a social meeting. They do not represent things in just the same style. Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds. The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very hearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace and distinctive beauty" (1SM 21, 22).

"The outward beauty of the Bible, the beauty of imagery and expression, is but the setting, as it were, for its real treasure—the beauty of holiness" (Ed 192).

4. Verse-by-Verse Analysis

"In daily study the verse-by-verse method is often most helpful. Let the student take one verse, and concentrate the mind on ascertaining the thought that God has put into that verse for him, and then dwell upon the thought until it becomes his own. One passage thus studied until its significance is clear is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained" (*ibid.* 189).

"We must be careful lest we misinterpret the Scriptures. The plain teachings of the Word of God are not to be so spiritualized that the reality is lost sight of. Do not overstrain the meaning of sentences in the Bible in an effort to bring forth something odd in order to

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please the fancy. Take the Scriptures as they read” (ISM 170).

“The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes” (*ibid.* 20).

5. Theological Analysis

“The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the Word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation” (Ed 190).

“The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God. From the first intimation of hope in the sentence pronounced in Eden to that last glorious promise of the Revelation, . . . the burden of every book and every passage of the Bible is the unfolding of this wondrous theme—man’s uplifting” (*ibid.* 125).

“Some portions of Scripture are indeed too plain to be misunderstood, but there are others whose meaning does not lie on the surface to be seen at a glance. Scripture must be compared with scripture. There must be careful research and prayerful reflection” (SC 90, 91; see also Ed 125, 126; CG 511; FE 187).

“Scriptural difficulties can never be mastered by the same methods that are employed in grappling with philosophical problems. We should not engage in the study of the Bible

with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God, and a sincere desire to learn His will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth” (GC 599).

“Both in divine revelation and in nature, God has given to men mysteries to command their faith. This must be so. We may be ever searching, ever inquiring, ever learning, and yet there is an infinity beyond” (8T 261).

“Men of ability have devoted a lifetime of study and prayer to the searching of the Scriptures, and yet there are many portions of the Bible that have not been fully explored. Some passages of Scripture will never be perfectly comprehended until in the future life Christ shall explain them. There are mysteries to be unraveled, statements that human minds cannot harmonize” (GW 312; see also 5T 533; 1SM 20).

6. Typology, Symbolism, and Parables

“The ceremonial system was made up of symbols pointing to Christ, to His sacrifice and His priesthood. This ritual law, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be performed by the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world” (PP 365; see also 6BC 1095; 7BC 933).

“The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed” (GC 599).

“Jesus taught by illustrations and parables drawn from nature and from the familiar events of everyday life. . . . In this way He associated natural things with spiritual, linking the things of nature and the life experience of His hearers with the sublime truths of the written Word. And whenever afterward their eyes rested on the objects with which He has associated eternal truth, His lessons were repeated” (CT 140).

“Natural things were the medium for the spiritual; the things of nature and the life-experience of His hearers were connected with the truths of the written Word. Leading thus from the natural to the spiritual kingdom, Christ’s parables are links in the chain of truth that unites man with God, and earth with heaven” (COL 17, 18; see also 21).

7. Contemporary Application

“In order to be benefited by the reading of the words of Christ, we must make a right application of them to our individual cases” (MM 37).

“In His promises and warnings, Jesus means me. God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that I by believing in Him, might not perish, but have everlasting life. The experiences related in God’s Word are to be *my* experiences. Prayer and promise, precept and warning, are mine. . . . As faith thus receives and assimilates the principles of truth, they become a part of the being and the motive power of the life. The Word of God, received into the soul, molds the thoughts, and enters into the development of character” (DA 390, 391).

“Merely to read the instruction given in the Word of God is not enough. We are to read with meditation and prayer, filled with an earnest desire to be helped and blessed. And the truth we learn must be applied to the daily experience” (2MR 95; see also 2MCP 784; 1888 Materials 1680).

D. The History of Biblical Interpretation

1. Rabbinical Hermeneutics

“The rabbis spoke with doubt and hesitancy, as if the Scriptures might be interpreted to mean one thing or exactly the opposite. The hearers were daily involved in greater uncertainty. But Jesus taught the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority” (DA 253).

“They [the leaders in Israel at the time of Jesus] studied the Scriptures only to sustain

their traditions and enforce their man-made observances. By their interpretation they made them express sentiments that God had never given. Their mystical construction made indistinct that which He had made plain. They disputed over technicalities and practically denied the most essential truths. God’s Word was robbed of its power, and evil spirits worked their will” (CT 438, 439).

2. Medieval Hermeneutics

“Almost imperceptibly the customs of heathenism found their way into the Christian church. The spirit of compromise and conformity was restrained for a time by the fierce persecutions which the church endured under paganism. But as persecution ceased, and Christianity entered the courts and palaces of kings, she laid aside the humble simplicity of Christ and His apostles for the pomp and pride of pagan priests and rulers; and in place of the requirements of God, she substituted human theories and traditions” (GC 49).

“For hundreds of years the circulation of the Bible was prohibited. The people were forbidden to read it or to have it in their houses, and unprincipled priests and prelates interpreted its teachings to sustain their pretensions” (GC 51).

“In lands beyond the jurisdiction of Rome there existed for many centuries bodies of Christians who remained almost wholly free from papal corruption. They were surrounded by heathenism and in the lapse of ages were affected by its errors; but they continued to regard the Bible as the only rule of faith and adhered to many of its truths” (*ibid.* 63; see also 68).

3. Reformation Hermeneutics

“The great movement that Wycliffe inaugurated, which was to liberate the conscience and the intellect, and set free the nations so long bound to the triumphal car of Rome, had its spring in the Bible. . . . Wycliffe accepted the Holy Scriptures with implicit faith as the inspired revelation of God’s will, a sufficient rule of faith and practice” (*ibid.* 93).

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“He [Zwingli] submitted himself to the Bible as the Word of God, the only sufficient, infallible rule. He saw that it must be its own interpreter. He dared not attempt to explain Scripture to sustain a preconceived theory or doctrine, but held it his duty to learn what is its direct and obvious teaching” (*ibid.* 173).

“The grand principle maintained by these [later English] Reformers—the same that had been held by the Waldenses, by Wycliffe, by John Huss, by Luther, Zwingli, and those who united with them—was the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. . . . The Bible was their authority, and by its teaching they tested all doctrines and all claims” (*ibid.* 249; see also 132).

4. Higher Criticism

“When men talk of higher criticism; when they pass their judgment upon the Word of God, call their attention to the fact that they have forgotten who was the first and wisest critic. He has had thousands of years of practical experience. He it is who teaches the so-called higher critics of the world today. God will punish all those who, as higher critics, exalt themselves, and criticise God’s Holy Word” (BE Feb. 1, 1897).

“As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and

confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God’s Word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives” (AA 474; see also Ed 227; MH 142; GC 522).

5. Millerite Hermeneutics

“Endeavoring to lay aside all preconceived opinions, and dispensing with commentaries, he [Miller] compared scripture with scripture by the aid of the marginal references and the concordance. He pursued his study in a regular and methodical manner; beginning with Genesis, and reading verse by verse, he proceeded no faster than the meaning of the several passages so unfolded as to leave him free from all embarrassment. When he found anything obscure, it was his custom to compare it with every other text which seemed to have any reference to the matter under consideration. Every word was permitted to have its proper bearing upon the subject of the text, and if his view of it harmonized with every collateral passage, it ceased to be a difficulty. Thus whenever he met with a passage hard to be understood he found an explanation in some other portion of the Scriptures. As he studied with earnest prayer for divine enlightenment, that which had before appeared dark to his understanding was made clear. He experienced the truth of the psalmist’s words: ‘The entrance of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple’ (Ps. 119:130)” (GC 320).

“Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel’s message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted” (RH Nov. 25, 1884; see also GC 320, 321, 354).

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