

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

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

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

## CHAPTER TWO

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# The History of Interpretation

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

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

### Jewish Interpretation

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

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

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

Their identity and the history of their work remain obscure, but the Hebrew Scriptures still show the thumbprints of their work.<sup>2</sup> One such anonymous writer, for example, ended Deuteronomy with this interpretation of the unique significance of Moses: "Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face . . ." (Deut 34:10). Similarly, the books of 1–2 Chronicles offer, in part, a reinterpretation of 1–2 Kings from a post-exilic perspective. Such interpretations sought to apply then-extant biblical materials to contemporary concerns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup>For general background on Targums, see J. Bowker, *The Targum in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 3–28.

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

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

### Rabbinic Judaism

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

Rabbinic Judaism produced three main literary works. The Mishnah presents the once-oral teachings of leading rabbis as early as the famous competitors, Hillel and Shammai (late first century B.C. to early first century A.D.). Published about A.D. 200, the Mishnah presents many individual tractates arranged under six topics (e.g., feasts, women, holy things, etc.).<sup>7</sup> About fifty years later, another document called *Abot* (lit., "the Fathers") affirmed that what the Mishnah writers taught was part of the oral law received by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Most of its content is halakah.

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

<sup>6</sup>Halakah and haggadah also refer to the genre of rabbinic traditions themselves, whether they are legal or narrative in form.

<sup>7</sup>For a standard edition, see H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). Cf. also the general comments and examples in J. Neusner, *From Testament to Torah: An Introduction to Judaism in Its Formative Age* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 45–65.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the excellent introduction with examples in Neusner, *From Testament to Torah*, 72–99.

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

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

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

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

If either of them [i.e., the son's parents] was maimed in the hand, or lame or dumb or blind or deaf, he cannot be condemned as a stubborn and rebellious son, for it is written, *Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him*—so they were not maimed in the hand; *and bring him out*—so they were not lame; *and they shall say*—so they were not dumb; *this is our son*—so they were not blind; *he will not obey our voice*—so they were not deaf.<sup>11</sup>

The central feature of rabbinic interpretation, however, is the practice of *midrash*. Basically, midrash aims to uncover the deeper meanings that the rabbis assumed were inherent in the actual wording of Scripture. Ultimately, their motives were pastoral—to give logical biblical teaching for situations not covered directly by Scripture. To do so, the rabbis followed a system of exegetical rules (Heb. *middot*) carefully worked out over the years. Hillel listed seven such rules by which an interpreter might draw inferences from a passage.<sup>12</sup> Most of the rules employed assumptions that we still deem valid—e.g., the use of analogous words, phrases, or verses

<sup>10</sup>Shabbath 19.1 (from Danby, *The Mishnah*, 116).

<sup>11</sup>Sanhedrin 8.4 (from Danby, *The Mishnah*, 394).

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

from biblical cross-references to illumine the text under study. On the other hand, they sometimes used cross-references in ways that we consider questionable (e.g., citing words, etc., without regard to their context).

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

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

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

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

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

## Hellenistic Judaism

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

<sup>13</sup>Shabbath 9.2 (from Danby, *The Mishnah*, 108, including n. 8).

<sup>14</sup>Kugel, "Early Interpretation," 40-44. For an overview of Hellenistic Judaism, see M. Hengel, *Hellenization of Judaea in the First Century After Christ* (London: SCM, 1989).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup>For Philo's life and thought, see E. R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, rev. ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963); B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1952), 1–6.

<sup>19</sup>*De Vita Contemplativa*, x. 78.

<sup>20</sup>*Legum Allegoriarum*, 1.63–64.

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

## The Qumran Community

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

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

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

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

<sup>22</sup>For an overview of their interpretive methods, see F. F. Bruce, "Biblical Exposition at Qumran," in France and Wenham, eds., *GP III*, 77–98.

<sup>23</sup>On the nature of *pesher*, see M. P. Horgan, *Pesharim: Qumran Interpretations of Biblical Books*, QMS 8 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association, 1979), 229–59.

the interpretation. Lacking an existent variant, the clever interpreter was not averse to creating one that suited his interpretive purposes! For example, Hab 1:13a reads, "Your eyes are too good to look at evil; you cannot stand to see those who do wrong" (NCV). The Peshier rightly comments that the words address God and describe his holiness. One expects a similar treatment for v. 13b: "So how can you put up with those evil people? How can you be quiet when the wicked swallow up people who are better than they are?" (NCV). But the commentary interprets the "you" pronouns as plural, not singular, and as such they refer not to God but to the house of Absalom—a religious group that the Qumranians disliked.<sup>24</sup>

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

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

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

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

Continuity and discontinuity mark the transition from Jewish to early Christian interpretation. As devout Jews, the first Christian interpreters—the apostles—regarded Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah and the small religious community he left behind as the true fulfillment of Judaism's ancient hopes. They appealed to the OT Scriptures to support their beliefs, interpreting them by many of the same principles as

<sup>24</sup>Horgan, *Pesbarim*, 15, 32–34; W. H. Brownlee, *The Midrash Pesher of Habakkuk*, SBLMS 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 91–98.

<sup>25</sup>Brownlee, *Midrash Pesher*, 59–62; Horgan, *Pesbarim*, 13, 26.

<sup>26</sup>The translation follows Brownlee, *Midrash Pesher*, 122–24 ("a pun"); cf. Horgan, *Pesbarim*, 17, 39 ("probably an interpretation").

other Jewish religious groups.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, they revered Jesus as the new Moses and the authority of Jesus as superior even to that of the law of Moses—a decisive departure from their Jewish roots. Also, they interpreted the OT from a radically new perspective—in light of the Messiahship of Jesus and the new age inaugurated by his coming.<sup>28</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Barrett, "Interpretation," 399–401.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. R. M. Grant and D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 8–38.

<sup>30</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 36–38. More on this to follow.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 28–35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>32</sup>Barrett, "Interpretation," 396–97.

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

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

## The Patristic Period (ca. A.D. 100–590)

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

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

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

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

<sup>33</sup>Greer, "The Christian Bible," 130.

<sup>34</sup>For an overview, see Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 39–51; R. P. C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church," *CHB I*, 412–53. More detailed treatment appears in D. S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

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

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

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

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

Consider, for example, the interpretation that Barn 7–8 gives the OT ritual of the red heifer (Num 19). Typical of allegory, it draws great spiritual significance from the details of the procedure. So, the writer says the red heifer represents Jesus, and the children who sprinkle its ashes "are those who preach to us forgiveness of sins . . . , to whom he [Jesus] entrusted the authority to proclaim the gospel" (i.e., the apostles). Similarly, for Barnabas the seven days of creation provide the interpretive key to the future of history. The six days symbolize that the world will last six thousand years, the seventh day symbolizes the second coming of Christ, followed by the eighth day—"the beginning of another world" (15:3–9).<sup>38</sup>

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

<sup>36</sup>Greer, "Biblical Interpretation," 137–42.

<sup>37</sup>The translation is from *The Apostolic Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 19.

<sup>38</sup>Translation of Lightfoot et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 182–83.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>41</sup>Cf. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 134–39, 231.

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

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

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

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

<sup>42</sup>Our discussion follows the treatment in Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 52–56.

<sup>43</sup>A. R. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 2:581–82 (sermon fragment).

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

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

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

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

Not surprisingly, Origen's extreme allegorical approach sparked a reaction among other early church leaders. They rejected allegory as a legitimate, reliable method for interpreting Scripture. As a result, they founded a second Christian catechetical school at Antioch in Syria in the fourth century A.D.<sup>46</sup> Instead of allegory, its curriculum taught the historical-grammatical understanding of Scripture: that every passage has one plain, simple meaning conveyed by its grammar and words. The chief instructors were Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. A.D. 350–428) and Theodoret (ca. A.D. 393–460). The sermons of John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 347–407) show the application of this method to preaching.

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

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

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

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

<sup>46</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 63–72; and M. F. Wiles, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School," *CHBI*, 489–510.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 66, 67.

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

### Church Councils (ca. A.D. 400–590)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>48</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 73.

<sup>49</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.41. Cf. the convenient overview of Augustine and his thought in G. Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," *CHB I*, 541–63.

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

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

### The Middle Ages (ca. A.D. 590–1500)

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

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

<sup>50</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 78–80.

<sup>51</sup>For an overview, see J. H. Dalmus, *The Middle Ages* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literal:           the ancient Jewish city  
Allegorical:       the Christian church  
Moral:            the faithful soul  
Anagogical:       the heavenly city<sup>56</sup>

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

<sup>53</sup>McNally, *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages*, 29.

<sup>54</sup>Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 46–66 (with a photograph).

<sup>55</sup>Translation from Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 85.

<sup>56</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 85–86.

<sup>57</sup>Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 120–72.

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

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

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

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

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

## The Reformation (ca. A.D. 1500–1650)

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

<sup>58</sup>Below we draw on the fine discussion in K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 495–98.

<sup>59</sup>Interestingly, some access to Aristotle came through Arabic and Syriac translations of his Greek writings (so Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 497).

<sup>60</sup>Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 509–514; and Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 87–91.

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

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

Further, a renewed interest in studying the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek languages provided scholars with a fresh glimpse of the Scriptures. In 1506, the controversial philologist Johann Reuchlin published a rudimentary Hebrew grammar, thereby founding the modern study of Hebrew.<sup>62</sup> In 1516, Erasmus published the first modern edition of the Greek New Testament with a fresh Latin translation appended to it. This increasing interest in the early manuscripts exposed many translation errors in the Latin Vulgate and undermined the absolute authority it had enjoyed in supporting church doctrine. The Catholic Church had staked its own authority in part on the Vulgate. Thus, doubts concerning the authority of the latter also cast shadows of doubt on the authority of the former.

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

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

<sup>61</sup>What follows draws on O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 29–39. “Humanists” were scholars who devoted themselves to the study of classical literature during this period.

<sup>62</sup>B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 38, 39.

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

<sup>64</sup>Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 39; cf. also his treatment (pp. 40–75) of Luther’s life. R. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), offers an excellent biography of Luther.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>66</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 94.

<sup>67</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 94–95.

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

<sup>69</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 96.

<sup>70</sup>Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 739–40; Hall, “Biblical Scholarship,” 76–77; and N. Sykes, “The Religion of the Protestants,” *CHB III*, 175–76.

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

### The Post-Reformation Period (ca. A.D. 1650–1800)

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

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

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

<sup>71</sup>Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 868; cf. also the account of the Council of Trent in Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 273–81.

<sup>72</sup>Sykes, “The Religion of the Protestants,” 190–93; Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 894–897.

<sup>73</sup>For an overview of the Wesleyan movement, see Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1022–29.

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

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

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

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

<sup>74</sup>Cf. the extensive survey in Sykes, “Religion of the Protestants,” 193–98; W. Neil, “The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible 1700–1950,” *CHB III*, 128–65; and Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 100–109.

<sup>75</sup>Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use,” 239.

<sup>76</sup>T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III, chap. 33. This denial, of course, ran against the longstanding opinion of the day.

<sup>77</sup>Sykes, “Religion of the Protestants,” 194. Later scholars would look back to Simon as the father of modern biblical criticism.

<sup>78</sup>Grant and Tracy, *Short History*, 105–108.

## The Modern Period (ca. A.D. 1800–Present)

### The Nineteenth Century

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Twentieth Century

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

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

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

<sup>79</sup>Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1061.

<sup>80</sup>For details, see Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use,” 255–65.

<sup>81</sup>Our treatment follows the summary of Baur by F. F. Bruce, “The History of New Testament Study,” in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 42–43.

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

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

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

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

## Post-World War I

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

<sup>84</sup>For its story, see H. F. Hahn and H. D. Hummel, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 83–118.

<sup>85</sup>F. Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903).

<sup>86</sup>Cf. Hahn and Hummel, *Old Testament*, 119–56; more briefly, Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use,” 289–91.

<sup>87</sup>Gunkel’s own definitive research on the psalms certainly reflects this change. See H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933); cf. id., *Die Psalmen*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968).

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

The first was the Swiss country pastor, Karl Barth (1886–1968). In his commentary on Romans (1919), Barth lambasted the mistakes of liberalism and sought to reassert long-lost emphases of his Reformation heritage.<sup>88</sup> Specifically, he reemphasized the authority of Scripture as the Word of God and the necessity of a personal encounter with the living God of whom it speaks. The idea of such a personal encounter reflected the influence of Kierkegaard. Barth’s later multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* fueled a lively renaissance in Protestant systematic theology and exemplified how penetrating biblical interpretation could enrich theology.<sup>89</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>90</sup>Cf. the appreciative treatments in Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, 237–51; and W. G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 17–27.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>93</sup>Richardson, “Modern Biblical Scholarship,” 327–39; and Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

## Post-World War II

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>95</sup>For the method, see the introduction by NT scholar N. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>100</sup>According to Neill and Wright (*Interpretation of the New Testament*, 379–403), a "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus has recently superseded both the "first" (i.e., A. Schweitzer's) and the "new" quests. Its distinctives are: (1) use of extra-biblical evidence to reconstruct the cultural milieu of Jesus; (2) a renewed interest in Jesus' Jewishness; and (3) discussion about why Jesus was crucified.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>104</sup>Here we refer readers to the recently published, definitive discussion of contemporary biblical interpretation in A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

## CHAPTER FOUR

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# The Interpreter

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

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

## Qualifications of the Interpreter

### Faith

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup>The difference between the findings of unbelieving versus believing scholars is often one of volition, not cognition. Through their careful work, both may come to the same understanding of a text's *meaning*. But due to their different faith commitments, only the believer can perceive the text's true *significance* and be willing to obey the truth conveyed. We discuss the distinction between meaning and significance later.

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

### Obedience

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

If the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be "heard" today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be "heard" as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>N. Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 17.

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

<sup>4</sup>Lash, "Martyrdom," 18.

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

## Illumination

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

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

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

In the pulpit this error may sound like this:

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

<sup>6</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, rep. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981, from original 1876 edition), v.

As B. Ramm, who invented a similar quote, observes, “This sounds very spiritual,” but in fact “it is a veiled egotism” and a “confusion of the inspiration of the Spirit with the illumination of the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The Spirit’s work of illumination does not grant new revelation.<sup>8</sup>

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

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

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

## Membership in the Church

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

<sup>7</sup>B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 17–18.

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

<sup>9</sup>We do not wish to deny that God works in the lives of unbelievers, even through the Scriptures. We merely stress the Holy Spirit’s illumination in the lives of believers in keeping with 1 Cor 2:14–16.

<sup>10</sup>W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 224.

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

### Appropriate Methods

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

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

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

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

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

### Presuppositions for Correct Interpretation

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

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

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

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

<sup>11</sup>Paul comprehended that principle well in expressing his counsel to the Philippians: ". . . whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, . . . —think about such things" (Phil 4:8).

## Presuppositions about the Nature of the Bible

### Inspired Revelation

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>13</sup>In defense of this statement, see J. D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>14</sup>For a thoughtful treatment of this issue, see W. A. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Modern Problem of Formulation: A Doctrine of Scripture," *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 19–59.

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

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

### Authoritative and True

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 66.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>21</sup>See J. Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

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

<sup>23</sup>To see how often this is the case in the Gospels, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*.

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

## A Spiritual Document

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

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

## Characterized by both Unity and Diversity

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

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

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

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

### *An Understandable Document*

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

### *Forming the Canon of Scripture*

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

<sup>26</sup>For more details see our discussion of canon and textual criticism earlier and the literature cited in the footnotes.

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

### **Presuppositions about the Nature of the Interpreter**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As evangelicals we can, however, conduct a defense of our position. We concede the validity of rational, historically defensible arguments. We are committed to being logical. We bind ourselves to the facts of history, but we insist this does not obligate us to a nonsupernatural explanation of the biblical record. However, it does force us to engage in careful historical argumentation to show that the biblical accounts are defensible and historically credible, even if in the end they cannot be scientifically proven.<sup>28</sup> We insist that to hold evangelical presuppositions is not to

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

<sup>28</sup>In addition to the literature cited in defense of Scripture's truthfulness cited above, see for the OT, K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977); and P. C. Craigie, *The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 255–90. For a helpful introduction to the role of the historical method in NT studies see D. A. Hagner, "The New Testament,

commit intellectual suicide nor to relegate ourselves to a hopelessly obscure dogmatism. The evangelical faith is committed to a defensible, historically-credible explanation of the Bible—within the bounds of the Bible's own claims about itself and its origins. Rather than reject logic and reason, the evangelical study of the Bible welcomes any method or approach that enables the Bible's meaning and significance to be understood.

## Presuppositions about Methodology

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

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

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

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

History, and the Historical-Critical Method," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 73–96. Hagner concludes his essay with several valuable modifications of the historical-critical method that will counter its unwarranted negative conclusions (89–91). On the historical veracity for the Gospels see also I. H. Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Presuppositions about the Goal of Hermeneutics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a corollary to this, God's role in inspiration assures that the Bible spoke not only to its original readers or hearers, but it also speaks to us today.<sup>34</sup> An inspired and authoritative Bible has significance and relevance beyond its original circumstances. Further, we assume that the meaning God wanted it to have today corresponds to the original meaning. On the basis of the solidarity of the human race and the spiritual plight we share, the ancient meanings will speak more or less directly to the human condition today. The questions the Bible addresses concern ultimate issues, in addition to merely localized or immediate matters. As we learn God's mind, expressed by human authors long ago, we find understanding and significance for our concerns today. Any quest for other "meanings" from the Bible lacks that objectifying basis in God's revelation. The meaning found in the text alone provides this foundation.

## Preunderstandings of the Interpreter

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

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

<sup>34</sup>Paul affirmed as much to his Roman readers in Rom 15:4.

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

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

## Definition of Preunderstanding

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

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

<sup>36</sup>Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 237.

<sup>37</sup>Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, xix.

<sup>38</sup>D. S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 6.

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

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

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

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

## The Role of Preunderstanding

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

<sup>40</sup>He admits there are degrees of overlap between them and that a single act of preunderstanding contains elements of all four.

<sup>41</sup>Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 12.

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

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

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

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

<sup>44</sup>Speaking of the epistemological stance of the scientific method, D. Tracy observes, “Scientism has pretensions to a mode of inquiry that tries to deny its own hermeneutical character and mask its own historicity so that it might claim ahistorical certainty” (*Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 31). For many scholars this “certainty” excludes the possibility of the miracles recorded in both Testaments. We could cite many other examples. For the attitudinal dimension of preunderstanding, Wellhausen's anti-judaism led him to denigrate the Law (see Lou H. Silberman, “Wellhausen and Judaism,” *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 75–82; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Getting At the Roots of Wellhausen's Understanding of the Law of Israel on the 100th Anniversary of the Prolegomena* [Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979]). It seems likely that Hegel's ideological influence underlay Wellhausen's view that Israel's history evolved through three distinct phases (R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*, JSOTSup 53 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1987], 43). Gunkel's form criticism—a methodological element—significantly affected a whole generation of OT scholarship (cf. D. A. Knight, “The Pentateuch,” in *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight, et al. [Philadelphia: Fortress and Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985], 264, who observes, “. . . it is now inconceivable to conduct critical exegesis without attention to form, genre, Sitz im Leben and intention”; see also W. Klatt, *Hermann Gunkel*, FRLANT 100 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1969]). Likewise, canon criticism has opened up important insights on the interpretation of the Psalms (see G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 [Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985], 139–228; and B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 504–25).

<sup>45</sup>In R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton, and C. Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1985). See also Lundin's essay, “Hermeneutics,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 149–71.

<sup>46</sup>Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 21.

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

<sup>48</sup>Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 22.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>49</sup>Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 23.

<sup>50</sup>Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 24; also see Lundin, “Hermeneutics,” 158–63.

<sup>51</sup>R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 186.

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

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

### A Philosophy of Interpretation as Preunderstanding

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

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

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

<sup>52</sup>Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 186.

<sup>53</sup>Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 286.

<sup>54</sup>Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 286.

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

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

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

<sup>55</sup>Historically, Christianity has claimed that it is uniquely true—that in Jesus we have the way, truth, and life, the only way to God (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). In a well-reasoned book H. A. Netland defends this currently unpopular assertion of Christian exclusivism. He asserts, "where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false" (*Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991], 34). Netland's point is *not* that all the claims or teachings of other religions are false, or that they possess no value, or that Christians can learn nothing from them. Rather, when religions make conflicting claims to truth, the Christian position is the true one. Netland's work presents a compelling defense of the historic Christian faith. All missiologists and philosophers of religion will need to examine what Netland has presented. See also L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC, 1989).

<sup>56</sup>Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 289.

<sup>57</sup>We will take up below our defense of textual meaning as the primary goal of hermeneutics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>62</sup>In these words Thiselton is citing Ebeling (Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 344).

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>63</sup>Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 174.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>69</sup>Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 75. See texts such as 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15; et al. Meeks goes on to discuss households, voluntary associations, synagogues, and schools to provide insights into how the fledgling church began to organize itself. To these, Tidball adds "the city community" or *politeia* as a social institution reflected in the early church (D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 76-79).

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

<sup>71</sup>McKnight, *Postmodern Use*, 149.

<sup>72</sup>McKnight, *Postmodern Use*, 161.

<sup>73</sup>McKnight, *Postmodern Use*, 161.

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

### Testing Preunderstandings

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

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

<sup>74</sup>G. R. Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions of Non-Evangelical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, eds. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 613–26. Scholars employ the technical term "hermeneutical circle" in several ways: (1) asking questions of the text whose answers subsequently reshape the questions that are then posed to the text, etc.; and (2) the phenomenon by which one cannot understand constituent parts of a whole without some comprehension of the whole, while at the same time recognizing that an understanding of the whole comes by combining an understanding of its component parts (see Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 104). In neither instance are we doomed to subjectivity; indeed, the burden of this book is to enable understanding to proceed with objectivity. In fact, as we will show below, perhaps changing "circle" to "spiral" alters the image enough to see we are not doomed to a "vicious circle." So see G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 6, 14.

<sup>75</sup>Lewis, "Response," 620.

<sup>76</sup>In Van Til's words, "To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method. The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism" (C. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955], 116). Van Til took issue with his colleague B. B. Warfield who taught that apologetics was a prior and separate discipline to establish the truth of Christianity before one moved to the other theological subjects. Rather, Van Til says, "All the disciplines must presuppose God, but at the same time presupposition is the best proof" (C. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1974], 3). At this point we find ourselves more in sympathy with Warfield than Van Til.

<sup>77</sup>See E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 103–121, for a helpful discussion of what constitutes verification in apologetics.

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

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

### A Christian Preunderstanding<sup>79</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>78</sup>Carnell, *Introduction*, 102.

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

<sup>80</sup>E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 75.

distortion the biblical facts as they really are: they see the facts clearly because they see their true meaning.<sup>81</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>81</sup>A. Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), 105.

<sup>82</sup>Is our concern to apply the Constitution in the way its original framers intended, or in some other manner?

<sup>83</sup>B. Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," in Ramm, et al., *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

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

What are the unique features of the Bible that formulate our preunderstanding?<sup>84</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>84</sup>Ramm's insights are worth consideration. The following discussion owes much to his presentation, "Biblical Interpretation," 18–28.

<sup>85</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 18.

<sup>86</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 18.

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

<sup>88</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 19.

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

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

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

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

<sup>90</sup>S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC 51 (Waco: Word, 1984), 125.

<sup>91</sup>Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 125.

<sup>92</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 20.

<sup>93</sup>K. Snodgrass suggests: "At every point early Christians attempted to understand their Scripture [which, of course, was the Old Testament] in the new light of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They used the Old Testament to prove their Christian theology and to solve Christian problems. The Old Testament provided the substructure of New Testament theology. The Old Testament also provided the language and imagery for much of New Testament thought, although this is not always obvious to the casual reader. Therefore, New Testament concepts must be understood from Old Testament passages" ("The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], 409).

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

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

<sup>96</sup>See our discussion below on the NT use of the OT, pp. 120–32.

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

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

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

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

## Preunderstandings Change with Understanding

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

<sup>97</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 23.

<sup>98</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 24.

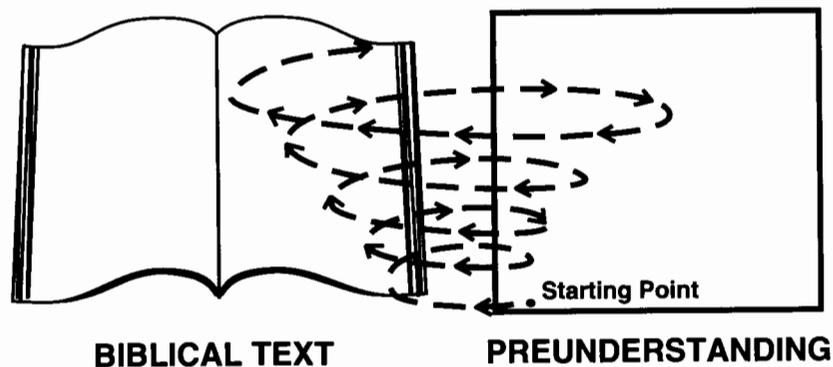
<sup>99</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 25.

<sup>100</sup>Ramm, "Biblical Interpretation," 26.

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

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

### HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL



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

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

### Preunderstandings and Objectivity in Interpretation

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

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

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

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

<sup>102</sup>Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 299.

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

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

## CHAPTER FIVE

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# The Goal of Interpretation

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

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

<sup>104</sup>Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 17.