INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

by

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Why Is Interpretation So Important?

Hermeneutics is indispensable for anyone who reads the Bible. Herman who? Hermeneutics, a four dollar word for most folk, simply refers to the science of interpretation.[1] It is the skill and art of understanding how language is used, how thought forms are communicated both orally and in writing from one person to another. Often, people take for granted that communication is simple and straightforward, and so long as one functions within the rather tight circle of his or her own cultural group, that assumption may work reasonably well. A moment's reflection, however, will demonstrate that language is idiosyncratic. Take a Millennial, a Gen-Xer and a Baby-boomer, for instance. Generational changes in verbal nuances can make communication tricky, even for people from the same ethnicity and culture. If one moves outside one's own culture, the process becomes even more complex. The reason this is so is that *all language is culturally conditioned and idiomatic*, that is, every culture has unique ways of using words and ideas so that complete meaning is more than just a sum of the individual words. Consider, for instance, the following idioms from America and France.

American English
beat a dead horse
be a loose cannon
to chew you out
to lose your cool
lay it on thick
talk turkey

French/ comparable English idiom
il est casse-pieds (he is a foot-breaker = he's a pain in the…)
ils ne tournent pas rond (they do not turn around = they are out to lunch)
il est tombe dans les pommes (he fell into the apples = he passed out)
je ne peux pas le sentir (I can't smell him = he gets on my nerves)
il en a gros sur la patate (he has it heavy on the potato = he has a heavy heart)
il a les chevilles enflees (he has swollen ankles = he has a big head)

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[1] The English word "hermeneutics" derives from the Greek word ἑρμηνεια (*hermeneia* = explanation, interpretation).

When one adds to the mix of idiomatic language unique to each culture the added factors of *genres* (different types of literature, such as, psalms, letters, narratives, etc.), *historical settings* (the ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world), *translation* (moving from one language to another), *exegesis* (discovering what the text meant for its first readers) and *application* (making ancient texts relevant to the modern world), the task of interpretation becomes even more important. In general, we should assume that one must discover what the biblical text *meant* before one can properly address what it *means.* This is to say that all texts in the Bible meant something to its original authors and original readers, and discovering this meaning is the single most important factor that shapes how we understand the text in our modern world. We cannot properly know what God has to say to us if we have no clue what he said to them. Otherwise, the Bible is simply a book of magic: its words and paragraphs will be liable to any sort of meaning we want to inject into them.

The Reader as an Interpreter

Occasionally, one may hear the sentiment, "I have read no man's book, I've consulted no man's theory: I just read the Bible and take it as it is." This may sound rather spiritual, but really it is rather arrogant. What this person really says is that he is smarter than all the people who have studied the Bible in the whole history of the church—his mind is so sharp he is beyond the need of help. Any good reader will adopt a more modest self-assessment. If the Bible is the Word of God in the words of humans, then the believer who reads the Scriptures must be serious in attempting to understand what they intend to say as well as avoiding making them say something they do not intend.

At the very beginning, one's approach toward interpretation is related to one's assumptions about the Bible. If one approaches the Bible like Christians through the centuries, that is, as the fully inspired authority for the life of the church, then one will be careful to approach it reverently and with great care.

How the Bible Becomes Obscure

Various factors may block the reader from good interpretation, sometimes before he/she even picks up the Bible. Some of these factors might include:

A Careless Attitude

If Paul encouraged Timothy to "correctly handle" the Word, he surely implies that there are incorrect ways to handle it also (2 Ti. 2:15).

Cultural Distance

Our culture is not that of the ancient world where the Bible was written. Furthermore, there are diverse cultures reflected within the Bible itself. The culture of Abraham, for instance, was not the culture of Paul. To properly understand what the Bible meant to its first readers, one must be willing to examine the culture that surrounds it.

Application Without Interpretation

Frequently, the believer is in such a hurry to find out what God has to say to him/her personally through the Word that he/she neglects the all-important step of finding out what it meant to its first readers. Such a method can be disastrous. There are no short-cuts! Interpretation must always precede application.

Pre-Understandings

Virtually all readers come to the Bible with preconceptions and presuppositions. Most have been conditioned by the religious beliefs with which they grew up, correct or not. These beliefs are not easy to uproot, and if readers are not careful, such presuppositions will bias their minds as they look to the Scriptures so that they read meaning *into* the Word of God (*eisegesis*) rather than extracting the intended meaning *out of* it (*exegesis*). The first task of the interpreter is not to prove that his/her preconceptions are right, but to discover what the text meant to its original readers. Only then can one address the further question of application.

Dogmatism

One of the easiest snares in which to fall is the refusal to recognize one's own limitations, or to put it another way, to assume that one's own way of looking at things must surely be correct and all the others wrong. The wise interpreter will freely admit his own tendency toward error and thereby build a tolerance for others when he thinks they might be wrong. Two principles will be helpful here:

> *The Bible is Sufficient, but not Exhaustive:* The Bible will not necessarily tell us everything we might wish to know, even about things that the Bible itself introduces.
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> *The Bible is More Clear in Some Places than in Others:* It would be a mistake to think that every text is equally clear. For reasons just such as culture and language, there are some passages from which one must withhold dogmatic judgment. On one occasion, for instance, Paul refers to a subject about which he had previously given extensive teaching, but without access to this body of instruction, we would be wise to proceed

with caution (2 Th. 2:5). This is why obscure passages must give way to more clear passages.

In the end, no one has a monopoly on the truth. The Bible warns against being preoccupied with obscurities (1 Ti. 1:3-8; 4:6-7; 6:20; 2 Ti. 2:16-18; Tit. 3:9-11). As one person has aptly said, "The kingpin in every cultic machine is the obscurities in the Bible."[2]

The Problems of Allegorism and Letterism

Allegorism as a method of interpreting the Old Testament arose among the Jews in the two centuries before Christ. Its premise was that there is a hidden meaning in Scripture beyond the face value meaning. To be sure, there are indeed areas of Scripture that are allegorical (e.g., Ezekiel 16, Revelsation 18), but allegorism as a system sees hidden meaning as a prevailing characteristic of all of Scripture. Unfortunately, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries after Christ, many Christian interpreters began adopting allegorism as a primary interpretive method. Eventually, this method gained a dominant position and was widely used in the church until the Reformation in the 16th century. [3]

Here are some examples of allegorism. To Origen (185?-254?), the fact that Rebekah drew water for Abraham's servant meant that everyone must meet Christ by coming to the wells of Scripture. In the 5th century, one preacher interpreted Herod's slaughter of the children two years old and under as meaning that only Trinitarians would be saved (i.e., anything less than "three" was damnable heresy). When medieval interpreters encountered the word "Jerusalem," they not only saw it as meaning a city, but also as representing the church, the human soul and heaven, and all this at the same time! Augustine's famous interpretation of the 153 fish in John 21:11 is a real howler. He (along with others) reasoned that since the number 153 is the sum of the numbers 1 through 17, and since the number 17 is made up of 10 added to 7, and since 10 is the number of law and 7 is the number of grace, the allegorical message in the passage was concerning law and grace.[4] A more recent example is an attempt to defend the superiority of the King James Version of the Bible. In Psalm 46 of the KJV, the 46th word from the beginning is "shake" while the 46th word from the end is "spear". Since Shakespeare was 46 years old in 1611, when the KJV was first published, the

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[2] A. Rendalen, "The Gospel Versus 'The True Church,'" *Verdict* (Mar. 1981), p. 5.

[3] B. Ramm, *Protestant Bible Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 24-45.

[4] For this and other bizarre interpretations of the 153 fish, see F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 401.

priority of the KJV is alleged to be divinely established.

Allegorism's chief problem is its subjectivism. It generally tells us more about what is in the mind of the interpreter than what was in the mind of the biblical writer. If allegorism is allowed as a prevailing method, the Bible can be made to mean virtually anything one wants it to mean. The only limit is the size of one's imagination! Today, perhaps the most serious expression of allegorism is to be found in the uncontrolled typology of some well-meaning Christians who seem to find double meanings under every rock and bush of the Old Testament.

At the opposite extreme from allegorism is letterism. This approach, also originally developed among the Jews before the time of Christ, was characterized by an intense devotion to details of the text, so much so, that interpreters often missed things essential and created mountains out of the incidental. This system was typical of the rabbinic Judaism of Jesus' day, and he criticized it sharply (Mt. 23:23-24).[5] In a modern context, letterism is the refusal to recognize genre, idiomatic meanings, and culturally conditioned contexts. It reads the Bible as though it were a modern newspaper, ignoring the wide range of style and nuance. What on the face of it looks to be a deeply sincere effort to support the Bible as God's Word ends up underminding that very Scripture by forcing it into categories that are unnatural and inappropriate.

Examples of letterism include the assertion that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world, because Jesus said so (Mt. 13:32). In fact, today we know that there are many seeds smaller than a mustard seed. Jesus words must be taken in the context of his culture, where the mustard seed was the smallest observable seed for Jews in his time (and they had no microscopes to tell them otherwise!).[6] Others, similarly, defend the "flat earth theory", asserting that because the Bible speaks of the four corners of the earth, the earth must be flat and square instead of round. All scientific evidence to the contrary is regarded as a hoax by godless enemies of the Bible. In reality, the expression "four corners of the earth" is an idiom meaning "the whole world", not a scientific description of the earth's shape.

What is a Balanced Literalism?[7]

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[5] Ramm, pp. 45-48.

[6] The NIV translation helps the modern reader by inserting the word "your" in the translation, even though it is not in the Greek text: "Though it [the mustard seed] is the smallest of all *your* seeds…"

[7] Ramm, pp. 51-59.

One of the most important accomplishments of the Protestant Reformation was a return to the literal meaning of Scripture, and in fact, this approach is now prevalent among Roman Catholic scholars as well.[8] Under the influence of people like Martin Luther and John Calvin, the allegorism that had dominated the medieval church was rejected as an overstatement. In its place were put sound principles of interpretation that are the foundation of biblical exegesis today, and indeed, the interpretation of all literary texts. Literalism does not deny that the Scriptures use figurative language. Rather, literalism hold that a passage should be treated figuratively only if there is good reason internal to the passage itself to regard it as figurative.

When we speak of literalism, therefore, we are not referring to some straight jacket approach that refuses to take into account metaphor, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, synecdoche, metonymy, alliteration, simile or other figures of speech. Balanced literalism does not eliminate literary genre, as though the Bible must be read in some "flat" manner that reduces all language to mathematics. In fact, one will most often find this sort of "flat" reading among the cults, such as, the Jehovah's Witnesses who twist the translation of texts in order to deny the deity of Christ, or the Mormons who insist on baptisms by proxy for people who have been long deceased, or the Appalachian Pentecostals who handle poisonous snakes and drink strychnine. All of them claim to support the "plain" meaning of the Bible. In the end, "the antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation, based on commonsense guidelines."[9]

Language, Literacy and Translation

A distinction between the Pre-historic Period and the Historical Period can only be made because of written language. This shift came in about 3000 BC. People before 3000 BC had a history, of course, but they were not able to record it except in pictures and tokens.[10] The longest attested family group of languages are Semitic (Akkadian, Eblaite) with the oldest forms dating back as far as the 26th century BC. The earliest surviving written documents are economic and administrative documents from southern Iraq

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[8] R. Brown and S. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer and R. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), pp. 1148-1149.

[9] G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), p. 21.

[10] The cave drawings prior to 10,000 BC from Lascaux, France are well known, while in Mesopotamia a system of record keeping using clay tokens emerged about 8000 BC.

(Uruk), and they exist in cuneiform, a type of writing in which a reed stylus was used to impress figures in wet clay tablets. The Hebrew language emerged from early Semitic forms and is the best known and best attested language from Canaan.[11]

Still, even the invention of writing did not mean that writing was immediately available to everyone. Widespread literacy did not begin until approximately the 8th century BC. Writing in the earliest periods of human civilization was primarily the provenance of the state, the activity of specialists in administration and high culture. Writing was expensive and required the support of the state. Its use by the state gave rise to a special class, the royal scribes. The public, by contrast, was essentially non-literate. Public written documents were not for "reading," but served as displays of royal power and authority, especially for super-powers in Mesopotamia and Egypt.[12]

With the development of the Israelite monarchy, writing became important to the states of Israel and Judah as well. Still, Israelite society was essentially an oral society. While the act of writing is sometimes described in the early documentation of Israelite history (i.e., Moses, Joshua, etc.), many of the references are to monumental inscriptions (Ex. 34:1, 27-28; Nu. 17:2; Dt. 6:9; 17:18; 27:2-3; 31:24-26). Such inscriptions emphasized the mystery and power of the leaders, but they were hardly material for literary consumption by the general public. However, the development of the Semitic alphabet was a long step toward the eventual literacy of the people, and this development occurred within the culture of Syria-Palestine. Certain functions of writing became standardized, such as, horizontal writing from right to left and the stabilization of the alphabet to 22 letters around the beginning of the Iron Age (approximately 12th century BC). The Phoenicians, the Aramaeans, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Moabites and the Israelites all adopted this Canaanite alphabet, and from about the 10th century BC, Hebrew was written in what is classified as paleo-Hebrew script.[13]

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[11] D. Schmandt-Besserat, "Record Keeping Before Writing," and J. Huehnergard, "Semitic Languages," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. J. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2000), IV.2,097ff. and 2,117ff.

[12] W. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), pp. 35-63.

[13] J. Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 83-84 and W. Whitt, "The Story of the Semitic Alphabet," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2000), IV.2379-2397.

From Oral Tradition to Codification

The emergence of biblical Hebrew out of the mix of ancient Near Eastern northwest Semitic languages was an oral process before it was a written process. Biblical Hebrew has close connections with Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabitish, and Edomitish, and all these languages went through similar processes of development. By the time of Israel's monarchy, scribes had become a necessary part of the royal court of the Israelite kings. Still, writing was primarily under the patronage of the state and primarily for administrative record keeping. The "average" Israelite would not have been literate, though occasionally there were exceptions (cf. Jg. 8:14).

To a large degree, the increase in literacy from the 9th to the 8th centuries BC must be credited to the impact of the Assyrian Empire, the first of the great Mesopotamian superpowers that controlled substantial portions of the Levant. As Assyria moved westward in its conquests, it brought with it one polity, one economy and one language (Aramaic).

> *Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech...I made them of one mouth.* (Dur-Sharrukin cylinder)

The period of Hezekiah saw an increased emphasis on written texts. Collection and codification of wisdom literature began (Pro. 25:1). With the exile of Israel in the north, refugees swelled Jerusalem to quadruple its former size. In turn, increased writing became part of the urban infrastructure. Archaeologically, an explosion of writing on ostraca and pots, in tombs, and graffiti on walls occurred over much of the Levant, signaling a sudden growth of literacy generally. In Judah, for instance, *lemelek* stamps (= belonging to the king), the Siloam inscription (describing the construction of Hezekiah's tunnel in 701 BC), the Lachish Letters (correspondence between military officers during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem), and the collection of sermons by the 8th century prophets (the beginning of the writing prophets) are part of this literary explosion. Hezekiah communicated to outlying areas of his kingdom by written documents (2 Chr. 30:1). Almost every major city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire built and maintained libraries and archives, and Hezekiah's "men" in Jerusalem were part of this wider movement. The period of Josiah, especially, was marked by extensive religious reform spurred by the discovery of a text of the Torah (2 Kg. 22//2 Chr. 34).

As a result of Assyrian encroachment, urbanization increased dramatically. With increased urbanization, bureaucracy and literacy increased in direct proportion. The simplification of language through the

development of the alphabet fostered wider literacy.[14] The power of the written word could not be denied.

The Languages of the Bible

The Bible, of course, comes to us in written form (though, no doubt, some parts of it almost certainly existed in oral forms and were passed down orally before they were codified). Furthermore, the Bible is written using three ancient languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

Hebrew (all the Old Testament except the small sections cited below in Aramaic)
Aramaic (Ezra 4:7—6:18; 7:12-16; Daniel 2:4b—7:28; various words and
phrases in the New Testament)
Greek (all the New Testament except a few words and phrases in Aramaic)

It is easy to understand why most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Hebrew was the ancient language developed by the Israelites. It was written with 22 alphabetic consonants (no vowels), right to left, without capitalization or punctuation, and in its earliest forms, without spaces between the words. Most of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) was written before the collapse of the nations of Israel and Judah to Assyrian and Babylonian invaders. While the stylization of Hebrew consonants developed over the centuries, the language remained remarkably stable. However, when the Jews went into Babylonian captivity in 586 BC, the Hebrew language began its demise as the common language of the Jewish people. The international language of the day was Aramaic, and many Jews adopted it. After the Jews returned from exile to rebuild Jerusalem under Persian administration (late 5th century BC), the people spoke a hybrid language (Ne. 13:24), and some apparently had difficulty understanding Hebrew (Ne. 8:8).

The portions of the Old Testament written in Aramaic come from this Persian period, when Aramaic was the official language of the empire. The sections in the Book of Ezra record official correspondences between provincial officials and the Persian government and between the Persian government and the returned exiles. It is less clear why some sections of Daniel are written in Aramaic, but the fact that the book emerges during the Persian Period is significant.

Another four centuries later, by the time of the New Testament, the Greek culture had spread throughout the world after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Hence, Greek was now the international language of

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[14] Schniedewind, pp. 64-114.

the Mediterranean world. Thus, the New Testament documents were written in "common Greek" (Koine), the everyday language of the Roman Empire. To be sure, a few words and phrases appear in Aramaic in the New Testament, and often enough they represent language spoken by Jesus and/or the apostles (Mk. 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 11:9-10; 14:36; 15:22//Mt. 27:33//Jn. 19:17; Mk. 15:34//Mt. 27:46; Ro. 8:15; 1 Co. 16:22; Ga. 4:6). Even where the written text is Greek, sometimes it states that the spoken language was Aramaic/Hebrew (Ac. 21:40; 22:2; 26:14).[15] This feature suggests that while Jesus and his Jewish apostles may have known Greek, they probably spoke Aramaic as their native tongue.

Later Developments

While the collected documents that form the Bible are very ancient, certain developments took place after these documents were written. In the first place, the various documents had to be collected. The Hebrew Bible comes to us in three large collections that make up the whole: the *Torah* (the books of Moses), the *Nebiim* (the prophets) and the *Kethubim* (the writings). The New Testament documents probably originally circulated as single books or smaller collections (e.g., the letters of Paul) until they were widely distributed and recognized.

The typical form of Hebrew writings was the scroll, long sheets of parchment stitched together and attached to a spindle for rolling up. Among the Christians, however, the codex (book form bound on one edge) became the more popular form. The codex had the advantage of making both sides of the page available for writing, whereas the scroll usually had writing on only a single side.

By the 8th century AD, the first steps toward developing a vowel system for Hebrew were begun, and vowel points were added to the consonantal text of the Old Testament in dots and dashes appearing under, over and within the Hebrew letters. Relatively early in the Christian era, the text of the Bible was divided into verses, and these became standardized by about AD 900.[16] Dividing the biblical text into chapters came still later and dates to about the 13th century AD.

Other developments include the addition of interpretive notations, such as were added to the Geneva Bible produced by the Calvinists in

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[15] Luke's exact phrase is "the Hebrew dialect", but most scholars believe this refers to Aramaic, cf. J. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles [AB]* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 701.

[16] There still remain some verse and chapter differences between standard English versions of the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible, but on the whole, they are remarkably similar.

Switzerland during the Protestant Reformation. Similarly, the Bishop's Bible from approximately the same period was produced by the Anglican Church and contained theological notes. The traditional King James Version was published without interpretive notes, but about a century ago, C. I. Scofield, a disciple of John Nelson Darby, published an annotated Bible containing the primary theological points of dispensationalism. Even more recently, the various popular study Bibles contain introductions to the various biblical books as well as footnotes regarding translation and theology.

Translating the Bible

Because the writings of the Bible were fixed in the three original languages in which they were composed, the translation of the Bible into other languages began before the era of Jesus. About two centuries before Jesus, the Jews in Alexandria, Egypt translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (a translation called the Septuagint). By that time, the international language of the Mediterranean world was Greek, and Jewish communities had been scattered widely over that Greek-speaking world. In Palestine, the Targums came to be used in the synagogues (paraphrases of the Hebrew text into Aramaic). Originally oral, the Targums eventually were committed to writing. Even in the New Testament, one finds remnants of a dispute between the Aramaic-speaking Jews and the Greek-speaking Jews (Ac. 6:1).

Other early translations of the Old Testament include the Samaritan Pentateuch, Syriac, Coptic and Latin. The New Testament, likewise, was translated from Greek into various other early languages, including Latin, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Georgian and Nubian. Since those early centuries, the task of translating the Bible into the languages of the world has been ongoing.

Why Interpretation Begins with Translation

Since most readers of the Bible are not conversant with Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, they are obliged to read translations of the Bible. This is not in itself bad, but one always must remember that any time ideas and thoughts move from one language to a second language, the reader is to some degree at the mercy of the translator. Translators make choices about what word or expression in the second language best captures what is intended in the first language. Furthermore, since all language is idiomatic, a word in the original language may need to be translated by more than a single word in the second language, depending upon nuance and context. Take, for example, Paul's use of the word $\sigma\pi\lambda\acute{\alpha}\gamma\chi\nu o\nu$ (= intestine) in his little letter to Philemon. He uses it three times (verses 7, 12, 20). To translate

this word without taking into account idiomatic values results in the very odd readings:

> The intestines of the saints have been refreshed through you (7).
> This [man, i.e., Philemon] is my intestine (12)!
> Refresh my intestine in Christ (20)!

Older English versions (KJV) translated this word as "bowels", but even this sounds strange in the 21st century. Much better is the NIV (so also NAB, NRSV, NASB, ESV, etc.), which contains the following readings:

> You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints (7).
> I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you (12).
> Refresh my heart in Christ (20).

A much looser rendering but generally effective would be "my right arm" (*The Message*), and some versions avoid altogether any attempt at finding a direct English equivalent for the word intestine (NEB, Phillips).

Idiomatically, the word "intestine" in the time of St. Paul was used metaphorically to refer to the seat of love, affection and compassion. We do not use that metaphor in English. Hence, a good translation will take into account the cultural nuance of the 1st century and use something other than crass literalism. However, the same word occurs in the account of Judas' suicide, where Judas, after hanging himself, fell into a field (apparently over a precipice), his body burst open, and he was disemboweled (Ac. 1:18; cf. Mt. 27:5). Here, a more literal translation of the same word is quite appropriate: "his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out" (NIV).

Translators regularly make choices; all translation requires such choices. Ideally, translators work to capture the sense of the original language, but sometimes translators may allow their own theological persuasions to influence their translation. Take, for instance, the following translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:6:

> And now you know with a positive assurance that which [namely, the departure of the Church, the saints being assembled together to the Lord] is preventing his being disclosed [as to his true identity]. (Kenneth Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*)

As a Christian committed to dispensational theology and its view of a pre-tribulation rapture of the church, Dr. Wuest has expanded his rendering of

this passage to accommodate his theology.[17] His rendering, however, goes considerably beyond what the Greek text actually says. Quite literally, the Greek text reads (my translation): *And now you know the [thing] restraining, for him [or it] to be revealed in his time*.

Even more serious, some cults adjust translations so that they favor theologies in significant conflict with the historic Christian faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, who deny the full deity of Christ translate Colossians 1:15-17 in the following way:

> He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; because by means of him all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All [other] things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all [other] things and by means of him all [other] things were made to exist. (The New World Translation)

By inserting the word "other" four times in this passage, the Jehovah's Witnesses intend to buttress their denial that Christ Jesus existed eternally. Instead, they teach that he was the first created being—not fully God. Their translation of this passage injects their own interpretive agendum into the text.

Examples could be multiplied by the dozens. The upshot is that all interpretation begins with translation. All translations are dependent upon the skill of the translator, his knowledge of the language and culture of biblical times, and his ability to capture the ancient meaning and carry it over into a second language and culture. Hence, the reader of the Bible should be concerned to use a "good" translation—one that is not unduly biased and one that depends upon the best of reverent scholarship.

The Science of Translation

The science of translation can be divided into two broad categories, *text* and *method*. The text concerns the underlying Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic text in the original language. We possess very ancient copies of these texts (called *manuscripts*), but none of them are the documents set down in the original penmanship of the authors (called *autographs*). Some, like the John Rylands fragment (a portion of John 18 dating to the early 2nd century AD), are very close to the original author. Others are more distant.

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[17] In fairness, he puts the expansion in brackets. Anything in brackets is not in the Greek text itself.

Any time documents are copied, especially copied by hand, the chance of transcription errors must be addressed. The work of discovering the original language of the biblical authors is called *textual criticism*. Of the thousands of early manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek (well over 5000), scholars compare them to decide which are the most accurate. For the Old Testament, scholars compare the traditional Hebrew text preserved by the Jewish community (called the Masoretic Text) with the Dead Sea Scrolls (dating to a couple centuries before the time of Jesus), the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament by Jews before Jesus' time), and other ancient sources.

Textual criticism works within special controls. Textual scholars assess both the date, location, character and quality of the manuscripts (external evidence) as well as the kinds of copying errors to which scribes are most susceptible (internal evidence). With respect to date, a general rule is that earlier is better (though there may be exceptions). Also, if a particular reading has a widespread distribution (i.e., the same reading is found in early Bible manuscripts in Italy, Palestine and Egypt), it is better than a reading that is found in only one area. A couple of examples may be helpful.

The earliest texts of the New Testament do not contain 1 John 5:7, which reads: *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one* (KJV). Early translators of the Bible into English, beginning with John Wycliffe, included this verse because it was in the Latin Bible. However, it appears in no early Greek manuscript at all nor does it appear in any early translation of 1 John. Hence, all modern translations of the Bible omit this verse (except the NKJV, though even it contains a marginal reference that indicates the verse is found only in four or five very late manuscripts). It is the conclusion of virtually all scholars that this verse probably first appeared as a marginal note and afterwards found its way into the text.[18]

Scribes sometimes copied manuscripts, not by reading them silently, but by listening to them as they were read out loud by others. Sometimes two words sound very similar, and a scribe may "hear" the wrong word, putting it down in his manuscript. A good example is the several times in the New Testament where there are textual discrepancies between the words ὑμῶν (= your) and ἡμῶν (our), the words ὑμιν (= to you) and ἡμιν (= to us), and the words ὑμας (you) and ἡμας (us). Out loud, these sets of words sound very similar. Hence, in a number of instances in the New Testament

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[18] B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp. 715-717.

early manuscripts will differ. Sometimes, English translations will differ as well, depending upon which early manuscripts they may be following. The KJV, for instance, says "walk in love, as Christ also hath loved *us*" (Ep. 5:2). The ASV has "walk in love, even as Christ also loved *you*".

The method of translation concerns the task of transferring ideas from one language to another. This is especially challenging when one attempts to translate such things as euphemisms and plays on words. Euphemisms are idiomatic, and word plays, especially word plays in the form of puns, are nearly impossible to reproduce in the second language. A euphemism about going to the bathroom, for instance, is used in 1 Sa. 24:3, where King Saul went into a cave in order to "cover his feet". Since this is not a current euphemism in English for relieving oneself, how should translators render it? To translate it straightforwardly, in fact, might result in misunderstanding (such as, that Saul went into the cave to take a nap). Or, consider the dynamics of puns. The prophet Micah uses a whole series of puns in his oracle about the invasion of Judah (Mic. 1:10-16). What should translators do with these phonetic word plays?

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches that translators may follow. One is called *formal equivalence* or *literal* translation, sometimes called "word for word" translation. Here, the attempt is to keep as close as reasonable to the form of the Hebrew and Greek wording and grammar. Often, translators attempt to find a single English word to represent a single Hebrew or Greek word. They may reproduce to a considerable degree the syntax of the original language in the second language. The more a translator tends toward formal equivalence, the more he expects the reader to be familiar with ancient culture and idiomatic language. Consider, for instance, the following examples:

> *Thus saith the L*ORD*…Behold, I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity, and will cut off from Ahab him that pisseth against the wall.* (1 Kg. 21:21, KJV)

> *Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the L*ORD *do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.* (Ru. 1:17, ESV)

Both these passages follow very closely the order of words in the original Hebrew texts. The first uses an idiom to refer to male descendents, and the KJV translates it directly, assuming that the reader will be able to understand the idiom. The second uses an oath formula, assuming that the reader will be able to capture the meaning. Formal equivalence, then, leaves more

responsibility with the reader for properly interpreting words and ideas from the original.

The other approach is called *functional equivalence* or *dynamic equivalency*, sometimes called "concept for concept" translation. Here, the concern is to maintain the meaning of the original by putting it into the idiomatic way we might say the same sort of thing in English. A single word in Hebrew might require a short phrase in the second language. A metaphor in Greek might require a somewhat different metaphor in English to convey the same concept. The more a translator tends toward dynamic equivalency, the less he expects the reader to be familiar with ancient culture and idiomatic language. Consider these examples:

> *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.* (2 Co. 5:16, NIV)

> *You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy.* (2 Ti. 4:3, *The Message*)

Neither of these renderings follow the Greek text exactly. In the first example, the Greek text uses the phrase "according to flesh", an idiom that is unfamiliar to most modern English readers. Hence, the NIV substitutes a more conventional English idiom that functionally means about the same thing: "a worldly point of view". In the second example, there is nothing at all in the Greek text that directly matches the phrase "[they] will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy". Rather, the Greek text says that "according to their own lusts they will heap up to themselves teachers tickling the ear". Eugene Peterson's rather free rendering intends to capture the spirit of the original if not the words of the original. Dynamic equivalency, then, attempts to supply the reader with modern words and phrases shaped by scholarly research and knowledge of ancient meanings.

Both formal equivalence translations and dynamic equivalence translations have value! One should not adopt an either/or approach, but a both/and approach. Comparing translations of both kinds often will yield the best results. Word-for-word translations sometimes leave the reader with English language that is ambiguous, even though it probably was clear enough to the first readers in the ancient world. Concept-for-concept translations, on the other hand, are more susceptible to the translator's bias. Hence, using both kinds of translations is in order. Following are general tendencies among some currently widely available translations.

Translations Tending Toward Formal Equivalence
King James Version
New King James Version
New American Standard Bible
Revised Standard Version
English Standard Version

Translations Tending Toward Dynamic Equivalency
The New English Bible
The Living Bible
The Message
Good News Bible (Today's English Version)
The New Testament in Modern English (J. B. Phillips)

*Translations Attempting to Find a Middle Ground Between Formal
Equivalence and Dynamic Equivalency*
New International Version
New Revised Standard Version
New American Bible
New Jerusalem Bible

Many Christians paid dearly to bring to us the Bible in our own language. Five centuries ago, many European church leaders thought that having the Bible in the language of the common people was too dangerous. The Bible should be controlled by the church and the clergy (and preferably read in Latin only), not read privately by women and men in their own homes. Those courageous people who thought otherwise were vigorously opposed, including John Wycliffe, who first translated the Latin Bible into English, Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into German, and William Tyndale, who translated the Scriptures from both Hebrew and Greek into English. Today, the work of translating the Bible still goes on in many languages where it does not yet exist. Further, there is always the need for ongoing translation even in English, since the English language changes almost daily. The English of Chaucer was not that of Shakespeare, nor Shakespeare's English that of Thomas Jefferson. Therefore, the work of translation is an ongoing task in order to keep pace with the language shifts that come over the years.

Context

As Christians committed to the Bible as God's infallible holy word, it might seem that rather pious to simply say, "Let the Bible speak for itself." In fact, the Bible does not "speak for itself," at least in the bald sense of the word. Someone must open its pages, pick a passage, read it and draw conclusions. This interpretive process proceeds out of several contexts that, in turn, affect the way the reader reads what he or she reads. A worthwhile maxim is that any text without a context is a pretext, which is to say that when one ignores the context of a passage, it often allows a twisting of the text so that it says what the reader wants it to say.

Everyone knows what it feels like to have someone repeat her/his words out of context. Wars have been started for such things! (In 1870 the Franco-Prussian war began over an incident when Bismarck released to the press an edited form of a dispatch that normally would have caused little notice, but after being reduced from 200 words to 20, it incited France to a call to arms.[19]) Some of the most serious errors of biblical interpretation have arisen out of an ignored, distorted or misplaced context. The real tragedy is that often a passage, even though stripped of its context, will be interpreted and received with authority simply because it comes from the Bible. *All interpreters of the Bible must remember that there is no authority whatsoever in a passage used out of its setting.* In fact, to read Scripture out of context undermines its authority. The authority of Scripture is replaced by the imagination of the reader.

Following are some crucial areas of context to consider when interpreting the Bible.

Biblical and Literary Context

It is of primary importance *where* in the context of the whole Bible a particular passage is located. Each Testament, Old and New, has unique features of its own that must be considered. There is theology in the Old Testament and theology in the New Testament—and while complementary, they are not identical. Also, the Bible is more than a book: it is a library of books. Each book of the Bible has key themes and individual characteristics. For instance, to properly interpret a passage in the Galatian letter, one must know something of the Galatian heresy. To interpret passages in the Book of Revelation, one should know something of the history and theology of martyrdom as well as something of the apocalyptic genre. Apples in the

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[19] T. Wallbank and A. Fletcher, *Living World History* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1958), p. 461.

context of the Song of Songs 2:5, where they refer to an aphrodisiac, are not to be interpreted in the same way as apples in Joel 1:12, where they refer to the produce of the fruit-farmer.

Compare, for instance, the following statements from the Bible, one from the Old Testament, the other from the New Testament:

> *Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same spirit; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?* (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21)

> *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

Here, context is everything! In the first passage, Qoheleth (the teacher) wants to impress on his readers that both humans and animals die, both decay and both turn back into dust. Humans are not exempt from death anymore than dogs. However, to employ this passage to describe the afterlife would be inappropriate to the writer's context. Qoheleth is not talking about the afterlife, but the meaninglessness of this life "under the sun". St. Paul, on the other hand, wrote in light of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and he writes about what will happen at the end of the age. The promise for all God's people is resurrection, not death like an animal.

There are other important biblical contexts in addition to the major division between the Testaments. Any given biblical passage occurs within a particular biblical book. Each biblical book is unique, has certain themes and emphases, and contains language and ideas peculiar to the author(s) of the book. Often a particular writer in Scripture will exhibit certain tendencies in his vocabulary and style. Paul and Luke and Jeremiah and John wrote at length, and each writer displays distinctive characteristics in his respective work. By finding parallel statements by the same writer, light often can be shed on a particular passage. Take, for instance, Paul's use of the phrase "the

righteousness of God" (Ro. 1:17; 3:21).[20] Is this a quality of God's own person (i.e., his own divine integrity) or something God gives to others (i.e., the conferring of righteousness status upon someone else)? What Paul says elsewhere about righteousness may help. In his Philippian letter, he speaks of a righteousness that is "through faith in Christ—a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Phi. 3:9). Here, more clearly, Paul speaks of a righteousness that God gives, not merely a righteousness God has. By comparing Paul's similar language in another of his writings, one gains a better idea of how Paul intends the phrase "righteousness of God" in the Roman letter.

Of course, one must also pay attention to local context. The Bible is not just a book of isolated propositions, though certainly it contains propositions. Most of the Bible is written so that ideas flow into one another. Usually a biblical statement does not stand alone, but it must be interpreted in light of what has preceded it and what follows it. By observing what precedes and follows a passage, one can frame the passage within its larger flow of thought. Readers should think more in terms of paragraphs than verses. Even after one has located a passage within a particular topic, he/she still must carefully consider the immediate context of the passage. Such consideration often involves reading two or three paragraphs or more on either side of the passage. Take for instance this description by Daniel:

> *I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns... As I was thinking about his, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes came from the west... He came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. I saw him attack the ram furiously, striking the ram ad shattering his two horns.* (Daniel 8:3a, 4-7a)

Isolated, we might think Daniel was on a farm watching two animals fight. The local context, however, repeatedly uses the word "vision" to designate what Daniel saw (Da. 8:1, 2, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 26, 27). So, Daniel was not "down on the farm." He was given a vision—something he saw in his mind's eyes—that was not happening in front of him in space/time history. Further, the ram and the goat in his vision were symbols of political powers in the ancient world, Persia and Greece (Da. 8:20-21). Virtually all interpreters

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[20] It may be noted that the NIV, following the tradition of Luther and the Reformers, has offered an interpretive translation of "the righteousness of God" by rendering it as "a righteousness *from* God", which is more specific than the Greek text. Other translations, however, do not go so far (cf. KJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, etc.).

recognize that this vision concerns the demise of the Persian Empire and the rise of Alexander the Great. Local context guides our understanding of the passage.

Historical-Cultural Context

The writings in the Bible come to us from various periods of history over a span of about a millennium and a half. Hence, there are huge historical and cultural jumps between, say, the historical context of the Book of Judges and the historical context of the Book of Philemon. A wide range of cultures are represented in the Bible, including the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant as well as the Mediterranean cultures of Greece and Rome. These are the questions of "when" and "where" that lie behind the texts, and they all have an effect upon how one reads particular passages.

In Abraham's world, for example, it was expected that a wife would bear her husband an heir. If she were sterile, she was obliged to seek other means, and one alternative means was to offer to her husband a slave-wife in the hopes of producing an heir through her. This practice of surrogate motherhood is attested throughout the ancient Near East from Babylon to Egypt, and various laws regulated such arrangements. A slave wife, for instance, was never elevated to the same status as the free wife, even if she were able to have a child.

> *If a man has married a votary [one devoted to him], and she has not granted him children, and he is determined to marry a concubine, that man shall marry the concubine, and bring her into his house, but the concubine shall not place herself on an equality with the votary.*
>
> Code of Hammurabi (#145, early 2nd millennium BC)

Hence, when Sarai suggested such a course of action to Abram so that "she could build a family through her [Hagar]", Abraham agreed (Ge. 16:1-3). However, when Hagar despised Sarai, because of Sarai's sterility and her own fertility, the slave-wife was sent away (Ge. 16:4-6). To modern ears, this story sounds strange. We would be reluctant to draw too many moral principles about married life from this narrative, and in fact, the biblical author does not give any clear word of approval but actually may imply disapproval.[21] Still,

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[21] Von Rad is probably correct in saying that even though Sarah's proposal was completely in accord with ancient Near Eastern custom, the Genesis narrator saw it as a great delinquency, cf. G. von Rad, *Genesis[OTL]*, rev. ed., trans. J. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 191.

knowing something of ancient Near Eastern cultural mores helps one to read this story with more sympathy and helps explain why Sarai made such a suggestion in the first place.

Another historical-cultural example concerns the veiling of women and the unveiling of men when praying. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

> *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.* (1 Corinthians 11:4-5)

Knowing something of ancient Greco-Roman cultural expectations helps frame what Paul said. In the first place, the reader may immediately remark upon the fact that in Jewish culture, men prayed with their heads covered, wearing a prayer shawl (or in more modern times, a *yarmulke*, cf. Mt. 23:5).[22] Why, then, does Paul restrict Greek men from praying like this? Furthermore, why does he require a wife to pray with her head veiled? The answer lies in Roman culture. It was traditional for males to take a leading part in local pagan rituals, praying and offering libations to the gods while having their togas drawn up over their heads.[23] Hence, Paul says that Christian men should not pray this way, since it would be taken as praying in a pagan manner.[24] Wives,[25] on the other hand, should pray with their heads covered, since the head covering was the traditional sign of marriage in Greco-Roman culture—a sign not unlike our modern wedding ring. For a wife to pray with an uncovered head would be to identify herself with the new, liberated wives of Roman society who were promiscuous.[26]

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[22] Jewish men wore the *tallit*, the four-cornered cloth with fringes, when they attended the morning synagogue service, cf. J. Neusner, ed., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1996), p. 498.

[23] B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 121-123.

[24] D. Edwards, *ABD* (1992) II.236-237.

[25] There is a translation issue in this passage concerning the word γυνή (*gyne* = woman, wife). Since the passage addresses veiled women, and since the common expression in Latin for a woman's marriage was "I veil myself" and the comparable expression in Greek was "veiling of the bride," the context seems to suggest that "wife" rather that "woman" is what Paul has in mind (so NAB, TEV, JNT, Weymouth, Taylor, Williams), Winter, pp. 126-127. While it is common for English translations to use the word "woman" (NIV, KJV, RSV, NEB, JB, NASB, ASV), this rendering is probably too general.

[26] Winter, pp. 127-130.

Confessional Context

Religious bodies and Christian denominations develop their own attitudes, presuppositions and doctrines about the meaning of Scripture, and usually, denominational preferences for the meaning of particular passages of Scripture. They all claim that the Bible supports their confessional viewpoint, whether Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal or Roman Catholic. Some denominations place more emphasis on traditional interpretations than others. Roman Catholics, for instance, have the *magisterium*, the belief that the teaching office of the church holds priority in the interpretation of Scripture.[27] Protestant denominations may not have a formal *magisterium*, but they may very well have unwritten interpretive traditions that their members are expected to uphold.

In general, Protestants have tended to formally subordinate their traditional interpretations to the authority of Scripture, that is to say, Scripture is given more weight than tradition. Scripture, in fact, can correct tradition so that the church is always being reformed in light of Scripture. Acknowledging such a principle formally, however, is not necessarily the same as permitting it to function practically, and the fact that scores of Protestant denominations have begun as splits from other denominations over the interpretation of Scripture testifies to the difficulty of consensus. Individually, a person may come to significant disagreement with his/her own denomination about the meaning of Scripture, and if the disagreement is substantial enough, may be forced to leave. Hence, while a confessional context is not internal to the Bible itself, it is a context that must be considered seriously.

Problems in Context

Parallels in biblical documents by different authors may also help to interpret passages when the various writings are addressing the same subject. Many Bibles have ready-made cross-referencing indices either as a center column, in the margins, or in the back of the Bible. Some serious cautions are in order, however. It is imperative to be aware that while these kinds of parallelisms are often helpful, they can also be misleading, especially if one automatically assumes that a particular writer uses a word or phrase identically with another writer. Paul speaks of faith and works (Ro. 4:3-4; Ep. 2:8-9), and James speaks of faith and works (Ja. 2:14-24) , but they do not use the words or concepts in precisely the same way. Similar wording does not necessarily yield similar meaning. Even the same word can be used in a variety of ways, depending on the context. The goal is to work toward authorial intent, that is, what the ancient author intended to say (not what the modern reader wants to

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[27] R. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Franciso: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 68-74.

hear).

A further caution should be given regarding proof-texting. Proof-texting begins with the statement of a proposition about doctrine and then the citation of a list of texts that "prove" the proposition to be true. Very often this sort of method strips the various cited passages of their local contexts. The use of proof-texts can be legitimate as a sort of biblical footnoting, but only so long as sound contextual interpretation precedes it.

Finally, some areas of Scripture, especially the Old Testament Wisdom Literature which often appears in maxims, have very little immediate context. Therefore, one must rely more heavily on poetic parallelisms and word studies to extract the meaning.

The New Testament Letters

Since the Bible is composed of in a variety of genres, each genre has unique features that should be examined individually. One such collection comprises the New Testament letters, documents written specifically by Christian leaders to other Christians to address problems, offer advice and encouragement, and sometimes to correct either theological or behavior deviation. Beyond the larger collection of letters in general, readers also should be aware of the personal idiosyncrasies present in letters by a single writer, such as, Paul or John or Peter.

Letters and Epistles

It probably is fair at the outset to draw a distinction between letters and epistles. In the Greco-Roman world, the term for "written correspondence" was ἐπιστολή (*epistole*) from which we derive the term "epistle". However, written correspondence in this period can be divided into two large categories. First, there were private letters never intended for public consumption. Second, there were the collected letters of prominent Greeks and Romans which, although composed as letters, were intended for an audience much wider than just a single person or group.[28]

The question, of course, is how far do the New Testament letters fall into one or the other of these categories. In some measure, the New Testament letters have features that belong to both. On the one hand, they are "real" letters in the sense that they were composed and sent to real persons and/or real churches. Their addresses are hardly artificial literary

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[28] O. Seitz, *IDB* (1962) 3.115.

devices. Much of the information in the letters is highly personal, such as, the specific mention of mutual friends (Rom. 16) or the direct naming of personal enemies (3 John 9). On the other hand, these written communications certainly were composed for a wider reading than by a single individual or even a single church. Instinctively, the early Christians seemed to know this. Further, when Paul wrote to Philemon, he addressed his one-pager not only to Philemon himself but also to "the church in your house" (Phlmn 1-2). Even more important, Paul instructed his readers to share his letters with other churches (Col. 4:16). Some letters may have been intended as encyclicals.[29] A work like the Book of Hebrews, at first glance, might not even seem to be a letter at all until one reaches the closing lines (He. 13:22-25). By the 4th century, Christians had marked off seven of the New Testament letters as "catholic", that is, as written to and for the whole church rather than a single congregation (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude).[30] In the end, each New Testament letter must be assessed on its own merits.

Letter Forms

Literally thousands of letters still exist from the time of the apostles, and most of them have a form very similar to what one finds in the New Testament. A reasonably standard form existed for a Greco-Roman letter, and Paul, at least, follows this form rather closely:[31]

Greco-Roman Letter	Paul's Letters
Sender & addressee	*Sender & addressee*
Greeting	*Greeting (using "grace" and "peace")*
	Thanksgiving and prayer
Body	*Body*
	Paraenesis (ethical advice)
Wish for good health	*Prayer*
Farewell	*Final greetings and farewell*

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[29] This might be true of a letter like Ephesians, where the earliest manuscripts do not contain the address to Christians "in Ephesus". Many scholars since the time of Archbishop James Ussher in the 17th century have explained this feature by suggesting that Ephesians likely was a circular letter, the church at Ephesus being only one of its intended recipients, cf. R. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 626-627.

[30] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.xxiii.25. Admittedly, however, this designation is not entirely appropriate, since virtually everyone agrees that these letters seem to address specific situations in particular localities. Still, they are less specific than, say, Paul's letters, cf. R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (London: Duckworth, 1971), p. 151.

[31] W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

Not all the letters in the New Testament follow this form to the degree that Paul followed it. Hebrews, for instance, lacks an opening. 1 John has *none* of the above formal elements, even though it surely was written to a particular group of Christians. James and 2 Peter lack final greetings and farewells, though both have an address at the beginning.

Still, given all the variety, there is one issue that is most important. Each New Testament letter was written in the 1st century to address a special situation within a particular group. Hence, each letter's original context must be considered very carefully in the interpretive process. The modern reader must always be conscious of the fact that he/she is reading someone else's mail, and in doing so—sort of like listening in on one end of a phone conversation—one must be prepared to do a certain amount of "reading between the lines" to discern the circumstances out of which the letters were composed.[32] While all the documents of the Bible are "for" us, not all of them are "to" us, at least directly.

Discovering the Situation

If the letters in the New Testament were written to specific recipients in particular situations, then discovering something about those people and their situations clearly is important. The recipients of letters sometimes are individuals, sometimes groups. 3 John, for instance, was written to Gaius, a church leader (1 Jn. 1), and Philemon was written to the leader of a household community where a church gathered (Phlmn 1-2). Galatians, on the other hand, was written to a whole group of churches in a sizeable province (Ga. 1:2). Romans was written to Christians in a single city, but they were subdivided into smaller groups that met in various house churches (Ro. 16:5, 10, 11, 15). 1 Peter, more broadly, was written to Christian congregations scattered over five Roman provinces (1 Pe. 1:1), and James, even more broadly, was written to folk dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world (Ja. 1:1).

Whether to a single person, a church, or a group of churches, each of the New Testament letters envisions a situation that stands in the background. Sometimes an external enemy is clearly spelled out, such as, in the Philippian letter. Here, Paul bluntly warns against a group he calls "dogs" and "mutilators" (Phil. 3:2). Similarly, in Galatians he writes against enemies whom he accuses of preaching "another gospel" (Ga. 1:6-9). 1 Peter was written to Christians who were facing stiff opposition from the Greco-

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[32] Fee and Stuart, pp. 58-59.

Roman culture, resulting in severe suffering for their faith (1 Pe. 1:6; 4:12-16; 5:10). Such situations are easy enough to spot in even a cursory reading.

On the other hand, some letters do not so much address outside enemies as internal issues within the Christian community. 1 John, for instance, is written against the background of a church split. Some members of the community had withdrawn themselves from the others (1 Jn. 2:19). 2 John warns against those who "run ahead", that is, those who assess the core of Christian teaching as being passé (2 Jn. 9-11). Jude writes against infiltrators whom he describes as "godless men" who "secretly slipped in among you" (Jude 4). 2 Corinthians is aimed at a group of teachers Paul labels as "false apostles…masquerading as apostles of Christ" (2 Co. 11:13). Hebrews addresses Christians and their relationship to the temple, and especially, it examines the meaning of Yom Kippur, the Jewish national Day of Atonement. Should Christians look to the ancient Israelite priesthood and participate in the Torah's sacrificial system? Absolutely not! These ancient rituals were temporary illustrations of the removal of sin, but only until the coming of Christ (He. 9:6-10; 10:1). Now, the death of Jesus has become the once-for-all sacrifice that will never need repeating (He. 9:26, 28). When Jesus, the final great high priest, had completed his sacrificial death on the cross, he sat down to denote that his work was done forever (He. 10:11-12; cf. 1:3; 8:1; 12:2).

Some letters are not so forthright. In reading someone else's mail, it always must be remembered that there will be information common to the writer and the first readers that is not privy to us two millennia later. When Paul says to the Thessalonians, "Don't you remember when I was with you I used to tell you these things" (2 Th. 2:5), we might wish to know what he said, but we do not have the same advantage as the Christian insiders who actually lived in Thessalonica. Similarly, when Paul says in 1 Corinthians that he had written to them previously (1 Co. 5:9), we would like to know what he wrote. Unfortunately, this letter has not survived. In a letter like Colossians, the modern reader must pay considerable attention to Paul's polemics, since he does not offer a formal description of the theological crisis. Whatever it was, it seems to have involved certain philosophical notions derived from traditions not strictly compatible with Christianity (Col. 2:8). Further, it seems to have carried a strong flavor of mysticism with a corollary demand for severe asceticism (Col. 2:16-18, 20-22).

On occasion, a given letter might be related to yet another letter. 2 Thessalonians, for instance, seems to have been written to correct some misunderstandings from 1 Thessalonians and perhaps to negate a forged letter purporting to be from Paul (2 Th. 2:1-2; 3:17; cf. 1 Th. 4:13—5:3). 1

Corinthians, on the other hand, was composed in response to a letter the Corinthians earlier had written to Paul, posing to him some delicate ethical questions. A substantial section of 1 Corinthians responds to those questions (1 Co. 7:1a). Each time Paul uses the expression περὶ δὲ (*peri de* = Now about…) he takes up one of the Corinthians' questions (1 Co. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

One thing always must be kept in mind. *Whatever one takes a biblical text to mean in the modern world can never contradict what it meant to its first readers in the ancient world.* This is why discovering the original situation is important. One cannot, for instance, say that when Paul warns against both the passive and aggressive roles in homosexual behavior (1 Co. 6:9) that this may mean something altogether different for modern folk who have the advantage of more advanced sociological and psychological development.[33]

The Argument

When we speak of the "argument", we refer to the logic of the letter. How does the writer reason through his material? The logic of Paul, for instance, tends to be different than that of John. Paul is quite syllogistic. His argument proceeds from *A* to *B* to *C* toward a climax. Take, for instance, one of his longer letters, Romans, where he sets forth his understanding of the gospel in preparation for a visit to Rome, a city he had never yet visited (Ro. 1:10-17, 20-24, 28-29). His argument follows this general progression:

1) *The whole world is guilty of sin (Rom. 1-3)*
   - *Gentiles have rebelled against God (1:18-32)*
   - *Jews, also, have failed to keep the Torah (2:1—3:8)*
   - *Both, therefore, are guilty before God (3:9-20)*
2) *The solution to the world's guilt is faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 4-8)*
   - *Abraham and David are the prototypes for justification by faith, and the true children of Abraham are those who believe, not those who have bloodlines descending from Abraham (4)*
   - *Christ died for sinners; salvation is by grace through faith (5:1-11)*
   - *Just as Adam was the prototype for death, Jesus was the prototype for life (5:12-21*

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[33] Paul's terms μαλακοὶ (*malakoi*) and ἀρσενοκοῖται (*arsenokoitai*) were drawn from a world in which homosexual behavior was not generally condemned. The two terms refer respectively to the passive partner (lit., "soft" or "effeminate") and the active partner (lit., "those who go to bed with males"). To attempt to work around this text by saying that it refers only to male prostitution but not to other homosexual relationships, as has been attempted by some within the gay community, is inadmissible, cf. Brown, pp. 529-530.

- *The new status of believers is that they are "under grace", not slaves to sin (6:1—7:25)*
- *Because they are "under grace", they have complete victory in Christ Jesus (8:1-39)*

3) **If the true children of Abraham are to be defined by faith, not pedigree, what was the purpose of God calling Israel in the first place? (Rom. 9-11)**
- *It was God's sovereign choice that the true Israel should be made up of the children promised to Abraham, the people of faith (9:1-33)*
- *Jews also need to respond to the gospel in order to be numbered among the true Israelites (10:1-21)*
- *In the end, the true Israel will be saved, whether Jewish or non-Jewish (11:1-36)*

4) **The Ethics of the Gospel (Rom. 12-15)**
- *The worship of the true Israel consists of a life of grace, love and obedience (12:1—13:14)*
- *In this life of grace, Christians should refrain from passing judgment on each other over secondary issues (14:1—15:13)*

John, on the other hand, follows a much different path by using a circular development. His progression of thought revolves around primary themes, and he keeps recapitulating them. In 1 John, for instance, his themes are:

1) *The confession of faith based on the apostolic tradition*
2) *The lifestyle of righteousness that all true believers should exhibit*
3) *The demonstration of brotherly love within the Christian community*

He begins the letter with the confession of faith (1:1-4), continues on with the Christian walk (1:5—2:4), and segues into the life of love (2:5-11). These same themes resurface only verses later—the confession of faith (2:20-27), the walk of righteousness (2:28-29), and the demonstration of God's love (3:1). He continues to repeat them: the righteous life (3:4-10), the showing of love (3:14-18), and the confession of faith in God's Son (3:23; 4:1-3). And yet again: the life of love (4:7-12), the confession of faith (4:14-15), the life of love (4:16-21), the confession of faith (5:1), the life of love (5:2-3), the confession of faith (5:6-12).

When reading a New Testament letter, then, one should remember that the entire letter would have been read to the recipients in a single sitting. This means that when a modern person reads a New Testament letter, they should follow the larger argument of the letter before attempting to split hairs on the meaning of smaller paragraphs or sentences. Look at the forest first before examining any particular tree!

Distinguishing Between Local and Universal Viewpoints

Because the New Testament letters were written to specific people in specific situations, a corollary challenge for the interpreter is to discern which elements may be locked up in the 1st century and which are more generally applicable to all people at all times. Paul, for instance, uses the same imperative language when he says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Ro. 16:16; 1 Co. 16:20; 2 Co. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26; cf. 1 Pe. 5:14) as he does when he says, "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Co. 6:18). Most Christians would doubt that such imperatives have the same force, but how can one tell the difference?

One approach is to follow the principle that whenever the modern reader shares *comparable specific life situations with the original readers*, then what Scripture said to them it also says to us.[34] Take the foregoing imperative to greet each other with a holy kiss. Such kisses in Paul's day were a common form of greeting between close friends, and in fact, they still are practiced as a form of greeting in some cultures. However, it is not a common cultural greeting for most Americans. Hence, we live at a cultural distance from this practice. Perhaps a more appropriate greeting for Americans might be a handshake or even a hug. On the other hand, the moral imperative to flee sexual immorality in a Greco-Roman culture that was suffused with sexual promiscuity is particularly comparable to our own culture, where promiscuous sexual expression has become so pervasive. Further, Paul's imperative to flee sexual immorality is backed by the ten commandments, which though they are raised to a higher level, still are in effect for Christians (cf. Mt. 5:27-30; Ro. 13:8-10).

To be sure, some interpreters might debate certain passages as to whether or not there is a comparable specific life situation. Sincere Christians may end up on opposite sides of such a debate, both affirming that the Bible is God's Word but disagreeing on how it is to be applied. Mennonite Christians, for instance, take the passage about women wearing a head covering to be applicable in the modern world (1 Co. 11:5-6, 13). Baptists don't. Both may be equally sincere, but they see differently as to whether this was a culturally time-bound issue or a universal one. The same can be said for other issues, such as, women in ministry, speaking in tongues, foot-washing or drinking wine.[35] In such debatable issues, it is wise

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[34] Fee and Stuart, p. 75.

[35] Some Christians treat as universal Paul's instructions that women should be silent in church (cf. 1 Co. 14:33-36). Those same Christians treat what Paul said about speaking in tongues (1 Co. 14:39) and drinking wine (1 Ti. 5:23) as local instead of universal. Others might go in exactly the opposite direction.

to remember Paul's counsel: *Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters*, and *Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourselves and God* (Ro. 14:1, 22).

Old Testament Narratives

There is more narrative literature in the Old Testament than any other genre. One reason, no doubt, is that peculiar to Hebrew and other Semitic languages is a literary form called "narrative sequence." This type of literature involves the use of complementary perfect and imperfect verbs connected by the conjunction "and".[36] Most of the material in Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel is composed as narrative literature. Substantial portions of the some of the prophets, also, appear as narratives.

Narratives tell a story. The Old Testament narratives recount the history of God's people from the beginning of the human race to the emergence and historical fortunes of the Israelites. However, the point of such stories was not simply to record factual data in some disinterested way. Instead, they were stories intended to give meaning and direction to God's people who heard or read them later.[37]

Though stories are not laws, many stories reflect upon the laws of Moses, showing how the implications of those laws were lived out in the history of Israel. Take, for instance, the law that forbade Israelite citizens from permanently selling their family property (Lv. 25:23-28). The story of Naboth, Ahab and Elijah reflects upon this law. When the King of Israel wanted to buy a vineyard from Naboth, the man flatly refused on the grounds of the ancient law code (1 Kg. 21:1-3). Ahab was so cavalier about Yahweh's laws that he and his wife engineered a kangaroo court and a bogus capital sentence in order to circumvent this Israelite citizen's loyalty to the ancient statute. Elijah, God's spokesman, sentenced Ahab and his wife to death for violating this law (1 Kg. 21:17-19, 23-24). In the end, the story

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Some Christians continue to practice foot-washing as a congregational practice similar to communion (Jn. 13:13-15). Others see this practice as culturally time-bound in 1st century Jewish culture.

[36] The *perfect* plus *imperfect* sequence, extremely common in the Old Testament, is used primarily for past tense narration. A special form of the conjunction "and" joins the verbs in sequence, and sometimes, such sequences can continue for literally dozens of clauses and sentences. (In English, we would call this an interminable run-on sentence.) *Imperfect* plus *perfect* sequences, on the other hand, are used for present or future tense narratives, cf. T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 107-109.

[37] Fee and Stuart, p. 90.

sharpens the focus of the law, shows the trend among the Israelites toward relaxing their obedience to God's covenant demands, and offers a warning to any reader that God's statutes are to be taken seriously!

Other cogent examples can be found in the oracles of the prophets. Many of their sermons are virtually unintelligible without the story of Israel as the background. To understand Ezekiel's lament about a lioness and her cubs, for instance, one must know the story of Judah's kings from Jehoahaz to Zedekiah (Eze. 19:1-9; cf. 2 Kg. 23:31—24:1-7). To appreciate Amos' denunciation of Bethel (Am. 3:14; 4:4; 5:4-6), one must know the story of how Jeroboam I set up a shrine at Bethel in order to redirect worshippers who were going to the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kg. 12:26-30).

Macro and Micro Narrative

In one sense, the history of the Old Testament is one, big story. It is as much the story of God and his mighty acts among his people as it is the story of the people themselves. As such, the macro story of the Old Testament reads somewhat like a long novel. The protagonist is God, and often enough, the antagonists are his people. After describing the origins of the human family (Ge. 1-11), the story focuses on Abraham and his descendants. It tells is how God rescued the children of Jacob from Egypt, gave them his law, brought them into the land of Canaan, and drove out their enemies. The plot thickens, however. The people of Israel were not faithful to God, so the history of the nation is sprinkled with setbacks and divine judgments. After a long spiritual decline, the story tells how the Israelites lost the land given them by divine grant, and especially, how their loss of the land was precisely what God had warned them about if they broke their covenant with him.

Still, exile was not the end of the story. The story continues, explaining how a small group of survivors were able to go back to the land they lost, reestablish themselves there, and await a future in which God would intervene in history in their behalf. The Old Testament ends on an unfinished note. The promise of a messianic age was envisioned by the prophets, but the post-exilic community continued to subsist under foreign domination with the materialization of this age. The final prophet predicted that God's messenger would appear before the coming of the Lord (Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6)

This is the macro story—the big picture. It is the story of God's relationship to his people. It was composed by many authors from different periods of time. The big story is a composite derived from many sources. It covers a period of about 1500 years spanning the time from Abraham to Ezra.

Abraham (ca. 2000 BC)
Exodus from Egypt (ca. 1250 BC)
David (1000 BC)
Division of the kingdom (922 BC)
Fall and exile of Samaria and Israel (722/721 BC)
Fall and exile of Jerusalem and Judah (586 BC)
Edict that exiled Jews could return to Jerusalem (539 BC)
Rebuilding the temple (520-515 BC)
Ezra arrives to teach the Torah (458 BC)

Within this macro narrative, of course, are scores of micro narratives. The bigger story is made up of many smaller stories. Some stories are about the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac & Jacob). The longest single sustained story in Genesis is about Joseph, one of Jacob's sons (Ge. 37-50). Then come the stories about Moses and Israel's redemption from Egypt, the giving of the Torah and the sojourn in the desert, stories that occupy the rest of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy). The Book of Joshua collects the conquest stories of Israel's entry into the land of Canaan. After the various accounts of the judges and one small novella about Ruth (Judges & Ruth), the intertwined stories of Samuel, Saul and David comprise the books of 1 & 2 Samuel. The Book of 1 Kings commences with the story of Solomon, followed by a stereotypical pattern that describes each of the kings of Judah and Israel in sequence after Solomon's death (1 & 2 Kings).

The story of Israel's national life from the death of Moses to the exile has been dubbed by scholars as Deuteronomistic History, that is, a history that played itself out under the blessings and cursings of the Deuteronomic code (Dt. 27-28).[38] The fortunes of the nation were made or broken on this covenant code. When the leaders and the people were faithful to the covenant, God blessed them, defended them, and supplied their needs. When they were unfaithful to the covenant, he sent disaster and foreign invasion, not to mention fiery prophets who warned them and called them back to the covenant. In several cases, there are "stories within the stories". For instance, the stories of Elijah and Elisha punctuate the ongoing annals of the kings of Israel in the north.

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[38] We do not here necessarily subscribe to the critical theories of Martin Noth about the composition of Deuteronomistic History, cf. M. Noth, *The Deuternomistic History* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1982). Still, there can be little doubt that the books Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings in the Hebrew Bible owe their primary theological orientation to the Book of Deuteronomy.

Finally, there is a second history of Israel comprising the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars dub this one the "Chronicler's History". It begins with the story of David, traces the history of Judah until the fall of Jerusalem, and recounts how the survivors came back from Babylonian exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

Characteristics of Narrative Literature

In general, narrative literature features five common components: *narrator, plot, characters, scene* and *dialogue*.[39] The narrator, of course, is in the background and not personally mentioned. Nonetheless, he is the one who chooses what parts of the story are to be told. His choice of materials shapes the way the story unfolds and emphasizes his theological viewpoint. In the story of Joseph, for instance, the narrator twice puts in bold relief the most important theological theme when Joseph says to his brothers: *it was not you who sent me, but God*, and *you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good* (Ge. 45:4-8; 50:20). Similarly, in the story of the exile of Israel to Assyria, the narrator's potent conclusion was: *All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God. [ ] The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers…but they would not listen* (2 Kg. 17:7-23). When David sinned by committing adultery, it is the narrator who, at the end of the account, observes, *But the thing David had done displeased the LORD* (2 Sa. 11:27b).

The plot is the skeletal structure upon which the story is fleshed out. Plots, by definition, show the rise and fall of dramatic tension. They have a beginning, a middle and an end. In the beginning, the plot sets up the conflict. The middle section develops this conflict toward a climax or even a series of ascending climaxes (there may be several points of intensity before one reaches the final climax). Sometimes there are subplots within the larger plot. At the end, the conflict gives way to resolution. Take, for instance, the plot in the story of Judah and Tamar (Ge. 38). The larger issue is that Judah, one of the sons of Jacob, might not have any heirs, thus leading to the elimination of one of the twelve tribes. Tamar, the wife of Judah's deceased son Er, and later the wife of his deceased son Onan, as yet had no children. Judah restricted her from becoming the wife of his youngest son, Shelah (38:1-11, 26). Tamar took it upon herself to trick Judah into a levirate marriage (marriage to a close relative) in order to preserve the family line. She disguised herself as a cult prostitute, and Judah, not knowing who she

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[39] For more discussion concerning narrative, see D. Fewell and D. Gunn, "Narrative, Hebrew," *ABD* (1992) IV.1023-1027.

was, impregnated her. However, because at the moment he had nothing for payment, he left some personal items for collateral until she could be paid. When he attempted to send payment, the cult prostitute could not be found (38:12-23). In time, it became obvious that Tamar was pregnant. Judah was furious and was on the verge of executing her for promiscuity (38:24). (There is, of course, the deep irony of Judah's double standard that screams for attention.) Before the execution, however, Tamar displayed the collateral that she had collected from Judah earlier, and in particular, it included his very own cylinder seal (38:25). He could hardly deny the items were his! In the end, he acknowledged what he had done, accepted Tamar's pregnancy as within her rights, and gave her protection. The birth of her twin boys is the resolution to the tension over whether or not the tribe of Judah would survive (38:26-30).

The main characters, of course, always figure prominently in any story. Oddly enough to our way of thinking, the physical appearance of the characters in most biblical stories is not described. Rather, the biblical stories focus on the inner qualities of the characters as demonstrated in their words and actions. Sometimes those qualities are negative, as in the stories of Samson and Ahab (Jg. 16:20; 1 Kg. 21:25-26). Sometimes those qualities are positive, as in the kingships of Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Chr. 31:20-21; 34:29-33). In fact, in one story this quality of inner character is prominently underscored as the only issue of ultimate significance (1 Sa. 16:7). Sometimes this quality of inner character or even the story line itself is sharpened by the use of personal names that results in puns on elements within the stories. Samuel (a pun on the expression "heard of God") reflects upon Samuel's sensitivity to God when just a boy (1 Sa. 3:2-10). An antagonist of David, was named Nabal (= fool, cf. 1 Sa. 25:3, 25). Solomon's name (= peaceful) reflects upon the fact that God wanted a man of peace, not a man of war, to build his temple (1 Chr. 22:6-10). Elijah's name (= Yahweh is God) underscores the primary issue in the contest on Mt. Carmel (1 Kg. 18:21, 38-39). Often, main characters stand in parallel or contrast to each other. The Saul and David stories are a good example, where Saul is cavalier about his obedience to God, but David is a man after God's own heart (1 Sa. 13:13-14; 15:22-29). In the story of Deborah's war, Deborah, a woman judge, stands as a parallel hero to Barak, the leader of the army. However, it was Deborah who was the true force behind Israel's victory, and Barak, though he figured in the outcome, is overshadowed by his female counterpart (Jg. 4:4-10; 5:7, 12, 15).[40]

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[40] The fact that Deborah's name is consistently mentioned first before Barak's is all the more remarkable in literature from a patriarchal culture!

The narrative scene is perhaps just as important as the characters themselves. Some stories almost function like a stage play divided into acts. Take, for instance, the story of Ruth. The first scene is in Moab. It describes the tragedy that befell a family of Israelites during a famine, causing them to move from Judah to Moab. All the men in the family died in Moab, leaving three widows. Two of them, a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, decided to move back to Judah in the extremity of their situation (Ru. 1). Next, the scene changes to Bethlehem. When the two women arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth, the lovely young widow, began to glean in the fields of a rich farmer, Boaz, not realizing he was a relative of her deceased husband (Ru. 2). Because he was a near kinsman, according to Israelite law Boaz was a potential redeemer-husband (cf. Dt. 25:5-6). Now the scene changes to a night encounter between Ruth and Boaz. In view of Boaz' kindness to allow her to glean in his fields, Ruth, at her mother-in-law's encouragement, presented herself as a candidate for levirate marriage (close relative marriage) only to discover that another relative, who was even closer, had first marriage rights for the young widow (Ru. 3). The tension in the story builds when the mystery man, the closer relative (he is unnamed in the book), is confronted with the possibility of him marrying Ruth. He declined his right, thus making it possible for Boaz to marry Ruth. The two of them were happily married, and God gave them a son (Ru. 4:1-17). As the appendix makes clear, this story was far more than a romance. It was a story about the great grandparents of King David and how God providentially worked out his divine purposes in their lives (Ru. 4:18-22).

Virtually all the stories have dialogue, which helps the reader understand both the character of the speaker and the plot of the narrative. Sometimes the dialogue comes in the form of speeches that rehearse the Deuteronomistic theology. These speeches by spiritual leaders like Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon and others punctuate the Deuteronomistic history and recall the Deuteronomistic values (Jos. 23; 1 Sa. 12:6-15, 24-25; 2 Sa. 22:26-27; 1 Kg. 2:2-4; 8:33-53, 56-61; 9:3-9; 11:29-39). Sometimes dialogue comes in conversations that give clues to the character values of the speakers as well as the story plot. In the dialogue between God and Samuel, for instance, over the Israelites' request for a king so they could be "like other nations", God says to Samuel: *It is not you they have rejected as their king, but me* (1 Sa. 8:7b). In the dialogue between Joseph and his family over his boyhood dreams, the question posed by his brothers actually sets the framework for the entire narrative: *Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?* (Ge. 37:8a). The command of Saul, *Turn and kill the*

*priests of the L*ORD*, because they too have sided with David*, demonstrates how calloused and violent he had become (1 Sa. 22:17).

Some Cautions when Reading Narrative

The careful reader may find that certain morals are implicit rather than explicit within some stories, that is, they may lie deeper than just the surface events. The story of Esther, for instance, does not mention the name of God even a single time. Nonetheless, the perceptive reader knows that God is in the background, guiding events so that the Jewish people were preserved.

In the New Testament the apostles sometimes saw typology in the narratives of the Old Testament. Typology is a correspondence between a person, event of thing in the Old Testament and a person, event or thing in the New Testament.[41] Paul, for instance, finds such a correspondence between the events of the exodus and the Christian experience. The crossing of the Red Sea, which was the demarcation between Egypt and the future, corresponded to Christian baptism, which demarcates the old life from the new life. God's sustenance of the Israelites in the desert corresponded to his spiritual sustenance of Christian believers (1 Co. 10:1-4). One should be cautious, however, when applying typology. It always is safest to apply typology where the New Testament clearly applies it, and to regard all other correspondences with reserve. Typology can easily become inappropriate allegorizing that injects meaning into Scripture rather than extracts meaning out of it. For instance, to argue that Enoch, who was taken to be with God before the great flood of Noah, is a "type" of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church before the great tribulation is not something the New Testament itself says (Ge. 5:24). One could just as easily argue that Noah, who passed through the flood, is a "type" of the church going through the great tribulation. Neither of these "types" have New Testament authorization. There may be more types between the Old and New Testaments than are specifically mentioned in the Bible, but one should err on the side of caution.[42]

Also, the reader should avoid any number of fairly common errors in interpreting biblical narratives. Narratives are not allegories. (The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, for instance, is not a symbol for Christ and his church.) Narratives must not be separated from their historical and literary contexts. (The promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 concerning Israel in covenant

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[41] The word τύπος (= type, pattern) occurs some 14 times in the New Testament.

[42] For a more thorough discussion of typology, see A. Michelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 236-264.

with Yahweh has only limited application to American politics and economic prosperity.) Narratives may or may not offer a contemporary "moral" for Christian life. (The story of Gideon's fleece in Judges 6 is hardly a guideline for one's Christian prayer life.)[43]

The Story of Jesus

For Christians, there can be no more important section of the Bible than the story of Jesus. The Christ-event is at the very center—Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. "This," as St. Paul said, "is what we preach, and this is what you believed" (1 Co. 15:11b).

The story of Jesus comes to us in four documents called "gospels" (the term is taken from Mark 1:1, but Christians apply it to all four). They are not formal biographies, even though they have considerable biographical material. Rather, they are compositions that aim toward answering a single, fundamental question, "Who is Jesus?" They do more than that, of course, but at the core, this is the highest concern. None of them were written by Jesus himself. They were written about Jesus. Further, while Jesus speaks extensively in the first person in the gospels, his words, for the most part, are probably in a language other than what Jesus originally spoke. There is considerable reason to accept the conclusion that Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic.[44] While Jesus may have spoken Greek, it is far more likely that his public teachings were in Aramaic. If so, then the words of Jesus in the gospels already have been translated from Aramaic into Greek. Still, it probably is fair to say that while for the most part we do not have the *ipsissima verba* (verbatim words) of Jesus, we do have the *ipsissima vox* (the actual voice) of Jesus.

Four Gospels, One Story

Though one effort was made in the late 2nd century to combine the four gospels into a single account,[45] the story of Jesus has remained in four

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[43] For other cautions, see Fee and Stuart, pp. 102-106.

[44] In a few instances, Jesus' words are transliterated from Aramaic but left untranslated (cf. Mk. 5:41; 7:34; 15:34; Mt. 27:46). While there is much that we do not know about the language of Jesus, such as, why the dialect of Aramaic Jesus spoke seems different than the written form that has come down to us in other sources from the 2nd temple period or whether or not Jesus knew Greek, we can say with a fair degree of confidence that Aramaic was his basic language, cf. M. Wise, "Languages of Palestine," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green & S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), pp. 434-444.

[45] Tatian produced the Diatessaron (= "through four") in about AD 170. Using the four canonical gospels, he stitched together a single, continuous narrative, but though his work was popular, the long view of the church did not eliminate the four gospels as we have them today.

gospels, three that are very similar (Matthew, Mark & Luke—dubbed "the synoptic gospels") and one that has some points of similarity with the others though it is largely unique (John).[46] Obviously with as many events and teachings as occurred during Jesus' public ministry, all the gospels are selective (cf. Jn. 20:30-31; 21:25). Though some events (e.g., the ministry of John the Baptist, the feeding the 5000, etc.) are recorded by all four evangelists, where the four gospels converge to the highest degree is in the account of Jesus' death. This event seems to have been central for all of them. Still, anytime a story is told four times by different folk, one would expect there to be various differences in the way the story is told.[47] It probably is more to the point to ask why three of the gospels are so similar, both in the selection of events, their order, and the language used to describe them. This similarity has come to be called "the synoptic problem", and it presumes that there is a literary relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke.[48]

To say that the four gospels tell one story is only one interpretive factor, though surely it is the most important one. Another factor is that each gospel was written to a different community or audience. Luke actually names his patron or recipient (Lk. 1:3), and while the other gospels do not, they all bear the marks of having been written for a particular community.[49] If so, then the selection of material in the gospels naturally reflects to some degree the concerns of the churches themselves. Any author drawing upon

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[46] For one who wants to study the four gospels so that the parallel materials are brought together side-by-side, several "harmonies" are available. The best in English is K. Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (USA: United Bible Societies, 1982). For the Greek texts of the four gospels in parallel, see K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Germany: Duetsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996).

[47] Differences need not mean that the accounts contradict each other, though such accusations are common enough. For a defense of the complementary character of the different gospels, see C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 113-152.

[48] The synoptic problem and its possible solution is beyond the scope of this treatment. Suffice it to say that the most widely accepted scenario (though not the only one possible) is that Mark was composed first (about AD 65), while Matthew and Luke were composed a couple of decades later, using Mark as a core source. Both Matthew and Luke expanded Mark's record by using another source common to them both (called "Q") as well as by unique material that appears only in Matthew (M) or only in Luke (L). The literature on the synoptic problem is voluminous, but for a reasonable summary, see R. Stein, "Synoptic Problem," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green & S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), pp. 784-792.

[49] It is easier to say that each gospel was written for a particular community than to decipher which community was intended in each case. Mark has a long-standing association with Peter, and hence Rome has been considered the intended community since early in the Christian tradition, cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15. Matthew may have been written for the community in Antioch, Syria, while John may have been written for the community in Ephesus, cf. R. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch & Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983), pp. 15-27 and D. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 393-404.

the traditions about Jesus would be expected to choose stories and sayings that were especially relevant. This goes a long way toward explaining such differences as why Matthew's Gospel has a strong Jewish element, while Mark's has a strong non-Jewish element. (Mark does not give nearly as many details of Jewish interest as does Matthew, and he translates Aramaic words, suggesting that his readers were non-Jewish, cf. 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34).

Historical Setting

It goes without saying that Jesus was a Jew, but this fact has not always been fully appreciated. Because Jesus is believed to be the Savior of the world, Christians sometimes extract him from his Jewish context and attempt to make him non-ethnic or pan-ethnic. There is a sense in which this is true, of course, since the coming of Jesus was for all people. Still, to interpret the gospels properly one must always keep in mind that Jesus, as a Jew, was talking to people who also were Jewish. His vocabulary, his frame of reference, his culture, his religious discussion—all these elements were deeply rooted in the 2nd temple period of Jewish Palestine under Roman occupation. Jesus' world was quite different than our own, and the interpreter must take some pains to bridge this cultural gap. Here, the work of biblical scholars is helpful.[50] Take, for instance, the factor of shame in Jesus' burial. Normal Jewish burial was in a family tomb, and the death of a loved one was reverently mourned. Condemned criminals, however, often were denied customary rites of burial and mourning. Jesus was not buried in a family tomb but given a dishonorable burial in a tomb "in which no one had ever been laid" (Jn. 19:41). The very newness of Jesus' tomb, though expedient given the situation, was nonetheless shameful. There was no traditional procession to the tomb, no public expressions of condolence to family and friends, and no one to sit *shiv'ah*, the custom of intense grieving for the seven days following death. Of such customs typical of Jewish culture during the Roman period, Jesus was deprived.[51] Without some knowledge of such customs, this factor would be lost on a modern audience.

Such cultural considerations could be multiplied almost without number. The story of Jesus sitting and talking to a Samaritan woman in the middle of the day (Jn. 4) must be read against the background of a long and

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[50] Two excellent works in this regard that extensively address the Jewish culture of Jesus are N. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 315-463.

[51] B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press Intl., 2003), pp. 89-108.

bitter feud between Jews and Samaritans. That Jesus touched lepers in a society where such contact would mean ceremonial uncleanness was more than an unusual act—it was a demonstration of God's radical compassion for outcasts (Mt. 8:2-3). To hear Jesus' warning that his disciples should not tell anyone that he was the messiah until after his resurrection (Mt. 16:20; Mk. 9:9), while the warning is understandable as it stands, is considerably sharpened if one knows something of the various uprisings spawned by other messianic claimants during Jesus' era as well as the messianic consciousness that led to two Jewish revolts against Rome, one in the late 60s AD and the other in the 130s AD. When Jesus described a woman who had lost one of her ten coins (Lk. 15:8), it may be helpful to know that such coins often were part of a woman's headdress, her dowry, and her most precious possession not even laid aside for sleep. When one of them was missing, she lit a lamp, not because it was night, but because the low doorway allowed only a minimum of light into the house.[52] When four friends lowered their paralytic companion through the tiling of the roof (Mk. 2:1-5), it helps to know that homes typically had an outside stairway, and that the flat roof was regularly used as extra living space.

Jewish cultural considerations also must be extended to the language of Jesus. Many of Jesus' words and expressions assume a 1st century Jewish context. Jesus not only addressed God as *Abba* (the Aramaic word for "father", cf. Mk. 14:36), he also taught his disciples to do the same (Lk. 11:2). This is so familiar to Christians that it is easy to forget (or simply to be unaware of) the fact that such a way of addressing God was virtually unknown in 2nd temple Judaism. Jesus' use of this familial address to God was an expression of his own deep relational confidence, reverence and obedience to his heavenly Father.[53] The repeated "I am" expressions in John's Gospel (Jn. 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19) take on deep significance in the context of a Judaism that would immediately connect these affirmations with the "I AM" of the exodus (cf. Ex. 3:14).[54] Perhaps most important of all is Jesus' repeated use of the phrase "kingdom of God".[55] This language first

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[52] J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 106-107.

[53] J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 61-68.

[54] These expressions appear throughout the Fourth Gospel, sometimes with a predicate, sometimes with an implied predicate, and sometimes, as in the passages cited above, in the absolute form with no predicate at all. Furthermore, in the Greek text, they appear as emphatic expressions (ἐγὼ εἰμί). The emphatic form suggests that the writer has something special in mind—that Jesus was making a profound Christological statement, and in doing so, he was claiming to *be* God, cf. R. Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), pp. 40-44.

[55] Actually, there are three terms, all referring to the same thing: "kingdom of God", "kingdom of the heavens," and simply "the kingdom".

appears in the preaching of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2), but it is central to all Jesus' teachings (Mk. 1:14-15 and later). For modern people in the western world who have no kings, the word "kingdom" is ambiguous. In the gospels, it refers not to a realm so much as to the sovereign rule of God. The term had its origin in Jewish intertestamental literature,[56] and it was a concept that both Jesus and his listeners knew well. The people of Israel had long awaited the time when God would break into history to establish his eternal, universal rule. When God invaded space and time to be heralded as the king of the universe, he would rule the world in the way he had always intended.[57] Jesus preached that they were on the threshold of this very event (Mk. 1:14-15)! However, in using this language, Jesus was recasting the familiar Jewish hope in a way that redirected the expected plot. In typical Jewish thought, the kingdom of God would be an abrupt transition from the "old age" to the "new age". Jesus, on the other hand, suggested that the new age would begin (Lk. 17:20-21) before the old age had run its course (Mt. 24:14). Hence, the kingdom of God would be both present as well as future.[58] Already God's rule had broken into the world (Lk. 11:20), but it would not reach its consummation until the end of history (Lk. 22:17-18).

The Parables

A unique feature comprising about a third of Jesus' recorded teaching were his parables. He used parables most frequently to explain the kingdom of God, often with the introductory phrase, "The kingdom of God is like…" Parables are short, pithy stories drawn from local life that focus on some aspect of God's kingdom by analogy. In this sense, they function like extended metaphors or similes. They are not allegories, however, though many sincere Christians have treated them as such.[59] Rather, they are stories that draw in Jesus' listeners and call from them a response about his message about God's kingdom.

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[56] 1 Apocalypse of Baruch 73; 3 Apocalypse of Baruch 11:2; Testament of Moses 10; Psalms of Solomon 17:4; 1QSb 3.5

[57] For a detailed analysis of this Jewish hope, see N. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 202-209.

[58] For a thorough treatment of the kingdom of God and what has come to be called the "already/not yet" tension, see G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

[59] Interpreting the parables as allegories has a long tradition. St. Augustine, for instance, identified the inn keeper in the parable of the Good Samaritan as St. Paul, while Tertullian equated the fattened calf killed when the prodigal son returned home to symbolize the death of Jesus. Such things the parables were never designed to teach, cf. A. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 7.

Because Jesus' parables were oral rhetoric in a real life setting that called for an immediate response from the listener, they featured local points of reference (farming, fishing, traveling, etc.) and often some unexpected turn in the story. Somewhat like jokes (which also feature points of reference and an unexpected twist), they are a bit more difficult to appreciate in written form. Interpreting the parables requires paying attention to three important things.[60] First, Jesus' audience should be identified. Were they Pharisees, common folk, the disciples? The audience shapes how the story is told. Second, the points of local reference should be appreciated, things that would have been apparent to the original listeners. Stories about farming (Mk. 4:3-9) or bandits (Lk. 10:30-37) or parties (Mt. 22:1-10) would immediately hook the listeners and draw them in. Finally, the twist in the story evokes a response from the listener. Sometimes, it comes directly in the form of a question, such as, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Lk. 10:36), or "Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" (Lk. 7:42). Sometimes it comes as a pronouncement, such as, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk. 18:14). Sometimes the twist is so sharp that the listeners gasp in horror, "May this never be!", and Jesus responds: *Everyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed* (Lk. 20:16b-18).

The Climax of the Gospels

All the gospels climax with the arrest, trial and death of Jesus. Rather early in his ministry, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he would die in Jerusalem (Mt. 16:21). At the time, they hardly could conceive of such a thing (Lk. 9:44-45), and in fact, the idea sharply conflicted with their presuppositions about the messiah. Jesus brought to bear upon his ministry two Old Testament predictions, the figure of the royal king from David's line (Am. 9:11-12; Ho. 3:5; Mic. 5:2-5; Is. 9:1-7; Je. 30:9; Eze. 34:23-24; Zec. 12:8) and the figure of the suffering servant described by Isaiah (Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 52:13—53:12). In his death, Jesus brought together both of these figures, for he was at one and the same time the Son of David and the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Mt. 22:41-46; Jn. 18:33-37; Lk. 24:25-27, 45-46).

Jesus interpreted his death as vicarious—something he offered for the sake of others (Mk. 10:45; Jn. 10:11, 15, 17-18). At the last supper during a

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[60] Fee and Stuart, p. 155.

traditional annual Passover celebration, Jesus focused upon his death as the beginning of a new covenant of forgiveness established through his shed blood (Mt. 26:27-28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20). The ongoing meaning of his death was that forgiveness of sins would be preached among all nations (Lk. 24:46-47). God's divine verification that Jesus was who he claimed to be came on Easter morning, when Jesus rose from the dead (Mt. 28:1-7). In the end, the story of Jesus is about both his life and his death. The one without the other would be incomplete (Ac. 10:36-43).

The Torah

The first five books of the Bible form a special collection alternately called the *Torah* (= the instruction), the *Pentateuch* (= five books), the *Books of Moses* and the *Law*.[61] In them appear a wide variety of literary genres, including narrative, poetry, family pedigrees, laws and prophecy. As a whole, these books describe the formation of the people of Israel into a nation, beginning with the creation of the universe and followed by God's call to Abraham, the slavery of Jacob's family in Egypt, the exodus, the giving of the law at Sinai, and the sojourn in the desert up until the death of Moses. These five books were preserved by the Jewish community in five separate scrolls, probably because the large volume of material made a single scroll impractical. Still, even though the material was preserved in five separate documents, the five scrolls had common ties and were always grouped together.[62] Hence, when the Bible says that workmen in Josiah's day found a "book of the law" (2 Kg. 22:8), we should not think that they found the entire Torah. Rather, they found one of the five scrolls of the Torah, and in all likelihood the scroll of Deuteronomy.

Theories of Composition, Editing and Collecting

While traditionally one man, Moses, has been credited with the composition of the entire five books, scholarship over the past couple centuries has suggested a more complex picture. In the first place, the stories about Moses are recorded in the third person. While Moses could certainly

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[61] Each of these terms have their own orientation. The term "Torah" is the traditional Jewish term, the term "Pentateuch" comes from the Septuagint, the title "Books of Moses" derives from the traditional belief that Moses was the author/compiler of the material, and the title "Law" stems from the fact that these scrolls contain the 613 commandments enumerated by the rabbis.

[62] There seem to be specific connections between adjacent books. Ex. 13:19, for instance, refers backward to Ge. 50:25. The appointment of Aaron and his sons as priests in Lv. 8 presupposes the instructions in Ex. 29. The prediction about Moses' death in Nu. 20:12 anticipates Dt. 34.

have written them in this way, some portions of the Torah seem unlikely to have been composed by him,[63] and in fact, only a relatively small number of instances actually describe Moses as writing (cf. Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27-28; Nu. 33:2; Dt. 31:19, 22, 24ff.), though later portions of Scripture credit him as the man behind the law (2 Chr. 34:14; Mk. 12:26; Lk. 16:29; 24:44). On occasion, the Torah itself cites what seem to be preexisting documents that might underlie the Torah (Ge. 5:1; Nu. 21:14-15).[64] After the death of Moses, the Book of Joshua indicates that some of the laws and decrees of Israel were added at this later time (Jos. 24:25-26). Sometimes in the narratives there are odd juxtapositions and discontinuities that imply the bringing together of more than one preexisting literary source.[65] One story in the Torah describes God by using the more general name Elohim (Ge. 1:1—2:4a), while an adjacent narrative consistently uses the name Yahweh Elohim to describe God (Ge. 2:4bff.). This shift in nomenclature is what one might expect when bringing two sources together but seems more unlikely in a single composition. Finally, there are anachronisms in the Torah that seem to come from a period later than Moses.[66]

The long and short of it is that today most scholars conclude that the Torah was compiled out of preexisting shorter sources, either oral traditions or actual documents edited and collected over a long period. The classical version of this theory, called the Documentary Hypothesis, is conveniently abbreviated JEDP.[67] It has been generally supported by most scholars,

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[63] It seems unlikely, for instance, that Moses would have recorded the events of his own death (Dt. 34). Again, it seems unlikely that Moses would have written the following about himself: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Nu. 12:3).

[64] The reference in Ge. 5:1 to a תּוֹלְדוֹת (*toledoth* = genealogical list) is one of eleven such units in the Book of Genesis. They may possibly have had an independent existence as cuneiform tablets before being brought together in the composition of Genesis, cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1982) 2.436-437.

[65] Take, for example, the table of nations in Genesis 10, which describes how the descendants of Noah dispersed throughout the earth. Following this account is the story of Babel in Genesis 11, where all humans are together in the Plain of Shinar before God scattered them by confusing their languages.

[66] Take, for instance, the reference in Genesis 14:14 to the city of Dan. In the periods of Abraham and Moses, this city was named either Leshem (Jos. 19:47) or Laish (cf. Jg. 18:27-29), the latter name also known to us from other ancient Near Eastern texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia, cf. *ABD* (1992) IV.130. The name Dan was not given to this site until long after Moses had died. As another example of anachronism, the reference in Ge. 36:31 listing the Edomite kings says that these kings ruled before any Israelite king reigned. Such an observation could only have been made after the time of Saul, at the earliest.

[67] This classical paradigm suggests four primary sources behind the Pentateuch: **J** (the Yahwist source, a product of the united monarchy, ca. 1000 BC), **E** (the Elohist source, a product of the northern kingdom, ca. 9th to 8th centuries BC), **D** (the Deuteronomist source, roughly corresponding to the Book of Deuteronomy, a product of the northern kingdom at about the time of the northern exile), and **P** (the Priestly source, a product of the southern kingdom's citizens during the exile in about 6th century BC), cf. D. Freedman, *IDB* (1962) 3.711-727.

though more recently, it has itself come under further analysis and critique so that the classical theory has been modified in significant ways.[68] The debate continues. While it cannot be said that the Documentary Hypothesis has fallen, it is at least true that additional hypotheses and paradigms are constantly being suggested. Also, it must always be kept firmly in mind that each hypothesis emerging from critical methodology is inherently speculative, and while such theories are not necessarily anti-supernatural, they often tend in that direction. Hence, Christian scholars who work in this area must always remember that literary speculation must never be allowed to cancel out divine intervention, nor does such scholarly speculation cancel out the authenticity of the Pentateuchal traditions about Moses to whom God revealed himself.[69]

The Idea of Covenant in the Ancient Near East

The idea of covenant was woven throughout the woof and warp of ancient Near Eastern life. A covenant was a solemn promise between individuals, clans, or states made binding by an oath (either a verbal formula or a symbolic action) which both parties recognized as sacred. Such an oath called upon the gods to punish any breach of the covenant. The obligations accepted by someone in such a covenant relationship carried the force of law. Covenants regulated the social behavior of ancient peoples so that a certain level of predictability and trust could be counted on. Even before the time of Abraham, well-formed covenantal patterns for the regulation of international affairs had been established in the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures. By the time Israel was coming out of Egypt, the Hittites, who built a vast empire in Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400-1200 BC), had left an indelible impression on their vassal cultures in what scholars call the Hittite suzerainty treaty, examples of which are well-known to archaeologists. Other than blood ties, the covenant was perhaps the single most important social relationship between ancient Near Eastern peoples, and it controlled both domestic and political life.[70]

The reader of the Old Testament will find many examples of how the covenantal ideal impinged upon normal life. Abraham's refusal to accept the

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[68] For one approach toward modification, see A. Campbell & M. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

[69] B. Arnold, "Pentateuchal Criticism, History of," and T. Alexander, "Authorship of the Pentateuch," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Alexander and D. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 70-71, 630.

[70] G. Mendenhall, "Covenant" *IDB* (1962) 1.714-715.

spoils of war was due to a covenant oath (Ge. 14:21-24). Abraham entered into covenant with Abimelech of Canaan over water rights (Ge. 21:22-32), a covenant later renewed by his son (Ge. 26:26-31), and he also entered into covenant with his senior slave regarding the securing of a bride for his son (Ge. 24:1-9, 37-38, 40-41). When Esau sold his birthright, he did so under covenant oath (Ge. 25:29-34). Jacob cut a covenant with his uncle Laban regarding clan boundaries (Ge. 31:43-54). In his old age, Jacob ensured that he would be buried in Canaan rather than Egypt through a covenantal oath (Ge. 47:29-31; 50:4-6), and Joseph, also, called upon his clan to enter into a similar covenant (Ge. 50:24-25). The force of Joseph's covenant lasted hundreds of years (Ex.13:19)!

That God used the institution of ancient Near Eastern covenants by which to establish his own relationship with the people of faith is everywhere attested in Torah. The flight from Egypt and the journey toward Canaan was the direct result of Yahweh's ancient covenantal oath to the patriarchs (Ex. 6:6-8). The earliest covenant in the biblical record is the one made by God with Noah after the great flood, a covenant guaranteeing protection from another such deluge (Ge. 6:18; 9:1-17). The most important covenant in the patriarchal narratives, however, is the covenant God made with the patriarchs regarding their clan and the land of Canaan. God's covenant with Abraham is stated, for the most part, in very unconditional language in the form of a promissory oath (Ge. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:2-5; 17:3-22; 18:17-19; 22:15-18). It was reaffirmed to Isaac (Ge.26:2-5) and later to Jacob (Ge. 28:13-15; 35:11-12). The patriarchal covenant consisted of a complex of interrelated promises guaranteeing posterity to Abraham in very great numbers as well as blessing for those who favored Abraham and disfavor for those who did not. It gave Abraham and his descendants land rights to Canaan as well as divine blessing for all nations of the earth through Abraham. When Israel came out of Egypt to go into the land of Canaan, the assumption, based on God's covenant with Abraham, was that they would be established in their promised land so that they might live there perpetually (Ex. 6:2-8).

While the covenant is unconditional in the sense that God would never forget his covenantal promises, it still remained true that the individual blessings of these promises were contingent upon the response of faith and obedience. Even those who were of the covenantal family could be "cut off," and a graphic illustration of this tragic possibility is to be found in the story of how Yahweh tried to kill Moses because he neglected the important ritual of circumcision (Ex. 4:24-26). Even more ominous, the rebellion at Kadesh by the people of Israel meant that the covenantal promises regarding the land

would not be fulfilled to them, but only to their children (Nu. 14).

At Mt. Sinai the reader of Torah is introduced to the covenant God made with the Israelites as a nation as mediated through Moses. Just as God related to Abraham in the form of an ancient Near Eastern covenant, so he related to Israel in the form of a suzerainty treaty. Yahweh, the great Suzerain (= overlord), established his covenant with Israel, his vassal (servant). By a free and gracious act, Yahweh chose for himself a people who had no necessary claim upon him. The heart of the treaty was the list of *stipulations* or requirements that the vassal must perform out of deference to the suzerain. The consequences of covenant-keeping on the part of the vassal, the *blessings and cursings*, were clearly spelled out: promises of blessing in return for obedience and dire warnings against a breach of duty (Dt. 11:26-28). The Decalogue (ten commandments) was the covenant charter (Ex. 19:3-17; Dt. 5:7-21). They gave concrete expression to the Israelites' relationship with Yahweh and their relationship with each other in a social context. As a free people, redeemed from the bondage of Egypt, it guaranteed their human rights, freedoms and responsibilities.

Of special importance to the Sinai covenant are the two kinds of law found within it, apodictic and casuistic.[71] Apodictic laws are framed in an absolute manner. The ten commandments are laws of this type. Casuistic laws (case laws) are conditional laws stated in the "if" style, that is, if such and such condition exists, then such and such a response is appropriate (cf. Ex. 21:2-6; 22:25; 23:4-5, etc.). Case law was quite familiar to ancient Near Eastern societies, both Hebrew and non-Hebrew alike.[72]

The covenant ratification at Sinai (Ex. 24), like many other elements in the covenant, was carried out in the form and spirit of ancient Near Eastern patterns. Moses acted as a mediator of the covenant between Yahweh and the people (Ex. 24:1-2). He read the stipulations of the covenant, after which the congregation of Israel, similar to a bride at a wedding, repeated the vow in unison, "Everything Yahweh has said we will do" (Ex. 24:3). The symbolic actions that formed the oath of the covenant were carried out by Moses, who set up an altar, representing Yahweh, along with twelve pillars, representing the clans of Israel. Sacrifices were offered, and the blood of the sacrificial animals was drained off in bowls for the blood ceremony (Ex. 24:4-5). Half of the collected blood was dashed against the altar representing Yahweh. After reading the Book of the Covenant to the congregation, and after the people had

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[71] Fensham, *ISBE* (1979) 1.793.

[72] A good example of case laws from the ancient world is Hammurabi's Code.

repeated the vow in unison, Moses dashed the remainder of the blood over the people (Ex. 24:8). The life's blood of the sacrificial victims now covered the two contracting parties. Yahweh and Israel were blood-brothers, bound together by oath-taking words and actions. From the time of the Sinai experience, the remainder of the Old Testament is governed by the idea that Yahweh and Israel were bound together in covenant by solemn oath. Yahweh was a covenant God, and Israel was a covenant people. Yahweh is to be known in the context of the covenant, and Israel is to be defined in the context of the covenant.

One question about the law of Moses looms large for Christians. How do the laws of Moses relate to them? Christians, obviously, are not part of the ancient family of Jacob, so do the covenant laws extend beyond the Jewish circle? After all, Christians are under a "new" covenant (Je. 31:31-34; Mt. 26:27-28; 1 Co. 11:25; 2 Co. 3:6; He. 7:22; 8:7-13). Actually, there is both continuity and discontinuity between the laws of Moses and Christian responsibility. In the first place, Jesus plainly taught that the moral force of the law was still in effect, though raised to a higher level than merely legal technicalities (Mt. 5:17-48). The apostles in Jerusalem, while they concluded that one did not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, also upheld the moral force of the idolatry and sexual laws of Torah (Ac. 15:1, 19-21; cf. Ex. 20:4; Dt. 5:8; Lv. 18).[73] Paul urges the same moral force by citing from the ten commandments (Ro. 13:8-10). He can even cite relatively obscure commandments from Moses' law and apply them to Christian conduct (e.g., 1 Co. 9:8-10; cf. Dt. 25:4). On the other hand, the temple no longer existed, and various rituals practiced by ancient Israel carried more symbolic than behavioral value (Col. 2:16-17). The stories from the Torah, while they may not be "about" us or directly "to" us are certainly "for" us (1 Co. 10:1-11). It is the inner aspect of Torah observance, not outward technical conformity that is most important (Ro. 2:28-29). In this way, the law of Moses still stands, as Jesus taught, but it has been transfigured by the Christ event. It is preserved yet transformed in light of the new covenant.

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[73] James' advice to abstain from eating strangled animals and blood (Ex. 22:31; Lv. 17:10-15) is more difficult to assess. Perhaps, as many interpreters think, the issue was sympathy to Jewish sensitivities, or perhaps the appeal was made because these issues were not only for Israelites but also for "aliens living among them" (Lv. 17:8, 10, 13, 15). James may be thinking in particular of non-Jews who are living as brothers and sisters in Christ with Jews. Regardless, James clearly invokes the Torah over these issues while suspending it regarding circumcision.

Remarkable Ancient Parallels

Perhaps a final word should be said about some of the remarkable parallels between ancient Near Eastern literature and passages in the Torah. Some of the laws in ancient law codes are near duplicates of laws in the law of Moses, and in fact, are earlier than Moses.[74] Also, some stories in ancient Near Eastern texts bear incredible points of similarity to biblical texts. The story of the great flood in the Gilgamesh Epic, for instance, speaks of the divine decision to destroy humans through a flood and the command for a hero to build an ark. In this ark, he took all sorts of animals for survival. After the flood, the ark grounded upon a mountain, the hero opened a window, and birds were released to reconnoiter.[75] Since some of the versions of this Mesopotamian epic are even older than Moses,[76] the question naturally arises concerning a possible literary relationship between them and the Bible's account of Noah.

We may not be able to answer with finality this question, but one reasonable possibility is that the accounts in Genesis were intended as a sort of apologetic—a "set the record straight" sort of literature. Since the Israelites were migrating from Egypt to Canaan, they would be exposed to both Egyptian as well as Mesopotamian mythologies. What is most important about the Genesis accounts as compared with the Mesopotamian ones are not so much their similarities as their differences, for it is in the differences that Yahweh is shown to be radically different than the gods of the pagans. The most striking difference is between polytheism and monotheism. The other ancient stories are about "the gods", but in the Bible, there is only one God, Yahweh, who acts sovereignly. Furthermore, Yahweh's judgment in the great flood was given in a moral context (humans had become thoroughly given over to wickedness, cf. Ge. 6:5-7), while in the Mesopotamian flood stories, the gods were just peeved because humans made too much noise. In summary, the Mesopotamian deities were limited, greedy, fearful, ignorant and jealous. Yahweh God was all-powerful, omniscient, personal, holy and gracious.[77]

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[74] One of the most striking is the *lex talionis* law (eye for eye, tooth for tooth) in the Code of Hammurabi. Compare Ex. 21:23-25; Lv. 24:20; Dt. 19:21 with Hammurabi: *If a seignor has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye. If he has broke a seignor's bone, they shall break his bone.* (Codes 196-197), cf. *ANET* (1969) p. 175.

[75] From the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI, cf. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949).

[76] The version from Sumer (the Sumerian Fragment) dates to ca. 1700 BC, and the Akkadian version (Myth of Atrahasis) dates to ca. 1600 BC.

[77] See more extension comparisons in G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), pp.164-166.

Prophets, Poetry and Other Strange Language Features

Poetry, the linguistic symmetry of sound and form, was especially important to oral societies in which traditions were passed down by memory from generation to generation. A considerable amount of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is set in poetry. This was not well understood in the older translations of the English Bible (which tended to print all sections of the Bible as prose), but today virtually all translations offer biblical texts with a clear recognition of poetic forms where they occur. Because ancient Near Eastern poetry has a distinctive character, the interpreter of the biblical must know something of these dynamics to fully appreciate how they affect the meaning.

It is universally recognized that poetry in the ancient Near East, Hebrew included, is most clearly identified by parallel lines that bear a thought relationship to each other, either of similarity, contrast or some other type of development. In addition, Hebrew poetry contains rhythm or meter, the recurring pattern of sounds. The first feature, thought parallelism, can to a large degree be replicated in translation, since it does not depend upon phonetics, but rather, the comparison of ideas. The second feature, rhythm and meter, cannot easily be reproduced in a second language.[78] Hence, English translations of the Bible can set forth the poetic forms in lines that aid the reader in discerning the parallel thoughts, but one must be conversant in the Hebrew text of the Bible to discern phonetic rhythms.

Some major types of parallelism are *synonymous* or *congruent* (where parallel lines express the same thought in different words), *antithetic* (where parallel lines express contrasting thoughts), *synthetic* (where succeeding parallel lines in some way develop the idea presented in the first line), *chiasmus* (where parallel ideas are presented in inverted patterns; the <u>middle</u> lines become most important), and *staircase* or *climactic* parallelism (a step-like pattern in which elements from the first line are repeated in succeeding lines).[79] Following are representative examples of the above types.

Synonymous or Congruent Parallelism (A_1, A_2, A_3// A_1, A_2, A_3, etc.)

> *When Israel came out of Egypt,*
> *the house of Jacob from a people of foreign language,*(Ps. 114:1)

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[78] To explore meter in the Hebrew language, see W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1986), pp. 87-113.

[79] A. Berlin, "Parallelism," *ABD* (1992) V.156-157.

> *The shields of the soldiers are red;*
>> *the warriors are clad in scarlet.* (Na. 2:3a)

Antithetic Parallelism (A₁,A₂,A₃// -A₁,-A₂,-A₃ , etc.)

> *The kisses of an enemy may be profuse,*
>> *but faithful are the wounds of a friend.* (Pro. 27:6)

> *A fool gives full vent to his anger,*
>> *but a wise man keeps himself under control.* (Pro. 29:11)

Synthetic Parallelism (Aᵦ,Bᵪ,Cᵈ, etc.)

> *What the locust swarm has left,*
>> *the great locusts have eaten;*
> *what the great locusts have left,*
>> *the young locusts have eaten;*
> *what the young locusts have left,*
>> *the other locusts have eaten.* (Jl. 1:4)

Chiasm (AB//BA, ABCBA, ABCCBA, etc.)

> *Announce*
>> *in Judah,*
>> *and in Jerusalem*
> *proclaim.* (Je. 4:5a)[80]

> *See, he is puffed up;*
>> *his desires are not upright—*
>>> *but the righteous will live by his faith—*
>> *indeed, wine betrays him;*
> *he is arrogant and never at rest.* (Ha. 2:4-5a)

> *Make the heart of this people calloused;*
>> *make their ears dull*
>>> *and close their eyes.*
>>> *Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*
>> *hear with their ears,*
> *understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.* (Is. 6:10)

Staircase or Climactic

> *Return, O Virgin Israel,*
>> *return to your towns.* (Je. 31:21b)

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[80] Unfortunately, the NIV did not follow the word order of the Hebrew text, and thereby destroyed the chiastic structure.

> *Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD?*
> *Was your wrath against the streams?*
> *Did you rage against the sea?* (Ha. 3:8a)

It may be a challenge for the average reader to follow all these features, but a good translation that sets the poetic lines in the proper parallel structure is a great aid. At least an awareness of the basic feature of parallelism is indispensable.

The Metaphorical Language of the Prophets

The lives and ministries of the prophets were filled with pathos. Their preaching was fierce, visceral, passionate and direct. The world in which they preached, much like our own, was filled with citizens who believed they had a corner on a progressive economy, upward mobility, the benefits of leisure and the pursuit of beauty and happiness. The prophets, to the contrary, saw vividly the human will to power, unmitigated greed, self-aggrandizement and wholesale deceit. In a word, they were scandalized.

> *Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt,*
> *a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption.*
>
> *They have forsaken the LORD;*
> *they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.*
> (Isa. 1:4)

What is most important is to see that the pathos of the prophets reflected the pathos of God himself. Abraham Heschel has aptly stated, "God is raging in the prophet's words."[81] If the prophets tell us anything, they tell us that God is not aloof from the trauma caused by his wayward creatures in the world. God is indignant, offended and betrayed by his own people, and the explosive messages of his spokesmen document that hurt and indignation.

> *I reared up children and brought them up,*
> *but they have rebelled against me.*
> *The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger,*
> *but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.* (Isa. 1:2b-3)

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[81] A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962 rpt. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1999), p. 5.

The images of betrayal burst from the prophets lips as though they gushed from the very heart of the Almighty! When Hosea's wife deserted him to become a prostitute, her faithless desertion matched the northern nation's abandonment of God himself (Ho. 1:2; 2:2). When Ezekiel's wife died on the day that Jerusalem fell, the stoic desolation of the prophet, who lost "the delight of his eyes", mirrored the desolation of God (Eze. 24:15-27; 33:21-22). The weeping of Jeremiah (Je. 9:1) was nothing less than the weeping of God (Je. 14:17). The anguish of shattered relationship—husband and wife, parent and child—was like a haunting cry in the night.

> *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*
> *But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.*
> *They sacrificed to the Baals*
> *and they burned incense to images.*
> *It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,*
> *taking them by the arms;*
> *But they did not realize*
> *it was I who healed them.*   (Ho. 11:1-3)

The prophets lived out on earth what God was, so to speak, living out in the heavens. God was not merely a spectator but a participant with his people. Yahweh suffered profound disappointment (Is. 5:1-7) and the wrenching pain of betrayal (Is. 2:11-13, 20-25). When his people sinned, they were not merely breaking laws, but relationships!

If the pathos of the prophet is the pathos of Yahweh, the vehicle of that pathos is the language of metaphor. Metaphor (and by metaphor we speak broadly, including a wide range of figures of speech, such as, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, euphemism, irony and so forth) communicates not merely facts but passion. It employs extreme language, both exultant and raw, to impart to the listeners the way they should feel about things as well as the way they should think about things.

The oracles of the prophets are filled with metaphors. Formally, metaphors are a manner of communication in which figurative language directly compares two things without the use of "as" or "like", defining one thing in light of another. Metaphors often use two nouns not normally associated together but joined by a linking verb (e.g., "that man is a thorn in my side").

> *The house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are copper, tin, iron*
> *and lead left inside a furnace.* (Eze. 22:18)

Usually, metaphors are picturesque, expressing ideas in visual images. Such images carry poetic character whether or not they are expressed in formal poetic lines.

> *You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. So, I will destroy your mother.* (Ho. 4:5)

Often enough, this manner of expression begins with something non-figurative and makes it figurative.

> *I will rebuke your offspring and spread dung on your faces, and I will put you out of my presence.* (Mal. 2:3)

> *Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your heart.* (Je. 4:4)

Because of their intense visual capacity, metaphors increase memorability. They have incredible capacity for conveying abstract ideas. They offer literary elegance and express thoughts and feelings as well as describe concrete objects. At a rhetorical level, they increase persuasive power. At the same time, because they are more ambiguous than literal descriptions, they invite interaction between the speaker and listener. It is to the point that metaphorical language is very often not intended to be taken too literally. When Joel, for instance, says that the mountains will "drip with new wine" and the hills will "flow with milk" (Jl. 3:18), it is hardly that we are to take this language at face value. Especially in the language of wrath and curses as well as the language of love and blessing, metaphor expresses the powerful emotive aspect of God's perspective as much as a literal description of what actually will take place.[82]

Because God is himself mystery, the language of metaphor is used by the prophets to describe the ineffable. Human language is too limited to describe an unlimited God. Therefore, metaphors regarding God often are extreme, containing hyperbole. God's curses and statements of wrath as well as his expressions of love and promises of blessing are cases in point:

> *I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine.* (Is. 49:26)

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[82] For a much fuller treatment of prophetic metaphor, see the excellent work by D. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 19-102.

> *You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts.* (Is. 60:16)

The Historical Context of the Prophets

The prophets were spokespersons for Yahweh to call his covenant people back to their sacred agreement with God (the Law of Moses). God did not merely give his law, he promised to enforce it through blessings and curses—blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. From earliest times, prophets were a balance of moral power. When leaders or the people of Israel defaulted on their responsibility to God's covenant, the prophets called them to account. Often, they predicted future disasters, interpreting them as divine judgments because their listeners would not repent and change course. Such prophecies, however, were often conditional, and if the people repented, they could be averted.

> *'If you are willing and obedient,*
> *you will eat the best from the land;*
> *But if you resist and rebel,*
> *you will be devoured by the sword.'*
> *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.* (Isa. 1:19)

The conditional nature of such prophecy directly parallels the reciprocity of the Deuteronomic code (Dt. 27:15-26; 28:1-68; Lv. 26:1-39).

All the prophets worked out of the historical context of the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and in particular, the relationship of these Israelite nations to the pagan nations surrounding them. The most important of these relationships concerned the invasive threat of the Mesopotamian empire-builders, Assyria and Babylon. It is critical, therefore, to read the prophets out of the context of the Mosaic covenant and the threat of invasion by these foreign entities. For instance, when Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah for showing envoys from Babylon his treasury (Is. 39), at the time Babylon was a second rate power more than a thousand miles away. The current great threat was Assyria. The Babylonians would remember Hezekiah's treasury, however, and Isaiah predicted it would be Babylon, not Assyria, who would steal Judah's wealth and carry its citizens into exile. Similarly, when Ezekiel said that Egypt had been like a flimsy reed-staff (Eze. 29:6-7), he was speaking of Judah's penchant to appeal for help from Egypt every time one of the Mesopotamian invaders attacked. Hezekiah appealed to Egypt in the period of Isaiah (Isa. 36:6), and Jehoiakim did the same thing again two centuries later (2 Kg. 23:34-35; 24:1, 7). Ezekiel said this dependence upon Egypt (instead of depending upon God) was inevitable disaster!

Psalms and Wisdom

In the English Bible, sandwiched between the historical books and the prophets, are five books comprising what is typically called "poetry". This is not to say, of course, that books outside this circle have no poetry, and in fact, small portions of these books are in prose. Still, traditionally in English Bibles (which in turn follow the Greek Bible, the Septuagint), the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs have been designated poetry.

The Psalms, the Hebrew Prayerbook

The Psalms are prayers. Unlike other parts of the Bible, where the emphasis is upon words *from* God *to* us, the Psalms are compositions *from* us *to* God, or else, admonitions for us to praise God. The task of interpreting words *from* us *to* God means that in reading the Psalms, the reader (or worshiper) is intended to find identity with the circumstances of the ancient person. In using these prayers, the modern person finds ways of expressing him/herself to God—joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and regrets.[83] Hence, the language of the Psalms is more emotive than propositional. The fact that the Psalms were composed as poetry and intended to be accompanied by musical instruments heightens their emotive character. Here, one finds all the various poetic devices of poetic analogy, such as, metaphor (23:1), simile (133:1-2), personification (114:4, 6), apostrophe (114:5), sarcasm (52:1), hyperbole (78:27), metonymy (10:7b), and acrostic (119).[84]

The idea of a prayerbook is, in itself, uncomfortable for some folk, particularly those who believe that all prayers should be spontaneous compositions. However, the prayers collected in the Book of Psalms were intended for public as well as private use. Many of the psalms have superscriptions indicating that they were composed for choir and orchestra, which in turn implies public performance (4, 5, 6, 12, 55, etc.), and some Psalms were intended to be sung with particular tunes (9, 22, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 75, 80, etc.). Some were composed for special occasions, such as, the dedication of the temple (30) or a royal wedding (45). About half of the Psalms (73 in all) are associated with the name David, composed either by

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[83] Fee and Stuart, p. 205.

[84] Other figures of speech also are to be found, such as alliteration and onomatopoeia, but they depend upon knowledge of Hebrew and cannot be translated.

David or in honor of David.[85] Among them, a number of Psalms are directly associated with events in David's life, especially his outlaw period (18, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 142). Authors other than David include Moses (90), Solomon (72, 127), Asaph (50, 73-83), the Sons of Korah (42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88), Heman (88) and Ethan (89).

The book of Psalms consists of five major collections—five books within the larger book (see the headings at 1, 42, 73, 90, 107). The Psalms come in a variety of types, including laments, hymns of praise, prayers of trust, and liturgies with congregational call and response (see especially Psalm 136). Laments, the largest single type, are prayers expressing struggle, suffering and/or disappointment. Some laments are intended for congregational use, as implied by the plural pronouns (12, 44, 80, 94, 137), and some seem more appropriate for individuals, since they are written in the first person singular (3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 88, 120, 139, 142).

In reading/praying the Psalms, the interpreter should ask several important questions:

1. *What type of psalm am I using (lament, praise, etc.)?*
2. *Is there a formal structure for this psalm (acrostic, stanzas, etc.)?*
3. *Is this psalm for congregational or individual use?*
4. *What sort of poetic figures of speech are expressed in the psalm?*
5. *What is the situation envisioned by the one who composed the psalm?*

Proverbs, Wisdom in Aphorisms

Hebrew wisdom is the intensely practical art of being skilful and successful in life as guided by moral, godly values. If the Psalms reflect wisdom inside the church (worship), the Proverbs reflect wisdom outside the church (daily life). The wisdom in the Book of Proverbs comes primarily in aphorisms (maxims), often in the form of poetic couplets.[86] Like all maxims, a proverb expresses in a pithy way some particular truth in a given situation. It may not say everything there is to say, but it points toward some essential feature. The proverbs speak suggestively, not exhaustively. In a word, proverbs are not absolute promises, but generalizations about life. The proverb that says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it," does not guarantee that godly homes will *always* produce godly children. In fact, Proverbs also advises that some children, even with the best training, refuse a life of wisdom. A son may be too opinionated to learn (13:1), and good homes can produce lazy kids (10:5).

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[85] The superscription in Hebrew "to David" is somewhat ambiguous. It could mean "by David" or "for David".

[86] In Hebrew, they are called מְשָׁלִים (*meshalim* = proverb, contrived saying).

Some rebellious children may even grow up to mock or curse their parents (15:20; 20:20; 30:11, 17). They may run through their parents' money (28:24) and even drive out of the home their widowed mother (19:26). Hence, the interpreter of the Proverbs must not approach them as through they were inflexible laws. To assume that all business ventures will be financially successful if dedicated to God on the basis of Proverbs 16:3 is to assume more than this proverb intends!

While some of the wisdom in Proverbs is associated with Solomon (1:1; 10:1), other sections of the book come from other wise individuals (notice the headings before 22:17 and 24:23). At least one major collection of wisdom aphorisms was made a couple centuries after Solomon's death (25:1). Two authors also appear in the book of which we know almost nothing save their names (30:1 and 31:1). Altogether, however, the Proverbs offer the best of godly, practical wisdom for every day life.

The first sub-collection of wisdom comes in the form of parental advice to a child (1:8—9:18), especially a father to a son (notice the repeating address "my son", 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1). In this collection, there appear dire warnings against such things as temptations from one's peers (1:10-19), casual sex (2:16-19; 5:1-20; 6:23-35; 7:6-27) and laziness (6:4-11). Throughout this section are repeated entreaties to acquire wisdom and discipline for a fulfilled life (1:1-7, 20-33; 2:1-15; 3:1-35; 8:1—9:12).

Various themes reoccur in the book. One is about the foolish person, which one meets under the names of the פתי (the *simple* or *naïve*, cf. 1:11; 7:7; 8:5; 9:4, 6, 16; 14:15, 18; 22:3; 27:12), the כסיל ,אויל, or נבל (the *fool*, cf. 10:8, 10, 14, 18, 23; 12:15, 16; 13:16; 14:16; 15:2, 5, 14, etc.), and the לץ (the *scoffer* or *cynic*, cf. 9:7, 8; 13:1; 14:6; 15:12; 19:25; 21:11, 24; 22:10; 24:9; 29:8). Another is the sluggard, who is anchored to his bed (6:9-10; 26:14), while he cites preposterous reasons why he shouldn't have to get up (26:13; 22:13). He even lets his food get cold (19:24; 26:15), while offering an unending series of excuses (26:16). Yet another theme is the profound value of a true friend (17:17; 18:24l 27:6, 10, 17). Still another is about the power of spoken words (10:11; 12:14, 18, 25; 15:4; 16:24; 18:21).[87]

Because the proverbs frequently are built from analogies, the interpreter must give reflective time toward discovering how and why the analogy is given. In some cases, the meaning may be more or less obvious,

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[87] For more extended discussion of these and other themes, see D. Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1964), pp. 31-56.

but in other cases it might also be obscure. It is one thing to say "A is like B", but quite another to explore "*how* A is like B". Take, for instance, 27:15. The constant friction caused by a quarrelsome spouse may seem obvious. In other proverbs, however, the correspondence may not be immediately clear, as in, for instance, 25:12: how is a wise man's rebuke like a gold earring? Some proverbs may end up being mind-benders! Consider, for instance, 21:27, where the composer moves from the lesser to the greater. It takes some reflection to perceive that while a wicked person who sacrifices without any real contrition is bad, someone who sacrifices only in order to be able to sin even more is worse.[88]

Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: Wisdom in Philosophical Questions and Issues

Three books in particular address larger thematic questions. The first is Job, which addresses the suffering of the righteous person. It begins by establishing that Job was a godly man of exemplary character (1:1, 5, 8, 20-22; 2:3, 10). In spite of crushing disaster, Job maintained his reverence for God. Though Satan challenged God that Job would not be faithful (1:9-11; 2:4-5), Job stood the test.

The bulk of the book, however, is not about God and Satan, but about Job and his friends (2:11-13). In a lengthy series of dialogues, Job's friends speculated about why a man like Job should face such debilitating trials. They concluded that suffering was simply cause and effect (4:7-9; 8:1-4, 20; 11:1-6). If Job met disaster, somehow he must have deserved it. Job, for his part, contended that he was innocent (6:24-25; 27:1-6). He moaned that his friends were miserable comforters (6:14-15; 16:1-4), and with biting sarcasm he doubted that their advice was even worthwhile (12:1; 13:2-5; 21:34; 26:1-3). Still, even if his friends were wrong, it did not answer his deeper question about why he was suffering. Did anyone know the true depth of his misery (6:1-3)? How could any mortal human measure up to God's righteousness (9:1-20)? Was there anyone who could serve as a mediator between God and mere humans (9:32-35)? What about life beyond this life—was there some compensation beyond death that balanced the scales (14:14-17)? In the midst of his agony, Job held tenaciously to the stubborn hope that God would vindicate him, even after death (13:13-19; 19:23-27; 23:10-12).

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[88] A helpful introductory work toward reflecting on the Proverbs can be found in W. Mouser, Jr., *Walking in Wisdom: Studying the Proverbs of Solomon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983).

In the end, God answered Job out of the whirlwind. He did not give Job the answer about why the righteous suffer. Instead, he helped Job grasp two important truths. First, God's ways are higher than our ways: Job had to be content in acknowledging that the full answer was beyond his comprehension (42:1-6). Second, Job's friends indeed were wrong (42:7-9). The end of the story is that the righteous sufferer must trust in God's sovereignty. The wisdom of the world may be logical, but it is inadequate. The wisdom of God may be beyond our comprehension, but it is to be fully acknowledged and trusted.

The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) addresses a very different issue. It poses what modern people call the existential question: is there meaning in life? Because the author is "going somewhere," any attempt to reach final conclusions about the book's message apart from consideration of the whole is bound to fall short.

The primary word in the book is הבל (*hevel* = vapor, nothingness, meaninglessness, cf. 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26, etc.). In exploring ultimate meaning, the writer examines such things as toil, work, wisdom, goodness, time, knowledge, industry, profit, death, justice, and memory. Such themes are among the most important categories of life. Still, can ultimate meaning be found in any of them? Qoheleth says, "No!" In the end, he intends to bring his readers to the conclusion that the only thing that gives meaning to life is the presence and recognition of God. However, he does not start here. Rather, he arrives at this conclusion only by a circuitous route over ten chapters. On the way, he puts himself and his readers in the sandals of the humanist and the secularist. He leads them in a systematic search for meaning following the path that most men and women follow. Systematically, he moves from lifestyle to lifestyle, from the beer-swilling "good ole boy" (2:1-3) to the artistic idealist who dabbles in aesthetics (2:4-6) to the young executive climbing the corporate ladder (2:7-11). He invites his readers to follow his quest.

In the end, he drives us to the conclusion that nothing is enduring, nothing in this life "under the sun" has final meaning. What, then, is the point of living? Final meaning must be found in the Creator himself, and it is best to realize this as early as possible (12:1, 6-8).

Because Ecclesiastes is an exploration of the various possible answers about the meaning of life, the reader must always keep the various sayings of the book in context. Preliminary sayings that arise while exploring secularism, for instance, should not be made into final conclusions about true spiritual meaning. Those conclusions are reserved for the end of the book.

The last of the so-called "poetical books" is a love poem. Here, the issue is not so much a deep philosophical question as it is a celebration of human love, a man for a woman and a woman for a man in marriage. The drama of the book occurs in a series of conversations. In the older English translations, these conversations were quite hard to follow, since it was not apparent in English (even though it was apparent in Hebrew) which speaker was the man and which was the woman. Modern translations head the various dialogues with appropriate labels, such as, "Bride" and "Bridegroom" (NEB, NASBmg), "Lover" and "Beloved" (NIV) or "The Beloved" and "The Shulammite" (NKJB).

The Song is constructed out of erotic poetry that explores the themes of beauty, courtship, separation, reunion and sexual consummation. One important interpretive approach to the book sees it as an extended chiasm of interrelated themes:[89]

A   *Anticipation (1:2—2:7)*
   B   *Found, Lost—and Found (2:8—3:5)*
     C   *Consummation in Marriage (3:6—5:1)*
   B   *Lost and Found (5:2—8:4)*
A   *Affirmation (8:5—14)*

If this approach is followed, then it is far more than incidental that the marriage occurs in the middle of the Song, since the middle section in chiastic structures is the most important. In any case, the Song describes romantic love in elevated but powerfully emotive images. This is no platonic relationship! It stimulates all five of the senses. Both the lovers—the young woman from a family of vineyard farmers and the young man from a family of shepherds—eagerly anticipate their union (1:2-4, 8-17). Still, there is the repeating caution "not to awaken love" prematurely (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Sexual love is wonderful, but it must not be promiscuous. Marriage is the true context for sexual love, and it is the wedding itself that makes consummation both permissible and holy (3:11; 4:16; 5:1). In the end, genuine marital love is "strong as death" (8:6).

Narratives from the Early Church

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[89] See an extensive treatment of this approach in G. Carr, *The Song of Solomon [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984).

Already, we have looked at the genre of narrative with respect to the Old Testament. In the New Testament as well, a special set of narratives comprising the Book of Acts call for special attention. While the narratives of the Old Testament are "warnings for us" (1 Co. 10:11), the narratives in Acts are much closer to home, since they describe the beginnings of the Christian church. Even though the moral force of the Old Testament narratives can be keenly felt by Christians, in spite of the fact that Christians are not part of the ancient community of Israel, the patterns of Christian life in Acts are more apt to be perceived as precedents—even marching orders—for Christians today, something that is hardly the case with the stories of the Old Testament. In fact, some segments of Christianity embrace what has come to be called "restorationist theology", that is, the notion that the Christian church has drifted away from the patterns of the primitive church and these patterns need to be restored. (To be sure, any given group is somewhat selective in what it perceives as needing restoration.) Other Christians view the development of Christian thought and practice over the centuries as legitimate and feel that the proper approach is not in attempting to duplicate what the early church did so much as in following the trajectories that the early church set. At issue are such things as whether or not one baptizes infants, whether church government is congregational or Episcopal or Presbyterian, whether musical instruments are appropriate for Christian worship, whether the Eucharist is to be celebrated every Sunday, whether church leaders are to be appointed or elected, whether all believers are expected to speak in tongues, and so forth.

Why Luke Extended His Gospel into a Second Volume

At the outset, it is obvious that the writer of the Third Gospel is also the writer of Acts. Both are addressed to the same person, Theophilus (Lk. 1:3; Ac. 1:1), and in fact, the second volume specifically references the first volume as "my former book" (Ac. 1:1). What happened in the Third Gospel is what Luke describes as "all that Jesus began to do and teach," which in turn implies that Jesus was still "doing and teaching" things in the life of the church after his ascension to the Father.

On the one hand, Luke's record is historical. He takes the trouble in his gospel to write "an orderly account" (Lk. 1:1). In Acts, he uses words like "many convincing proofs" to describe his work (Ac. 1:3). Luke is himself a Christian, and he writes to confirm the accuracy of primary Christian events to others. Still, his history is properly a redemptive history, set down not merely to record disinterested and random observations, but rather, to show the significance of the history he records. Because he is a

dedicated proponent of Christianity, Luke's history of the church also serves a theological purpose. Significant themes in the two-volume work bear out some of what Luke considered very important.[90]

One theme is apologetic, that is, he seems to write to demonstrate that the Christian movement was politically harmless to Rome. Christians increasingly came under suspicion from the Roman government. After Caesar Nero blamed the great fire in Rome on Christians in AD 64, Christianity lost status empire-wide. Repeatedly in Luke-Acts, the followers of Jesus, not to mention Jesus himself, were pronounced innocent by Roman officials and courts (Lk. 23:4, 13-16, 22; Ac. 16:38-40; 18:12-16; 23:27-29; 25:16-21, 25-27; 26:31-32).

Perhaps even more important is the theme that the ancient faith of Israel, the ministry of Jesus, and the life of the church are inseparably linked. "The law and the prophets were until John", but since then, in the public ministry of Jesus "the kingdom of God is preached" (Lk. 16:16). Similarly, what "began" in the ministry of Jesus continues in the life of the church through the work of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:1-8). This connection between three epochs (the period of Israel, the period of Jesus, and the period of the church) features a geographical progression from Galilee to Samaria/Judea to Jerusalem in the life of Jesus, and from Jerusalem to Judea/Samaria to the nations in the life of the church (Lk. 4:14-15; 9:31, 51-52; 13:32-33; 17:11; 19:28; Ac. 1:8; 8:1, 5; 9:31; 11:19; 13:1-3).

Luke also gives considerable attention to the coming of the Holy Spirit as the sign *par excellence* of the messianic age. In Jewish thought, the idea was popular that the Holy Spirit had suspended its activity with the last of the writing prophets and would not become active again until the coming of the Messiah.[91] At the same time, the hope burned brightly that a Messiah whom God would make "powerful in the Holy Spirit" would come and rule over Israel.[92] According to Luke, the quenched Spirit had become active again in the coming of Jesus. Jesus was born through the work of the Spirit (Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27), his ministry was empowered by the Spirit (Lk. 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21), and he was the one who would give the messianic gift of the Spirit to his followers (Lk. 3:16; 24:49; Ac. 1:4-5, 8; 2:4, 33). The same language of being "filled with the Holy Spirit" appears in

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[90] For a more considered treatment of Luke as a historian and theologian, see I. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (England: Paternoster Press, 1970).

[91] The rabbinical conclusion was that "since the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit has ceased in Israel", cf. *T. Sota*, 13, 2, par. in Str.-B., I.127 as cited in *TCNT* (1968) VI.385.

[92] Psalms of Solomon 17:32, 37; 1 Enoch 49:3; 62:2; Testament of Levi 18:2, 7; Testament of Judah 24:1-2, 4.

both Luke (Lk. 1:15, 41, 67) and Acts (Ac. 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9).[93] Hence, we can confidently say that Luke extended his gospel into a second volume to show the ongoing work of God connecting his ancient purposes in Israel, his messianic work in Jesus, and his continuing work in the community of Christians.

The Macro-Theme

What seems by far to be the most cogent purpose of Luke in Acts is the gospel crossing ethnic boundaries.[94] This macro-theme ties together all the foregoing smaller themes. The book commences in the very Jewish setting of Jerusalem, which occupies the initial chapters (1:1—6:7). At Jerusalem, the messianic gift of the Spirit was given (Ac. 2:4), thousands of Jews confessed faith in Christ, including many priests, as the story of Jesus was told and retold (Ac. 2:41, 47; 4:4, 21, 31; 5:12-16, 21, 42; 6:7). At the end of this first section, one encounters the resolution of the first ethnic tension, the cultural differential between Aramaic speaking Jews and Greek-speaking Jews (Ac. 6:1-6). The apostles took the lead in resolving this potentially divisive situation, and the Holy Spirit orchestrated the continued growth of the Christian movement!

However, the growth of Christianity among Jews was only a first step. Had not God intervened, perhaps the gospel would never have extended beyond the Jewish community. What caused the first outward movement beyond the Jewish circle was persecution, and the next section in Acts describes it (Ac. 6:8—9:31). When Stephen, a Hellenist Christian,[95] was lynched (Ac. 7:54-60), two important things happened. First, a young enthusiast named Saul, who watched Stephen die, became the grand inquisitor for the Sanhedrin, hailing Christians into prison and testifying against them all the way to their deaths (Ac. 22:3-5, 19-20; 26:9-11; Ga. 1:13-14). Second, Christians began scattering from Jerusalem because of the persecution, and everywhere they went, they took the story of Jesus (Ac. 8:4, 40). However, their sharing of the gospel was limited in that it was mostly confined to the Jewish population in other cities (Ac. 11:19). However, in one notable case a Christian leader named Philip crossed the ethnic line, preaching first to Samaritans (Ac. 8:5) and later to an Ethiopian proselyte (Ac. 8:27, 35). So significant was this action that the Jerusalem church sent a

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[93] All these passages in both Luke and Acts use the same Greek verb, πιμπλημι (*pimplemi* = to fill).

[94] Here, I will follow the subdivisions in Acts labeled "panels" by Fee and Stuart, p. 111.

[95] A Hellenist was a Greek-speaking Jew, usually from the Diaspora, cf. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 42.

delegation to Samaria to investigate (Ac. 8:14). God withheld the gift of the Spirit from the Samaritans until Peter and John from Jerusalem could be there to testify that God, indeed, had accepted Samaritans (Ac. 8:15-17). So significant was this breakthrough that Peter and John themselves began preaching in other Samaritan villages (8:25). Most important, the grand inquisitor, Saul, was himself converted, and in his conversion, God commissioned him as a missionary to the Gentiles (Ac. 9:15-16; cf. 22:14-16; 26:15-18).

The third movement in Acts concerns the spread of the gospel to even non-Jews (Ac. 9:32—12:24). Simon Peter figured large in this ethnic gate-crashing! He was sent by God—in fact, sent with the pre-warning that he must not reject those whom God had accepted (Ac. 10:15)—to a Roman military officer in Caesarea, the Roman provincial capital of Palestine (Ac. 10:17-33). Peter told the non-Jews the story of Jesus, and as he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on them, absolutely astonishing the Jews present (Ac. 10:44-46). As might be expected, Peter was obliged to defend himself before his colleagues back in Jerusalem! He had to explain his rash actions of entering a Gentile's home and eating there, but when he rehearsed what had happened, especially his vision and the unexpected gift of the Spirit to these non-Jews, the Jerusalem church confirmed that even to Gentiles God had "granted repentance unto life" (Ac. 11:18). Even more to the point, some of the Christians who fled Jerusalem because of Stephen's martyrdom went as far north as Antioch, Syria, the third largest city in the empire. Here, they began to share the story of Jesus with Greeks (Ac. 11:20). As with the Samaritans, the Jerusalem church sent a delegate to investigate, but when he saw what God was doing among the Greeks, Barnabas, the delegate, embraced them as brothers and sisters in Christ (Ac. 11:22-25). This same delegate would become close friends with Saul (Ac. 11:25-26). Meanwhile, persecution continued against the Christians in Jerusalem, especially during Passover (Ac. 12). It seemed apparent that while the Christian message was to a large degree being rejected by the Jews, it was making significant inroads among non-Jews.

The fourth movement describes the first non-Jewish Christian mission (Ac. 13:1—16:5). Paul (Saul) and his companions were commissioned as missionaries by the Antioch church, and they preached in Cyprus as well as on the mainland in Asia Minor (Ac. 13-14). Most significantly, they began each of their preaching points with an address to the Jewish communities, but when they were rejected, they turned to the Gentiles, who eagerly accepted the message. This scenario happened in Pisidian Antioch (Ac. 13:14-15, 44-49) and again in Iconium (Ac. 14:1-7). In Lystra, where there

apparently was no Jewish community, Paul directly preached to the non-Jews (Ac. 14:8-18), though some out-of-town Jews soon showed up to try to shut Paul down (Ac. 14:19-20). Paul and his company reported what God had done to the Antioch church in Syria (Ac. 14:26-28). Extremely important in this context is the great council at Jerusalem, which convened directly over this issue of non-Jews becoming Christians. Some advocated that in order to become a Christian one first must become a Jew (Ac. 15:1), but Paul and Barnabas reported on their Gentile mission, Peter chipped in his own experience at the Gentile soldier's house, and James offered some cogent justification from the Old Testament about the inclusion of non-Jews into God's family (Ac. 15:2-21). In the end, the Jerusalem church agreed that the Gentile mission was legitimate (Ac. 15:22-31; 16:4-5).

With the approval of the Jerusalem church, the westward expansion continued unabated! Paul went even further, this time to the Grecian peninsula, establishing Christian congregations in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth, as well as Ephesus in Asia Minor (Ac. 16:6—19:20). Then, Paul made his last trip to Jerusalem, where he was arrested and eventually taken all the way to Rome for his hearing before Caesar (Ac. 19:21—28:31). The message about Jesus that began in Jerusalem now had followed the programmatic intent of Jesus himself—from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to Rome, the center of the empire (Ac. 1:8).

How to Distinguish Between "What Happened Then" and "What Must Happen Today"

This ongoing interpretive question must be answered in the context of Luke's larger purpose—the advance of the gospel as it crossed ethnic barriers between Jews, Hellenists, Samaritans and Gentiles. The hotly contested theological questions about infant versus believer's baptism, church government, legitimate worship forms, and the dynamics of conversion-initiation are peripheral to Luke's larger purpose. In fact, many of the stories in Acts are recounted precisely because they are *unusual* events that became turning points for crossing such ethnic barriers, not normal events intended to describe the everyday life of the church. To attempt to decipher precise theological issues, such as, how often one serves communion, whether the gift of the Spirit precedes or is coincident with water baptism, how church officers are to be installed, and so forth, is simply not within the scope of Luke's purpose. This is not to say, of course, that Luke's writings may not bear upon these questions. They certainly may. However, the interpreter must not try to squeeze more out of Acts than is there. A good "rule of thumb" is: *Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must*

do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e., obligatory) way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.[96]

In principle, then, the Book of Acts offers us a macro-model of a church reaching beyond its own circle to share the gospel with those who are outsiders. This model of evangelism is basic and primary. The Book of Acts may also offer to us some insights on other issues that were not part of Luke's primary focus, but precisely because they are peripheral to Luke's main purpose, we cannot legitimately make final decisions on those issues from the narratives in Acts alone.

Why Does the Book Close with Ambiguity?

For many readers, the Book of Acts ends strangely. After spending several chapters describing Paul's arrest, his trial, his appeal to Caesar and his voyage to Rome, the book ends with Paul in prison awaiting a final hearing but without resolving his fate.[97] However, what seems to be an unfinished conclusion may well be Luke's artful way of intentionally reinforcing the overall purpose of the book—that the proclamation about Jesus would be ongoing until the consummation of God's kingdom. The story that began in Galilee, proceeded to Judea and Samaria, and climaxed in Jerusalem with the death and resurrection of Jesus had now followed the reverse pattern. The gospel had now moved from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and on to Rome. Paul's arrival in Rome symbolizes the gospel to the nations, Rome being the capital. The construction of the final verse in Acts seems to bear out this intent, keeping as its final statement the word "unhindered".[98]

Looking to the Future

A significant portion of the Bible is given to eschatology, the divine purpose for the future. Given the general human interest in such things, the prophetic portions of Scripture often attract an inordinate amount of attention, often from folk who are less qualified than could be hoped, and

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[96] Fee and Stuart, pp. 118-119.

[97] Even the ancient readers felt the abruptness of the book's closing, for in the Western Text of Acts, there appears a closing statement missing from all the other textual traditions: *...because this is the Messiah, Jesus the Son of God, by whom the whole world is to be judged*, cf. B. Metzger, p. 503.

[98] Most English translations rearrange the words of the final verse for syntactical reasons, but in Greek, it goes like this: *...κηρύσσων τὴν Βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδάσκων τὰ περὶ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας ἀκωλύτως* = *...proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness—unhindered!*

particularly from those who view such passages as keys for interpreting current world events and political trends. The eschatological portions of the Bible call for much care in interpretation. Since there are many conflicting viewpoints among Christians, we know they cannot all be right. Still, it remains possible that they all could be wrong.

At the outset, it should be observed that this kind of biblical literature comes in two broad categories, prophetic and apocalyptic. Both concern the future, yet while they sometimes overlap, they should be treated as individual genres. Prophecy tends to be figurative and poetic. Apocalyptic tends to be visionary and fantastic. Prophecy, the divine prediction about future events, begins early in the Bible (Ge. 3:15; 12:2-3, 7, etc.) and continues through the Old Testament right on into the New Testament. Apocalyptic, a special type of symbolic literature, has its roots in the later works of the Old Testament (Daniel, Zechariah), flowered extensively as a body of literature between the Testaments (The Pseudepigrapha), was employed by Jesus (The Olivet Discourse), and eventually was featured in an entire book at the end of the New Testament (Book of Revelation).

God's Purpose in Time

God is depicted in the Bible as sovereign over time. Unlike humans, who are bound by the confines of the present, he knows "the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Is. 46:10, cf. Rv. 1:8, 17). Even before the universe was created, Christ Jesus was ordained by God to be the Lamb slain "from the foundation of the world" (Rv. 13:8b). God intends that when time shall have reached its climax, all things in the universe will be brought into submission under one head, Jesus Christ (Ep. 1:9-10; Phil. 2:10-11; 1 Co. 15:24-28). Though Satan and angels and humans have rebelled against God, this rebellion will be tolerated only temporarily. God's patience during this rebellion is not due to his lack of power, but rather, his compassion and longsuffering to allow time for repentance (2 Pe. 3:9). Still, judgment is coming, and when it does it will be swift and thorough, making way for a new universe and a new future (2 Pe. 3:10-13; Is. 65:17-25; Rv. 21:1-8).

Prophecy, then, stems from God who himself knows and controls the future perfectly. He is willing to share his divine omniscience with his prophets (Am. 3:7), who in turn, because they have stood "in the council of the Lord", are able to predict things about the future that are completely unavailable otherwise (Je. 23:18, 22, 28-29).

Conditional and Unconditional Prediction

Prophecy comes in both conditional and unconditional categories, and it is not always immediately apparent which are which. David's family, for instance, was given what appeared to be an unconditional promise of a perpetual dynasty without interruption (2 Sa. 7:16; 1 Chr. 22:9-10). Nonetheless, the exile of Judah ended with the suspension of the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem (Je. 22:24-30), and since 586 BC, no king of David's family has ruled over Israel.[99] According to Jeremiah, even predictions that might seem to be unconditional implicitly carry a conditional aspect, depending upon how people respond to God's moral requirements (Je. 18:7-10). Further, because metaphorical language is so integral to prophecy, there is an inherent ambiguity in prophecy that, while it makes the messages themselves vivid and powerful, leaves a certain degree of flexibility in the outcome. When Malachi predicted the coming of Elijah, for example, the fulfillment ended up being in the ministry of John the Baptist (Mal. 4:5; Mt. 17:10-13). Even John himself was not fully aware that he had fulfilled this prediction (Jn. 1:21)! Hence, it is more appropriate to say that the language of prophecy is translucent rather than transparent.[100]

Sometimes prophecy is specifically conditional and includes "if" clauses that suggest more than one alternative (Je. 7:1-8; 26:2-6). At other times the language seems absolute and permits no deviation (1 Sa. 15:23-29). Yet, even prophecies that seem absolute, such as Isaiah's prediction that Hezekiah would die (Is. 38:1), later could be adjusted because of intervening circumstances (Is. 38:2-6). In the end, the interpretation of prophecy must not fail to take into account its metaphorical language and flexibility in fulfillment.

The Messianic Consciousness and the Christian's Blessed Hope

The single most important feature of biblical prophecy concerns the coming of the messiah. Paul can say that the message of grace was "given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ" (2 Ti. 1:9-10). While there are early hints about the coming of God's representative (e.g., 15; 49:10; Nu. 24:17; Dt. 18:18), it was the writing prophets preaching out of the threat of exile who shaped extensively the predictions about One still to

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[99] Of course, it certainly can be argued that Jesus was the rightful heir of David—in fact the New Testament argues this directly—but it still does not change the fact that the dynasty of Davidic kings was interrupted for several centuries, something that the original promise to David did not seem to envision.

[100] D. Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 140-146.

come. Most of their prophecies concerned a future king from David's line. Though the family of David would be cut off because of its collective wickedness, its prominence would be restored when "he comes to whom it rightfully belongs" (Eze. 21:25-27). The word "messiah" (= the anointed one) was a regular title for the anointed king (1 Sa. 12:3, 5: 16:6; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sa. 1:14, 16; Ps. 2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 28:8; 84:9; 89:38, 51; 132:10, 17, etc.), and by extension, it came to refer to the future messianic king from David's line (Mic. 5:2-5; Is. 9:1-7; 16:4b-5; 32:1; 33:17; Zep. 3:15-17; Je. 23:5-8; 30:8-9, 21; 33:14-18; Da. 9:24-26; Eze. 34:23-31; 37:15-28). Near the end of the Old Testament, a future vision was left of a new king who would come in peace (Zec. 9:9-10).

At the same time, an image other than royalty was powerfully predicted in the Book of Isaiah. This person was not depicted as a ruling figure but as a suffering figure, the suffering Servant of the Lord. On the one hand, the nation of Israel had been God's servant, but Israel had been blind and deaf to God's call and purposes (Is. 41:9-10; 42:18-22, 25; 43:22-24). Hence, God intended to raise up a leader in the future who would not fail as Israel had failed (Is. 42:1-7). This coming Servant of the Lord would be despised and rejected even unto death (49:7; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12), but he would bring about a rebirth of the nation directly connected to the "unfailing kindnesses promised to David" (Is. 54:1-8; 55:3-5).

In Jesus, these two ideals—the king from David's family and the suffering Servant of the Lord—come together as the messianic fulfillment (Lk. 24:25-27, 45-47; 2 Ti. 2:8). Yet, Jesus predicted something that no one had previously considered, that the Messiah would "come again" (Jn. 14:3; Ac. 1:11; Mk. 13:26-27; Mt. 24:27). Hence, it is correct to say that the Messiah *has* come and at the same time to say that the Messiah *will* come. Christians live between these two events. They live in tension between what already has happened and what is yet to come. Though they still live in the world as it is (the old age), through the resurrection life of Christ they participate in the future as well (the new age). The "second coming" of Christ at the end of history is the blessed hope of the church (Tit. 2:13; 1 Th. 4:15-17; He. 9:28; Rv. 1:7).

Images of the End: Judgment and Mercy

Prophetic literature in the Bible is littered with the images of judgment and mercy. Sometimes, the judgments and blessings are temporal, that is, they are predicted to happen within history as opposed to happening at the end of history. Along these lines, for instance, God promised to destroy the family of Eli (1 Sa. 2:27-34; 3:11-14). This prophecy was

fulfilled during an invasion by the Philistines around 1000 BC (1 Sa. 4:12-22). On the blessing side, because Solomon asked God for wisdom rather than wealth, God promised him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kg. 3:7-13), a promise that was fulfilled in his lifetime. By far the most important judgment within history was the exile of Israel, something the prophets began anticipating centuries before it happened (2 Kg. 17:3-20; Mic. 3:12; Je. 25:8-11; Eze. 24:1-2, 14; Da. 9:4-14). Many Israelites thought such a disaster could not happen—that they had a divine guarantee to the land of Palestine that was irrevocable (Mic. 3:10-11; Je. 5:12; 6:14; 7:9-10; 26:7-9). In the end, however, the prophets were right, and Israel lost its land through Assyrian and Babylonian invasion (La. 1:3).

Judgment, however, was never the last word, even for the prophets who so vividly predicted the downfall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. On the other side of judgment lay hope for a future (Ho. 2:14-23; Am. 9:11-15; Is. 40:1-11). Restoration was on the horizon, and in God's time, it would come in the form of a new covenant of forgiveness (Je. 31:31-34). To a large degree, this hope for the future was tied to the coming of the messiah. While doubtless there was great anticipation that all the glowing messianic promises would be fulfilled when the Jews returned from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem, in fact their return largely resulted in disappointment (Ezr. 3:11-13; Hg. 1:5-6, 9; Zec. 4:10a). Even though the temple was reconstructed, the glorious blessings of the messianic age did not materialize. Even by the time of the birth of Jesus, the faithful in Israel were still "waiting" for the consolation of the nation (Lk. 2:25).

The same images of judgment and hope that punctuated the history of Israel are equally applied to the end of the ages. Here, however, the forecast is complicated by the revelation of the "first" and "second" coming of the Messiah. In the resurrection of Jesus, the promised messianic king has been exalted to God's right hand (Ac. 2:32-33; 5:31; Ep. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:9-11; He. 1:3). His rule has already begun (1 Co. 15:25)! Still, the consummation awaits the end of the age, when all things will be subjected to him (1 Co. 15:24, 26-27). At that time, both judgment and mercy will attend his second coming, judgment for those who have rejected him and mercy to those who have believed in him (2 Th. 1:5-10).

Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic is a special genre of literature requiring considerable hermeneutical skills. Unlike narratives or epistles, apocalyptic is filled with highly stylized imagery and extraordinary visions of angels, dragons,

cataclysms and cosmic turmoil. To read apocalyptic as though it were a straightforward reporting of flat data is to misread it.

As a literary genre, apocalyptic came into its own in the intertestamental period. While it appears in a narrative framework (i.e., it sequentially tells a story), unlike ordinary narrative literature it is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient. It is intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and the future.[101] Frequently, apocalyptic literature was composed during times of great persecution and distress. It sought to answer why this distress had occurred and how God would intervene to bring it to a close, particularly by a radical divine in-breaking that would see the final triumph of God's people and God's final judgment of an evil world. It urges God's people to persevere in a hostile environment, because soon God will set things right. Unlike books of the writing prophets, apocalypses are usually not collections of sermons but unified literary works from beginning to end. The language is deliberately coded, often featuring animal and numeric symbolism as well as fantastic struggles between the forces of good and evil. Some of the images are stock images from antiquity, such as, the imagery of a seven-headed dragon (Rv. 13:1), which was known in the ancient world from as far back as the Early Bronze Age.[102] Many times, the images are allusive to the metaphors and images found in other works. The Book of Revelation, for instance, draws heavily from the imagery already found in the Old Testament.

Navigating through such unique literature carries its own share of pitfalls.[103] Perhaps the most common failure is to assume too great a level of specificity. Apocalyptic, while extremely vivid, is better approached from the perspective of a soft-focus lens rather than a microscope. Some of the details seem to be added for effect, and some of the allusions may be elusive. Apocalyptic is probably more like an impressionistic painting than a photograph; its imagery is colorful, emotive and powerful, but one must view it at a distance in order to "get it".[104] Before a modern reader becomes

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[101] *ABD* (1992) I.283.

[102] The earliest known depiction of a dragon with seven heads is on a 1.5 inch shell inlay dating to about 2600 BC. It depicts the Sumerian god Ninurta attacking a seven-headed dragon, cf. A. Collins, "Satan's Throne: Revelations from Revelation," *BAR* (May/June 2006), p. 37.

[103] For an extended example of such pitfalls, see D. Brent Sandy's exploration of the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 8, cf. Sandy, pp. 111-116.

[104] Sandy, pp. 117, 127-128.

too involved in any portion of apocalyptic, it is worthwhile to learn some of the background and style of this genre.[105]

None of the books of the Bible are exclusively apocalyptic in the sense of the Jewish apocalypses in the intertestamental period. However, several portions of the Bible contain extensive apocalyptic material, including the books of Daniel and Zechariah, Jesus' Olivet Discourse in the synoptic gospels, and the Book of Revelation. The latter is even titled "an apocalypse" (Rv. 1:1), though readers should also note that John includes two other genres in the same book, prophecy (Rv. 1:3; 22:18) and epistle (Rv. 1:11). As with all other genres of literature in the Bible, the reader of apocalyptic must remember that *the text can never mean for a modern reader something that it could not have meant for its author and first readers.* This is another way of saying that the primary meaning must be what the author originally intended, and this basic meaning, in turn, would have been something that his original audience could have understood, also.

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[105] An excellent overview can be found in G. Ladd, "Apocalyptic Literature," *ISBE* (1979) 1.151-160. For a more extensive analysis, see D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).