

A close-up photograph of an open book with a lamp of knowledge. The lamp has a glowing flame and is positioned to the left of the book, casting a warm light on the pages. The background is dark, making the light from the lamp and the text on the book stand out. The book is open to a page with dense, small text, likely a dictionary or a reference work. A blue pen is visible on the right side of the book.

Accurately Handling The Word of Truth

By David Webb

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The Trustworthiness of God's Divinely Inspired Word?

Chapter One

Is the Bible trustworthy? Has the Bible been altered or corrupted over the centuries to the point where it can no longer be considered the Word of God? Can we rule out the possibility that men may have conspired in secret to pervert the Scriptures by incorporating their own uninspired teachings into the Bible? How do we know if the Bible we have today is the same as the Scriptures written by inspired men more than two and three thousand years ago? Since we do not have the original manuscripts of either the Old or New Testaments, we must rely on copies of copies of those manuscripts. Can we really trust that there have been no significant changes or that no errors were made in the process of copying the Scriptures?

The Scriptures are under attack in our day as much as any time in past history. Skeptics repeatedly claim the Bible as we know it could not have originated from only one source (*God*) since they assert the Scriptures are filled with numerous historical, textual and doctrinal contradictions. This has led many critics to regard the Bible as purely a product of human invention. A movement that first gained popularity in the late 1800's, known as *Radical Criticism*, asserts that none of the epistles of Paul are authentic, and promotes the idea that Jesus and the apostles were merely fictional characters.

There have also been questions raised regarding the canon¹ of the Scriptures. Some critics claim the selection of ancient writings that compose the modern-day Bible was heavily biased, and rejected writings that did not conform to the accepted standards of religious dogma – namely, those of the Roman Catholic Church.

Adding to the confusion are Biblical theologians and scholars who believe *some* of the Bible is free from discrepancies and textual error. For example, Keith Ward, an ordained priest in the Church of England, and Fellow of the British Academy, wrote:

There may be discrepancies and errors in the sacred writings, but those truths that God wished to see included in the Scripture, and which are important to our salvation, are placed there without error... the Bible is not

¹ The word "canon" is derived from the Greek noun κανών "kanon" meaning "reed" or "cane," or also "rule" or "measure," which itself is derived from the Hebrew word קנה "kaneh" and is often used as a standard of measurement. Biblical canon or *canon of scripture* is a list or set of Biblical books considered to be authoritative as scripture by Jews (regarding the canon of the Torah) and Christians (regarding the canon of both Old and New Testaments).

inerrant in detail, but God has ensured that no substantial errors, which mislead us about the nature of salvation, are to be found in Scripture.²

If God could ensure that truths concerning the nature of salvation were placed in the Scriptures without error, why could He have not done the same for all the other teachings of the Bible? Furthermore, if God "ensured that no substantial errors, which mislead us about the nature of salvation, are to be found in Scripture," what "substantial errors" *do* exist in the Bible, how can we identify them, and what do these erroneous passages teach? In short, how can we have any confidence in the Scriptures that they are free from historical, textual or doctrinal error?

Religious cults, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS or "Mormons"), the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) further complicate the question of the divine preservation, inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures. The official position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints regarding the trustworthiness of the Scriptures states:

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.³

Accordingly, Church members believe that during the centuries-long process in which fallible human beings compiled, translated and transcribed the Bible, various errors entered the text. However, this does not override the overwhelming predominance of truth within the Bible.⁴

However, the Mormons claim, without any reservation whatsoever, that the *Book of Mormon* is inerrant and inspired. Consider the following claim:

"Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself? Behold, I testify unto you that I do not know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God... and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me."⁵

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day saints also put two other books on a par with Scripture: *Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*. These so-called "revelations" advocate radically different teachings from the Bible concerning the church, human nature, the origin of God, and the person and work of Jesus Christ.

² Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge for Fundamentalists* (2004)

³ *History of the Church*, Vol. 4, pp. 535—541, Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Article 8

⁴ *Newsroom, The Official Church Resource for News Media, Opinion Leaders, and the Public*, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Press Release, January 25, 2008, Salt Lake City

⁵ *Book of Mormon*, Alma 5:45-46

The Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, have their own translation of the Bible called the *New World Translation*⁶ (NWT) which claims to be the product of a multi-national "New World Bible Translation Committee" of "anointed" Jehovah's Witnesses. The "Watchtower Bible and Tract Society" of the Jehovah's Witnesses claims the new translation was simply an attempt to translate the Bible into modern English. However, the *New World Translation* deliberately mistranslates and twists the text in many places to support the doctrinal teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular teachings that deny the deity of Jesus Christ.

The late Dr. William Barclay, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism, University of Glasgow concluded:

"the deliberate distortion of truth by this sect [Jehovah's Witnesses] is seen in the New Testament translation. ... It is abundantly clear that a sect which can translate the New Testament like that is intellectually dishonest."⁷

The late Dr. Bruce M. Metzger, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and Bible editor who served on the board of the American Bible Society, wrote:

"the Jehovah's Witnesses have incorporated in their translation of the New Testament several quite erroneous renderings of the Greek."⁸

In 1994, the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church released *The Clear Word Bible*.⁹ However, due to intense criticism from within and from without the Seventh Day Adventist church, this publication is now simply called *The Clear Word*. Although *The Clear Word* is published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the 161-year-old book-and-magazine publishing arm of the Seventh-day Adventist church, Adventists now claim it is not a "Bible" but rather:

"a paraphrase/commentary that, when used properly, can enrich one's devotional study and can be recommended in that way."¹⁰

However, the Review and Herald Publishing Association currently promotes *The Clear Word* as a "devotional paraphrase" of the Bible available in bonded leather binding with gold leaf trimmed paper – for all appearances, a Bible. Critics of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have stated that *The Clear Word* distorts the meaning of the biblical text to support Adventist teachings. In more recent publications, the Adventists have finally admitted that *The Clear Word* is a blending

⁶ *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Brooklyn, NY, first published as a single volume of the entire Bible, 1961

⁷ R. Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions, The Essential Guide to Their History, Their Doctrine, and Our Response*, Zondervan, 2001, p. 94

⁸ Dr. Bruce M. Metzger, "Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today*, (April 1953 p. 74); see, "The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures," *The Bible Translator*, (July 1964)

⁹ *The Clear Word Bible*, first printed by the press at Southern Adventist University, now published as *The Clear Word* by The Review and Herald Publishing Association

¹⁰ *The Ministerial Association of the General Conference, Comments on Clear Word Bible*, "Record," Seventh Day Adventist Church, October 29, 1994, p. 10

of Biblical text with the teachings of Ellen G. White, the founder of the Seventh Day Adventist church, whose teachings are claimed to have originated from God. The Adventists now admit:

"The Clear Word is an Adventist paraphrase incorporating insights from Ellen White."¹¹

However, these so-called "insights" are not simply margin notes. They are written *into* the text where a reader who is unfamiliar with the authentic text of the Bible will have great difficulty discerning the difference between the Biblical text from the so-called "insights from Ellen White."

How do we defend against the deliberate attempts by religious cults like the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh Day Adventists to pervert the Scriptures? Is there some basis for our belief in the divine preservation, inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures other than just "wishful thinking?" Are there valid reasons for believing the Bible is the infallible product of men who wrote the revelation of God while under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit? The answer is "Yes!" It is possible to have complete confidence that the Scriptures we have today are the inspired words of God and are free from all attempts in past history to twist and pervert them to support a particular church or doctrine.

The Claim of Divine Inspiration

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible repeatedly makes the claim of being the divinely inspired Word of God. The claim for inspiration is not simply that the *message* of God was given by inspiration, but that inspiration extends to the very *words* of Scripture. We read that "Moses *wrote* all the *words* of the Lord" (Exodus 24:4), and that Isaiah was told by God to "take a large *scroll* and *write* on it with a man's pen" (Isaiah 8:1) and to "*write* it before them on a *tablet*, and *note* it on a *scroll*, that it may be for time to come, forever and ever" (Isaiah 30:8). Jeremiah was told to "not diminish a *word*" (Jeremiah 26:2). Not only does the Bible claim the *written* words were the words of the Lord, the Bible also asserts that God, through the process of inspiration, even gave the prophets the exact words they were to *speak*.

"The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue." (2 Samuel 23:2)

Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me:"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:9)

"You shall speak My words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are rebellious." (Ezekiel 2:7)

¹¹ William G Johnsson, Executive Publisher/Editor, *Adventist Review*, March 16, 2006, p. 5

The New Testament makes similar claims. Jesus said that which was *written* in the Old Testament spoke of Him (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; Hebrews 10:7). The New Testament refers to the *written record* as the "oracles of God" (Romans 3:2; Hebrews 5:12). The apostle John even pronounced a curse on all who would add to or subtract from the "*words of the prophecy of this book*" (Revelation 22:18-19). However, not only are the *written words* recorded in the New Testament given by the inspiration of God, even the words *spoken* by men such as the apostle Paul in their teaching were likewise given by inspiration.

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:11-13)

Inspiration Defined

What does it mean to say the Bible is inspired? How do we explain the process of inspiration God used to convey His Word to mankind? Can we have confidence that this process has given us God's Word as God intended? The contemporary definition of the words inspire, inspired or inspiration are as follows:

Inspire/inspired: to influence, move, or guide by divine or supernatural inspiration... to exert an animating, enlivening, or exalting influence on... to spur on: impel, motivate... or (archaic): to breathe or blow into or upon... to infuse (as life) by breathing...¹²

Inspiration: a divine influence or action on a person believed to qualify him or her to receive and communicate sacred revelation... the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions... the quality or state of being inspired...¹³

Unfortunately, these definitions are only partially helpful in giving us a proper understanding of the definition of inspiration. However, when we turn to the Bible, we find the Scriptures not only give rather detailed descriptions of the entire process of inspiration, the Bible actually makes the claim of being divinely inspired by God – meaning the very words of Scripture originated in the mind of God and were communicated to specific men of God through the process of what we call inspiration.

This is most significant. If the Scriptures are simply the product of mere men, then despite their good intentions, the Bible cannot claim to be inspired of God. Furthermore, if the Bible is not inspired by God, we should give it no more honor and respect than we would any other book written by men. On the other hand, if the claim that the Bible has been given through divine inspiration is true, then there

¹² *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*: Inspired

¹³ *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*: Inspiration

will be conclusive evidence to substantiate that claim. And, if there is credible, substantial evidence to support the claim that the Scriptures are given by God to mankind through the process of divine inspiration, then we must make every effort to thoroughly investigate and properly understand the Bible. God would not have given His Word to mankind unless He had a divine purpose for revealing a divine message through divine words. We must find that purpose and understand the message by properly interpreting the words.

The Hebrew word for inspiration, *neshamah*, appears only once in the Old Testament book of Job, and is defined as "a puff, i.e. wind, angry or vital breath, divine inspiration, intellect..."¹⁴

But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding. (Job 32:8)

There are four prominent New Testament passages concerning inspiration that not only proclaim the Scriptures are inspired of God, but also provide a glimpse of the Holy Spirit's role in the process of inspiration.

All Scripture given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The phrase "inspiration of God" come from the Greek *Theopneustos*,¹⁵ which is a combination of *Theos*, meaning "God," and the root word *pneu*, meaning "to breathe hard." In a more literal sense the phrase "inspiration of God" means "God-breathed." This is the only occurrence of the word *Theopneustos* in the New Testament.

To better understand the manner in which God revealed His will through inspiration and the role of the Holy Spirit in the process, consider the following three passages.

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son... (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." (John 14:25-26)

¹⁴ *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*: Job 32:8 "breath of the Almighty"

¹⁵ *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*: 2 Timothy 3:16 "inspiration of God"

In a very literal sense inspiration was the process by which the Holy Spirit moved, taught and reminded holy men of God to speak or record a God-breathed message to mankind. While 2 Timothy 3:16-17 emphasizes the message or the writing (*graphē*) of divine inspiration, Hebrews 1:1; 2 Peter 1:20-21 and John 14:25-26 emphasize the divinely inspired men (apostles or prophets) who spoke or wrote the message. Therefore, when the entire process of inspiration is viewed, it includes both the man and the writing.

However, while Peter explains that "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit," and while Jesus said the apostles would be taught all things and reminded of the things Jesus said, the Hebrew writer reveals that God spoke to the prophets "in various ways," some of which include:

- Through angels (a *theophany*¹⁶), as He did to Abraham (Genesis 18) and Lot (Genesis 19).
- In dreams or a "vision by night" (Daniel 7:1).
- Through visions, as He did with Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isaiah 1:1; Ezekiel 1:1; 8:3; 11:24; 43:3).
- In an audible voice (1 Samuel 3).

There have been many theories advanced by skeptics to explain away the divinely inspired nature of the Bible. While some contend God communicated His will through *some* process to the writers of Scripture, others completely deny the inspiration of the Bible claiming it is nothing more than a collection of myths and legends passed down from generation to generation, or the writings of men who were attempting to gain recognition by perpetuating the "Jesus myth", as it is sometimes called. Some of the more popular views regarding the inspiration of the Scriptures are presented here.

- *The Bible contains the Word of God:* Essentially this view promotes the idea that God *illuminated* certain men with various degrees of understanding, or that the intellect and intuition of the writers of Scripture was *heightened* at times enabling them to *discover* "divine truths" for their day. This view of inspiration emphasizes man's discovery of divine truth, not God's revelation of divine truth.
- *The Bible becomes the Word of God:* Related to the previous view, this theory suggests the Scriptures were not necessarily intended to convey the same message to everyone, but that God speaks to each person through the Bible by revealing truths relevant to that person's individual needs. For some, this requires stripping away the religious "myth" in the Scriptures and getting down to the core understanding of an all-compassionate, loving God. Reading the Bible becomes a tool for an existential self-discovery rather than a means of understanding God's will for mankind.

¹⁶ Theophany, from the Ancient Greek (ἡ) Θεοφάνεια - Theophaneia (meaning "appearance of God"), refers to the appearance of a deity to a human, or to a divine disclosure. J.T.Burchaell, "Theophany", in New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. (2003), .13:929.

- *The Bible is the Word of God:* This view claims the Scriptures are divinely inspired of God, and are the infallible and inerrant revelation of divine truths that came directly from God through the Holy Spirit to men of God who spoke and wrote those truths.

The Process of Inspiration

Perhaps nowhere is the process of inspiration explained any better than in the letter of the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets... (Ephesians 3:1-5)

Paul said God revealed "the mystery of Christ" to his "holy apostles and prophets" by "the Spirit" (the Holy Spirit). Paul further explained he had "written" down the things revealed by the Spirit, so that when others read what he wrote, they "may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ." This is the process of inspiration:

- God reveals His will to mankind through "revelation."
- The Holy Spirit is the one through whom God reveals His will to His holy apostles and prophets.
- God's holy apostles and prophets either write down or speak the things revealed to them through the Holy Spirit.
- The things revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets were recorded in the Bible.
- When we read what the holy apostles and prophets wrote or spoke in the Bible we understand God's will.

From this description of inspiration we can draw certain conclusions regarding the process God employed and the end result of that process.

- *God is the cause of inspiration:* The process of inspiration originated with Him. God *moved* and the apostle or prophet *spoke*, or God *revealed* and man *wrote* His Word. "The Bible is God's Word in the sense that it originates with Him and is authorized by Him, even though it is articulated by men."¹⁷
- *Apostles and prophets are the agents of inspiration:* Apostles and prophets played a crucial role in the process of inspiration, because they were the ones through whom God spoke. The Word of God was spoken or written by men of God whom He used to convey His message to mankind. Therefore, in

¹⁷ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 28.

inspiration, God is the cause and the apostles and prophets are the agents through whom God infallibly (perfectly or completely) revealed His will.

- *Scripture is the result of inspiration:* Scripture is the final inerrant (error-free) product of God revealing His will to apostles and prophets who spoke and wrote His words. God not only moved apostles and prophets to speak and record His message, He continues to speak today through the same writings of these holy men of God who were moved by the Holy Spirit. The implication of this is tremendously significant. The Scriptures are not only divinely inspired, they are divinely authoritative. The Bible contains the divinely inspired inerrant authority of God. Just as holy apostles and prophets spoke and wrote with the authority of God, the message they recorded in Scripture is God's written authority.

In essence, inspiration is the process by which God infallibly revealed His will for mankind through holy apostles and prophets who were moved by the Holy Spirit to inerrantly speak or write divinely authoritative Scripture.

How Were Holy Men of God Moved by the Holy Spirit?

While we understand the process of inspiration, in that God revealed His Word to holy apostles and prophets who were moved by the Holy Spirit, and who spoke or wrote down the things God revealed, there is still the question of how the Word was specifically transmitted to holy men of God. There are several theories offered to explain this, but only one that is in harmony with the unique characteristics of the Bible.

- *Mechanical inspiration:* This view is sometimes called the "Verbal Dictation View" and suggests the apostles and prophets who recorded Scripture were merely taking dictation from God. Those who hold this position point to Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:4; 34:27). Incidentally, this view is universally held by Muslims who believe the Koran was given by dictation from Gabriel to Mohammad out of the eternal book of heaven, thus making every word of the Koran divine truth.

The "mechanical inspiration" view, however, ignores the fact that the Bible contains stylistic differences and differences in expression between those who spoke and wrote God's Word. "Differences of vocabulary, syntax, interests and human objectives are very observable from book to book, unmistakably marking it as the product of human writers. A mechanical view of dictation to man in a vacuum simply does not accord with the actual facts of Scripture or of human personality."¹⁸

- *Thought inspiration:* This view contends that it is not the *words*, but the *thoughts* or *ideas*, that God inspired. Those who hold this view believe God put the thoughts or ideas into the minds of the apostles and prophets, allowing each to explain those thoughts in their own words. This method of inspiration is frequently used to explain the different personalities or literary

¹⁸ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pp. 44-45.

styles of the various writers of Scripture. While the proponents of this theory do not believe God communicated the exact words He wanted revealed, they maintain the message itself is from God, and therefore of divine origin.

While this view explains the stylistic differences in the Bible, it does so at the cost of weakening the claim of infallibility. If the writers of the Bible were allowed to express God's thoughts or ideas in their own words, how can we claim that the final product is really God's Word? Furthermore, how can the final product claim to be infallible or authoritative if God simply allowed the apostles and prophets to choose whatever words they felt best expressed God's intentions?

- *Verbal inspiration*: This view is clearly the one that is in harmony with the Bible. This position states that all the words which are written in Scripture are God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16). It further states that in giving His thoughts in the form of words, God also guided the writer of Scripture in the choice of words that were in keeping with the author's personality, cultural and educational background, so that the end product is the Word of God while at the same time being the words of men. "What is it that is inspired? The words of Scripture. How, then, is inspiration to be defined? Inspiration is that mysterious process by which the guidance of God on the human prophet invests their writings with divine authority. It is the process by which *Spirit-moved men* (2 Peter 1:20-21) produced *Spirit-breathed writings* (2 Timothy 3:16)."¹⁹

Therefore, in conclusion, is it the writer, their ideas, their writings, or a combination of these that is inspired? We have already seen that we cannot separate the writer from that which he has written – both were under the direction of the Holy Spirit in the process of inspiration, even though the word *inspiration* is used in the New Testament to only describe Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

Obviously God communicated His will through the prophets by the use of words, which, as Paul explained (Ephesians 3:1-5), were written down for us to read. Furthermore, the Bible repeatedly claims the words of the prophets were put in their mouth – they were God's words (2 Samuel 23:2; Jeremiah 1:9; Ezekiel 2:7). Therefore, we can say with confidence that both the writer and his writings were inspired.

Has the Bible been Inerrantly Preserved?

We understand that the claim of divine inspiration would apply only to the original manuscripts and not to the copies or translations of those manuscripts. However, since we no longer have the original manuscripts of either the Old Testament or the New, what confidence do we have in knowing God's Word has been inerrantly preserved? There are two passages that should help answer that question.

¹⁹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 46.

All Scripture given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the apostle Paul identified the purpose or intent of divinely inspired Scripture: "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Every moral, ethical or religious *good* that God requires of us to be holy as He is holy, and every *work* or duty that God demands of us as servants of Christ are revealed in Scripture. Furthermore, the instructions for achieving every good God requires and for fulfilling every work He demands are likewise revealed in Scripture. In addition, Scripture is able to make the man of God *complete* (lacking nothing and having a special ability to accomplish a given task) and *thoroughly equipped* (completely furnished) to accomplish *every good work*.

If the divinely inspired Scriptures have not been inerrantly preserved, then they are missing essential instruction for accomplishing every good work, or have been corrupted to the extent that we cannot know what good God requires or what duty He demands nor the way to achieve those things. We would be like a man lost in the wilderness with a damaged compass.

Paul also told Timothy that Scripture given by inspiration of God is *profitable* (useful or advantageous) for *doctrine* (teaching or instruction), for *reproof* (reprimand), for *correction* (restoration of an upright state), and for *instruction in righteousness* (training in the condition acceptable to God). "The Scriptures furnish the rules of holy living in abundance, and thus they are adapted to the whole work of recovering man, and of guiding him to heaven."²⁰ If the Scriptures have not been inerrantly preserved they are no longer profitable (useful) for *doctrine*, *reproof*, *correction*, and *instruction in righteousness*. At best, they would be flawed and inadequate. At worst, they would be misleading and dangerous.

Jude, on the other hands, who identified himself as "a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James," penned his epistle before the New Testament was completed, nevertheless looked forward to the completion of the Scriptures. He wrote:

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

In the Greek text the definite article *the* preceding *faith* points to the one and only faith: *the faith*. The term *the faith* was commonly used to pertain to the sum of

²⁰ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes*, 2 Timothy 3:16-17

that which Christians believe. There is no other faith. The apostle Paul affirmed this fact in two letters, one to the churches of Galatia and the other to Timothy. Paul told the Galatians that in the early years following his conversion:

I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches *the faith* which he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God in me.
(Galatians 1:22-24)

Likewise, Paul warned Timothy:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from *the faith*, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.
(1 Timothy 4:1-3)

In addition to the phrase *the faith* it is important to also notice Jude used the phrase *once for all*. The Greek word here is *hapax*, which refers to something done for all time, with lasting results, never needing repetition. In other words, nothing needs to be added to *the faith* that had been delivered *once for all*. This means everything God wants us to know as a body of truth has been delivered once for all time. There will be no additional or new revelation, and any new doctrine that may arise is a false doctrine. Any additional revelation to that which has been given by God in *the faith* is false revelation and must be rejected.

Finally, Jude said *the faith* has *once for all* been *delivered*. The word *delivered* is an aorist passive participle in the Greek, which in this context indicates an act completed in the past with no continuing element. In this instance the passive voice means *the faith* was not discovered by men or handed down from generation to generation, but *given* to men by God through the process of inspiration and recorded as Scripture as the final and complete body of truth for all men and for all time.

If *the faith* that has been *once for all delivered* to the saints has not been preserved inerrantly, then we have no faith nor any standard against which we can judge the truth or error of doctrine. By virtue of the fact that God has delivered *the faith* contained in inspired Scripture *once for all*, it is only reasonable to conclude that He will inerrantly preserve *the faith* as long as mankind needs it – namely, for all time.

Our faith, therefore, rests on complete, historic, objective infallible and inerrant revelation. The Scriptures are the final standard for the Christian. Every teaching and doctrine must be tested against *the faith* which was *once for all delivered*. This is another way of saying the canon of the Scriptures is not only complete, it is now closed and inerrantly preserved through the providence of God for all time.

How Much of the Bible is Inspired?

Every written word in the Scriptures came through the process of inspiration as holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit. While every word is inspired of God (God-breathed), and is in the Scriptures by His design and for His purpose; and since the Scriptures reveal *the faith* once for all delivered, and are profitable for *reproof, rebuke, correction and instruction in righteousness*; this is not to say every word in the Scriptures is *true*. The Word of God is truth (John 17:17) in that it reveals and teaches divine truth. However, the Bible also contains *lies*, such as Satan's lie (Genesis 3:4), Rahab's lie (Joshua 2:4), and the lies of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). This does not mean the Bible is uninspired or filled with errors, it simply means God chose to infallibly and inerrantly reveal through inspiration even the lies, false teachings (such as those of the scribes and Pharisees) and sins of various Biblical characters (like David).

When reading or studying the Scriptures we must keep in mind not so much what the writer says, or even whom he quotes, but what he is attempting to teach in the things he records in Scripture. Unfortunately, this is not always as easy as it may seem. For example, do all the opinions expressed by Job's friends meet with God's approval? Obviously, some did not. But what about the others? Was what they said true, or is the Bible merely rendering a true record of what they said, whether it was all true, partly true, or completely false? Essentially, did the writer approve or commend what he recorded, or merely record it to illustrate what he disapproves?

In some instances the Scriptures teach or illustrate divine truth by using an example of something ethically wrong. In the parable of *The Unjust Steward* (Luke 16:1-13) Jesus used the example of a steward who defrauded his master to gain personal favor among his master's debtors. Jesus was certainly not endorsing embezzlement or fraud, but simply used this example to teach His disciples the need to make proper use of material riches – to use them with a view to eternity, and to be aware of the inherent dangers of riches.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must accept the fact that every word in the Scriptures is inspired of God (God-breathed) in the sense that it is there by His design and for His purpose. There is nothing in the Bible that God did not want included. We must also accept the fact that the Scriptures reveal *the faith* once for all delivered, and that they are profitable for *reproof, rebuke, correction and instruction in righteousness*. Everything in the Bible is there for a purpose – every teaching, principle, illustration, or example. There is a divine purpose for each. However, we must also accept the fact that not every word uttered by every man or woman in the Bible is true. This is why it is critically important for us to understand not only who is speaking, and under what circumstances they spoke, but even more so, we must attempt to understand why those words are included in the teachings of the Bible.

How Did We Get The Bible?

Chapter Two

The word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *biblos*. This was the name given to the outer coat of the papyrus reed, commonly found in Egypt, and from which an ancient form of paper was made.²¹ The plural form of *biblos* is *biblia*, which was the word Christians began using in the second century AD to describe the Scriptures. The Greek word *biblia* gave birth to the Latin word of the same spelling which was eventually Anglicized into the modern English word *Bible*. The Bible is not a single book, but a collection (or library) of sixty-six books written over a period of approximately 1,600 years, spanning some forty generations, and was written by approximately forty divinely inspired men who came from every walk of life.

Languages of the Bible

The Bible was originally written in three languages: *Hebrew*, *Aramaic*, and *Greek*.

- *Hebrew*: This is the predominate language of the Old Testament, which is identified today by scholars as a "Semitic language" (named after Shem, Noah's oldest son). The Old Testament defines the language of the people as the "language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18); "Aramaic" (2 Kings 18:26); and "the language of Judah" or "Judean" (2 Kings 18:28; Nehemiah 13:24; Isaiah 36:11).²² It was not referred to as "Hebrew" until around 130 BC (prologue to the apocryphal *Ecclesiasticus*). However, in the New Testament, it is called "Hebrew" (John 5:2; 19:13; Acts 21:40).

The Hebrew language, which extends back to at least 1500 BC, was written from a script composed of twenty-two consonants (written from right to left). Most Hebrew nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs consisted of only three consonants, and prior to around AD 500, the Old Testament text was written without vowels or accent marks. However, vowels were eventually added because many Jewish rabbis' were fearful Jews would lose the ability to pronounce the words since the Hebrew language was no longer commonly spoken.

The Hebrew language uses a variety of figures of speech, such as parables, similes, metaphors, etc., and contains anthropomorphic expressions, such as "the hand of God" or "the eyes of the Lord." Unfortunately, this has led

²¹ *Papyrus reed*: a plant commonly found in Egypt from which ancient paper was made and was used as a writing material by ancient Egyptians and Greeks and Romans. The outer portion of the papyrus plant was cut in strips and pressed flat.

²² Some versions of 2 Kings 18:28 read "Hebrew" while the most commonly accepted reading is "Judean."

some to distort and pervert the Hebrew text by attempting to "literalize" these figures (like the Mormons who claim God must be "a man").

Hebrew continued to be the primary language of the Jewish people until the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivity (701-538 BC), when those taken into exile began speaking the language of their captors.

- *Aramaic*: After the exile, Aramaic became the most common language among the Jews who returned to Palestine. The Assyrians had made Aramaic the common language of the Near East. Spoken dialects of Aramaic had been in use since the ninth century BC, while written forms of Aramaic have been found on papyri discovered at Elephantine, Egypt dating to the fifth century BC. This explains why some parts of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4-7:28 and perhaps a few other verses). In the first century AD, Aramaic, in one dialect or another, was the common language of the Jews living in Palestine, although many Jews also spoke Hebrew and Greek.

There are a number of Aramaic words and phrases in the Gospels that were transliterated into Greek, such as "Golgotha" ("Place of a skull" – Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:20; John 19:17); "Talitha cumi" ("Little girl, I say arise!" – Mark 5:41); and "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" ("My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" – Mark 15:34).²³ There are also several Aramaic words in New Testament epistles, such as "Abba" (Galatians 4:6), and "Maranatha" (1 Corinthians 16:22). The inclusion of these, and other, Aramaic words in the New Testament text strongly suggests Jesus spoke a dialect of Aramaic.

- *Greek*: This was the language that spread throughout the ancient world by the conquests of Alexander the Great, and was the most common language spoken throughout the ancient world from about 330 BC to AD 330. Even after the Roman Empire came to power, and *Latin* became the "official" language of Rome, Greek (*Koine Greek*)²⁴ continued to be the common language of the East, and was spoken throughout the great cities of the Roman Empire including Alexandria, Athens, Jerusalem and even Rome itself.

Although the Greek language passed through several periods of change, the New Testament was composed during the time when Koine Greek was spoken. For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the saints in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire, in Greek. Gleason L. Archer wrote:

Greek was the most ideally adapted linguistic medium for the World-Wide communication of the Gospel in the entire region of the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt and the Near East. Accurate in expression, beautiful in sound, and capable of great rhetorical force, it furnished an ideal vehicle for the proclamation of God's message to man, transcending Semitic barriers and reaching out to all the Gentile races. It is highly significant that the "fullness of

²³ Matthew 27:46 reads "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

²⁴ *Koine Greek* (Ελληνιστική Κοινή, common Greek; or , the common dialect) is the popular form of Greek which emerged during the Post-Classical Period and continued for a thousand years (c. 300 BC–AD 300).

times," the first advent of Christ, was deferred until such time as Greek opened up channels of communication to all the Gentile nations east of Italy and Libya on a level not previously possible under the multilingual situation that previously prevailed.²⁵

Greek also played an important role in the translation of the Old Testament Scriptures. By the 3rd century BC, most Jewish communities were spread throughout the ancient world – known more commonly as "The Diaspora"²⁶ (or "The Dispersion"). Since these Jewish communities commonly spoke Greek rather than Hebrew, it was decided to translate the Old Testament into Greek so that the Scriptures could be easily read and understood during Synagogue readings and religious studies. Due to the fact that the largest number of Jews outside of Israel lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and since the city had become one of the most influential cultural and scholastic centers of the ancient world, the city is believed to be the site where the Septuagint (LXX)²⁷ was compiled under the direction of Ptolemy, who placed 70 scholars (legend says "72") to the task of translating the Hebrew Bible into common Greek.

The Written Text

The Scriptures have been preserved in several written forms, leaving us with numerous sources of reliable copies of the Old Testament as well as thousands of trusted copies (in part or in whole) of the New Testament. These sources include:

- *Biblical manuscripts*: A manuscript is any document or book written by hand. Until the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*²⁸ between 1947 and 1956, the oldest manuscript copy of the Old Testament (the "*Masoretic Text*")²⁹ dated to around AD 900, leaving a gap of approximately 1,300 years from the time the Old Testament was completed about 400 BC with the book of Malachi. The Dead Sea Scrolls have since closed that gap by nearly a thousand years. Biblical scholars were surprised to see how remarkably close the manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls are to the oldest surviving Masoretic manuscripts of

²⁵ Gleason L. Archer, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Vol. 3., 1975. Merrill C. Tenney, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁶ A *diaspora* (in Greek, *διασπορά* – "a scattering [of seeds]") is the movement or migration of a group of people, such as those sharing a national and/or ethnic identity, away from an established or ancestral homeland. When capitalized, the Diaspora refers to the formerly exiled Jews living outside the Land of Israel.

²⁷ The *Septuagint* (also designated as "LXX"), is the oldest Koine Greek (common Greek) version of the Hebrew Bible, translated in Alexandria, Egypt between the third century BC and its completion in 132 BC.

²⁸ The *Dead Sea Scrolls* are a collection of about 900 documents discovered between 1947 and 1956 in eleven caves in and around the ruins of the ancient settlement of Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. The texts are of great religious and historical significance, since they include the oldest known surviving copies of texts from portions of the Hebrew Bible, as well as numerous extra-biblical documents. They are written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, mostly on parchment, but with some written on papyrus. These manuscripts generally date between 150 BC and AD 70.

²⁹ *Masoretic text*: the authoritative Hebrew text of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) regarded almost universally as the official canon for the Hebrew Bible. The text was primarily copied, edited and distributed by Jews known as Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries AD. The Masoretic text also serves as the basis for virtually all English translations of the Old Testament.

the Hebrew Bible, offering further proof of the accuracy of the Old Testament as we know it today.

New Testament manuscripts are far more abundant, even though there are also numerous textual variants³⁰ among these copies. Presently, over 5,700 complete or fragmented Greek New Testament manuscripts have been discovered and catalogued by number.³¹ However, none of these manuscripts conclusively date to the first century AD. The only possible exceptions are a few manuscript fragments, including the John Ryland Manuscript, a small fragment of a few verses from the Gospel of John written perhaps as early as AD 80; the Magdalen fragment from Matthew 26 believed by some to date as early as AD 70; and Gospel fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that possibly date as early as AD 50. If these fragments were truly written during the first century (which is vigorously debated among textual scholars) they would have been written during the lifetime of the apostles.

- *Versions:* Other sources of evidence for the Biblical text include ancient and medieval versions of the Old and New Testaments, translated from Hebrew and Greek and written in languages other than that of the original manuscripts (*autographs*).³² These include the Septuagint (LXX), the Samaritan Torah (Pentateuch),³³ and the Babylonian Targums,³⁴ and as many as 20,000 full or partial manuscripts of the New Testament in Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and other languages.
- *Quotations:* A third category of evidence for the reconstruction of the Biblical text comes from rabbinical quotations found in the Hebrew Talmudic writings,³⁵ as well as thousands of quotations from the writings of the so-

³⁰ *Textual variant:* any difference between manuscripts that involves spelling, word order, omission, addition, substitution, or a total rewrite of the text. There are approximately 200,000 known variant readings among the existing manuscripts of the New Testament. However, this number is not as great as it seems when one realizes a single misspelled word copied in 3,000 different manuscripts would be counted as 3,000 variants. In reality, the actual number of significant textual variants (discounting copyist errors, etc.) is surprisingly small, and none of these have any appreciable affect on doctrinal teaching.

³¹ The *Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments* (abbr. *K-Liste*) is a catalog last published in 1994 by Kurt Aland of around 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament presently known to scholars. There are, however, many additional Greek New Testament manuscripts, in part or in whole, that were discovered since the *K-Liste* was last published but have not yet been categorized. (*The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts*)

³² *Autographs:* manuscripts written by the hand of the author – not copies written by someone else. None of the *autographs* of the New Testament have been found and most scholars believe they have been lost.

³³ The *Samaritan Torah*, also called *Samaritan Pentateuch*, is a version of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, used by the Samaritans and which dates to the twelfth-century AD.

³⁴ A *targum* (Hebrew: תרגום, plural: *targumim*, lit. "translation, interpretation"), referred to in critical works by the abbreviation \mathfrak{T} , is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible written or compiled from the Second Temple period until the early Middle Ages (late first millennium). The two major genres of Targum reflect two geographical and cultural centers of Jewish life during the period of their creation, namely the Land of Israel and Babylonia. Aramaic was the dominant Jewish language for hundreds of years in these major Jewish communities.

³⁵ The *Talmud* (Hebrew: תלמוד *talmūd* "instruction, learning", from a root *lmd* "teach, study") is a central text of mainstream Judaism, in the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah (c. AD 200) , the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the Gemara (c. AD 500).

called "church fathers" (early Christian leaders and writers of the second and third centuries AD). These are often called *Patristic Witnesses*³⁶ (meaning "witness of the fathers") because they are quotes from Old and New Testament manuscripts that existed at that time. To date, there are more than 36,000 quotes of New Testament alone from the writings of these "fathers" from the second and third century. This is of particular value for two reasons. Geisler and Nix stated,

"In fact, if there were no biblical manuscripts available today, the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from the writings of the Church Fathers of the first three centuries with the exception of eleven verses."³⁷

Another significant benefit of the patristic witnesses is that they give overwhelming and authoritative evidence in determining the canon of the Scriptures. Their quotes were from manuscript copies of books and letters of the New Testament accepted by Christians of the first three centuries as having been inspired by God, and were therefore widely circulated among the churches as divinely inspired Scripture.

- *Lectionaries*: One additional source of evidence in helping to reconstruct the Old and New Testament text are books known as lectionaries. The lectionary contains a collection of Scripture readings selected for Christian or Jewish worship on a given day or for a given occasion. There are more than 2,000 lectionaries currently known to Biblical scholars.

While there is sufficient evidence showing the reliability of the Old Testament text as we know it today, there is similar evidence for believing in the reliability of the New Testament text. When all the manuscripts in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic and other languages are added up, the total comes to well over 25,000 New Testament manuscripts. Despite the fact that none of the original autographs have been found, there are literally thousands of sources available to help reliably reconstruct the Biblical text, especially the New Testament.

From Scroll to Codex

Ancient copies of the Old Testament Scriptures and other writings, dating back to the eleventh century BC, were originally written on sheets of papyrus. This writing material was made from the stem of the papyrus plant commonly found in Egypt. After the outer rind was stripped off, the sticky fibrous inner pith was cut lengthwise into thin strips of about sixteen inches in length. These strips were then placed side by side on a hard surface with their edges slightly overlapping, followed by another layer of strips laid on top at a right angle. The strips were then soaked in water, and finally pressed (or hammered) together while still moist, forming a single sheet. The sheet was then dried under pressure, and finally polished with

³⁶ *Patristic Witnesses*: Writings of early Christian leaders and writers of the second and third century in which frequent quotes are found of widely circulated and accepted Old and New Testament manuscripts of that day.

³⁷ Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 359

some rounded object, possibly a stone, seashell or round hard wood. Although papyrus was the writing material of choice in the ancient world, it had a downside. Papyrus became extremely brittle with age. Some of the older surviving papyrus manuscripts are only fragments of pages.

By the fifth century BC, a better, more durable, writing material was invented known as parchment. Parchment was originally made from thin sheets of calfskin, sheepskin or goatskin that were treated, stretched and dried. The finer qualities of parchment are called vellum. Sheets of these writing materials were sewn or glued end to end to form a *roll* or *scroll*. The text on each sheet was written in columns about four to five inches wide on only one side of the sheet, although some scrolls were written on both sides (cf. Revelation 5:1). These scrolls varied in size, but were generally no more than 35 feet in length and about 9 to 10 inches high. When books of the Old and New Testament were reproduced, the length of the book of the Bible determined the length of the scroll. To keep scrolls from exceeding the standard length of 35 feet, larger Old and New Testament books were normally written on two scrolls.

This method of reproducing books of the Bible posed some difficulties. Since it would have been impossible to reproduce all the books of the Old and New Testaments on one scroll, books were copied and circulated individually. There was also some difficulty in reading scrolls. The reader would hold the scroll horizontally, unrolling it with one hand while rolling it up with the other. Larger scrolls had to be read while placed on a lectern with a wide angled top. This made unrolling and rolling the scroll easier.

No one knows who was responsible for inventing the first book, called a *codex*³⁸ (pl. *codices*), but most historians say Christians were the first to make extensive use of the codex. The earliest forms of the codex were written in columns on single sheets of papyrus which was then crudely bound together in book form. However, since papyrus was so fragile and began to be in short supply by the fourth century, parchment became the popular choice of writing material for the codex, even though it was much more costly.

Since writing materials such as papyrus and parchment were expensive, scribes made the most use of the available space on each page by using a form of writing known as *uncial* (all capital letters that ran together with no punctuation or spaces between words). The earliest scrolls and codices of the New Testament in Greek used this form of writing.

Not only were uncial manuscripts hard to read, this form of writing made the task of copying these manuscripts considerably more difficult. Copyists soon discovered it was much easier for the scribe to accidentally omit a letter, a word, or sometimes an entire line of text during the copying process.

³⁸ *Codex*: Developed by the Romans, it gradually replaced the scroll, becoming the dominant form of books in the ancient world. The spread of the codex is closely associated with the rise of Christianity which has been using it as the exclusive book format of the Bible almost from the beginning.

To get an idea of the challenge this form of writing posed to copyists, try reading the following paragraph reproduced in uncial.

TRULYMYSOULSILENTLYWAITSFORGODFROMHIMCOMESMYSALVATIONHEONLY
ISMYROCKANDMYSALVATIONHEISMYDEFENSEISHALLNOTBEGREATLYMOVED
HOWLONGWILLYOUATTACKAMANYOUSHALLBESLAINALLOFYOULIKEALEANING
WALLANDATOTTERINGFENCETHEYONLYCONSULTTOCASTHIMDOWNFROMHIS
HIGHPOSITIONTHEYDELIGHTINLIESTHEYBLESSWITHTHEIRMOUTHBUTTHEY
CURSEINWARDLYMYSOULWAITSILENTLYFORGODALONEFORMYEXPECTATIONIS
FROMHIMHEONLYISMYROCKANDMYSALVATIONHEISMYDEFENSEISHALLNOTBE
MOVED³⁹

Eventually, uncial was replaced by a style of writing known as *minuscule* – a small cursive script (developed from Roman cursive lettering), written in lowercase, with spaces between words. This form of writing was widely used between the seventh and ninth centuries AD.

Categorizing the Manuscripts

All ancient manuscript copies of the New Testament fall into one of four "text-types" or "families" of manuscripts based on grammatical and stylistic differences. As the church began to rapidly spread throughout the Roman Empire, and the demand for copies of the apostolic letters increased, many handwritten reproductions began to take on the distinct writing characteristics and style common to a particular geographical area. These stylistic markers are much like genetic markers that enable a scientist to categorize living things into families or groups – such as the genetic markers that distinguish those of Asian ancestry from those of European descent.

Since manuscripts fall into one or more of the four identified families or text-types, then all subsequent translations of the New Testament into Greek, Latin and ultimately into English, will likewise be based on one or more of these families or text-types. The four text-types are identified as:

- *Byzantine Text*: Also known as "The Majority Text," this is the largest family of manuscripts, comprising approximately ninety-four percent of all 5,700 Greek manuscripts currently cataloged. The term "Byzantine text-type" originates from the Byzantine Empire,⁴⁰ that warehoused and protected manuscripts for many centuries until the invasion of Ottoman Turks drove eastern Greek scholars toward the Roman Catholic West, taking their Biblical manuscripts with them.

³⁹ Psalm 62:1-4

⁴⁰ The Byzantine Empire (or Eastern Roman Empire) was at its height during the Middle Ages. Emperors ruled from Constantinople in direct succession from the ancient Roman emperors – from Constantine the Great (c. AD 306-337) to Constantine the XI (c. AD 1419-1453), culminating in the fall of Constantinople and its remaining territories to the Muslim Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century.

Dr. Bruce Metzger wrote:

"The framers of this text sought to smooth away any harshness of language, to combine two or more divergent readings into one expanded reading, and to harmonize parallel passages."⁴¹

The combining of two or more divergent readings into one expanded reading is known as "*conflation*" and generally includes combining the text of two or more families or text-types, thus giving a slight variation in the text itself from other manuscripts. Some scholars have argued this makes the Byzantine text-type of later origin than other types – perhaps many centuries later than other types. However, the practice of conflation was apparently not as wide-spread as first thought, since many scholars are now finding distinctive Byzantine readings of the New Testament appearing in Egyptian papyri dating from the second and third centuries.

- *Alexandrian Text*: The second largest group of Greek manuscripts, making up about three to four percent, traces its origin to Alexandria, Egypt and the large Christian community of the second and third century that lived there. Dr. Metzger writes:

"Characteristics... are brevity and austerity. That is, it is generally shorter than the text of other forms, and it does not exhibit the degree of grammatical and stylistic polishing that is characteristic of the Byzantine..."⁴²

Two leading manuscripts of this family are the Codex Vaticanus (c. AD 325–350) and Codex Sinaiticus (c. AD 330–360), and catalogued by textual scholars as *B* and *Ⲛ*. Even though the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are of the same text-type, there are significant differences between the two. Oxford scholar John William Burgon, writes:

"It is easier to find two consecutive verses in which *B* (the Codex Vaticanus) and *Ⲛ* (the Codex Sinaiticus) differ from each other than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree."⁴³

In fact, some textual critics have found over 3,000 variant readings between these two codices in the four Gospels alone – not counting minor errors such as spelling. Considering the fact that there are 3,779 verses in the Gospels, this amounts to a significant difference in the wording of identical verses within the Alexandrian text-type. This has led some conservative scholars to raise questions about this family of manuscripts, and because the word "Christ" appears far less frequently in this text-type than in the Byzantine (e.g: Matthew 23:8, Luke 4:41, John 4:42, Acts 15:11, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 5:4, Galatians 3:17, Philippians 4:13, 1 Thessalonians 3:13, 2 Timothy 4:22, Hebrews 3:1, 1 John 1:7, Revelation 12:17). Also see Ephesians 3:14 (Lord Jesus Christ).

⁴¹ Dr. Bruce M. Metzger, Introduction to: *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart: Biblia-Druck GmbH (German Bible Society), 1975, p. 20.

⁴² Dr. Bruce M. Metzger, *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴³ John Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, p. 12.

Despite the substantial textual variants among Alexandrian manuscripts, they are believed by many contemporary scholars to predate the Byzantine. This does not necessarily imply they are closer to the reading of the original autographs, especially since many manuscripts of the second and third centuries were somewhat error-prone.

- *Western Text*: This group of manuscripts originates in Carthage (North Africa) and Rome, deriving its name from the fact that these cities are further to the "west" geographically. Western text-type is the term given to the New Testament text found in the Old Latin translation from the Greek, and also the text-type from which certain second and third century writers quoted. Dr. Metzger writes:

"The chief characteristic of Western readings is fondness for paraphrase. Words, clauses, and even whole sentences are freely changed, omitted, or inserted with surprising freedom, wherever it seemed that the meaning could be brought out with greater force and definiteness."⁴⁴

The fifth century Codex Bezae⁴⁵ is the only Greek uncial manuscript that used the Western text-type for the four Gospels and the Book of Acts, while the sixth century Codex Claromontanus⁴⁶ is said to have used the Western text for the letters of the apostle Paul and Hebrews.

- *Caesarean Text*: This text-type derives its name from the Roman city of Caesarea on the coast of Palestine. Some scholars suggest this text-type appears in the works of Origen (c. AD 185–254)⁴⁷ after he settled in Caesarea. This text-type is actually a sub-group of Alexandrian manuscripts with some Western influence. It was the text used by Eusebius⁴⁸ and Cyril.⁴⁹ Dr. Metzger describes it as, "characterized by a distinctive mixture of Western readings and Alexandrian readings. One may also observe a certain striving after elegance of expression."

⁴⁴ Bruce Metzger, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *The Codex Bezae* is a codex of the New Testament dating from the 5th century written in an uncial hand on vellum. It contains, in both Greek and Latin, most of the four Gospels and Acts, with a small fragment of the 3rd John.

⁴⁶ *The Codex Claromontanus*, c. AD 500, was named by the French scholar and Protestant theologian, Theodore Beza (d. October 13, 1605) who procured it in the town of Clermont-en-Beauvaisis in the region north of Paris.

⁴⁷ *Origen* (c. AD 185 – 254) was an early scholar and theologian. According to tradition, he was an Egyptian who taught in Alexandria, but later relocated to Caesarea in Palestine where he died after being tortured during a persecution.

⁴⁸ *Eusebius of Caesarea* (c. AD 263–339) became Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine about AD 314. Eusebius, historian and textual scholar, along with Pamphilus, helped formulate the Biblical canon. He wrote many scholarly works on textual criticism, including, *Demonstrations of the Gospel*, *Preparations for the Gospel*, and *On Discrepancies between the Gospels*, and the *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁴⁹ *Cyril of Alexandria* (c. AD 376 - 444) was the Pope of Alexandria from AD 412 to 444, and came to power when Alexandria was at its height of influence and power within the Roman Empire. Cyril wrote extensively during the later 4th and 5th centuries, and was a central figure in the First Council of Ephesus in AD 431, which led to the deposition of Nestorius as Patriarch of Constantinople.

The significance of text-types will become rather apparent when understanding the development of a single Greek text of the New Testament that will serve as the basis for all contemporary English versions and translations. The question facing these textual critics will be which text-type best represents the original autographs.

The Canon of the Bible

Today, the Bible consists of sixty-six books, thirty-nine of which make up the Old Testament and twenty-seven making up the New Testament. These sixty-six books are all recognized as inspired by God and have been included in the canon of the Scriptures. This points out the fact that there is an inseparable relationship between the inspiration of the Scriptures and the canon of the Scriptures. Geisler and Nix wrote:

The first link in the chain of revelation "From God to Us" is inspiration, which is concerned with what God did, namely, that He breathed out (spirated) the Scriptures. The second link in the chain is canonization, which relates to the question of which books God inspired. Inspiration indicates how the Bible received its authority, whereas canonization tells how the Bible received its acceptance. It is one thing for God to give the Scriptures their authority, and quite another for men to recognize that authority. Canonization, then, concerns the recognition and collection of the God-inspired, authoritative books of the sacred Scriptures.⁵⁰

From the time of the apostles to the present day, the true church has not only believed the Bible is inspired, but that the Scriptures are final and complete. God has once for all time given His final and complete revelation. It is sufficient to meet every need and is infallible, inerrant and authoritative. Therefore, any attempt to add to the Bible, or to claim additional latter-day revelation, has always been completely and consistently rejected by men and women who believe in the faith once for all delivered (cf. Jude 3).

However, throughout the period of history following the prophet Malachi, and leading up to the New Testament era (c. 300 BC – AD 100), several non-inspired writings surfaced and were widely circulated among Jewish communities. Known as the *Apocrypha*⁵¹ these books of Jewish literature cover a broad range of subjects, and are generally classified into four categories: (1) Historical, (2) Legend, (3) Pseudo-prophetic, and (4) Ethical/Devotional. They are: The First Book of Esdras (also known as Third Esdras); The Second Book of Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras); Tobit; Judith; The Additions to the Book of Esther; The Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach); Baruch; The Letter of Jeremiah (this letter is sometimes incorporated as the last chapter of

⁵⁰ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 127.

⁵¹ *Apocrypha* is used with various meanings, including "hidden," "esoteric," "spurious," "of questionable authenticity," and "Christian texts that are not canonical." The word is originally Greek and means "those having been hidden away." The term is generally applied to 15 books of Jewish literature written between 300 BC and AD 100 which most Christians of the first to third centuries considered useful but not divinely inspired.

Baruch – giving fourteen books rather than fifteen); The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon; The Prayer of Manasseh; the First Book of Maccabees; and the Second Book of Maccabees.

Although they were never accepted by Jews into the canon of the Hebrew Bible, many early Christians "fathers" debated whether they should be included in the canon of the Scriptures. Jerome (AD 345-419) initially opposed the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the canon of the Bible, but later conceded because others accepted them. Augustine (AD 354-420) accept them into the canon, but argued they were clearly not on a par with the Hebrew Old Testament.

However, first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37-100) argued against the Apocrypha in his book *Against Apion*⁵² by giving evidence concerning the trustworthiness of the accepted canon of the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures.

. . .it follows that we do not possess myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but twenty-two, and contain the record of all time. Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. This period falls only a little short of three thousand years. From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes, who succeeded Xerxes as king of Persia, the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life. From Artaxerxes to our own time the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.⁵³

Josephus' reference to books written, "from Artaxerxes to our own time," but, "not deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records," are the Apocrypha. He further described how the Jews of his day highly esteemed the Scriptures and believed the books in the canon of the Hebrew Bible to be unquestionably inspired by God.

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.⁵⁴

⁵² *Against Apion*: a polemic work by Flavius Josephus (written c. AD 95) as a defense of Judaism against allegations made decades earlier by Apion (20s BC – c. AD 45-48), an anti-Semitic Graeco-Egyptian grammarian, philosopher who had encouraged Caligula to attack Jews living in Rome as disloyal.

⁵³ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.8

⁵⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.8

By the first end of the first century AD, the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was exactly as it is today in our Bibles, even though they counted twenty-two books rather than thirty-nine. Dr. Neil Lightfoot explains the difference:

The number of books looked upon as having divine authority is carefully limited to twenty-two. By joining Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah, and remembering that the Jews enumerated their books differently, the twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus are the same as the thirty-nine books in our Bible today.⁵⁵

Presently, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes the canonicity of most of the Apocrypha and includes them in the Old Testament of Catholic Bibles.⁵⁶ The Eastern Orthodox Churches (Greek and Russian Orthodox) include additional apocryphal writings in their versions of the Bible. However, the Apocrypha has been omitted from virtually every non-Catholic printing of the Bible.

While Biblical scholars agree the Apocrypha has value in understanding Jewish history, traditions, and theology leading up to the time of Christ (especially concerning common misconceptions about the nature and purpose of the Messiah), these writings were generally rejected from the canon because they contain numerous historical, chronological, geographical, and doctrinal errors. However, there are other reasons why these books were rejected from the canon of the Scriptures.

- They are not, and have never been, in the Jewish canon of the Old Testament.
- Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century AD, intentionally excluded them from his list of canonical books.
- Philo (20 BC – AD 50) neither mentions them nor quotes from them.
- They were never quoted or alluded to by Jesus Christ or any of the apostles.
- The sermons in the book of Acts, which outline Jewish history, do not include any historical events recorded in the Apocrypha.
- Most "Church Fathers" in fact rejected them.
- None of the Apocrypha claim inspiration or divine authority.
- They lack the power and distinctive elements of the Word of God.

The canon of the Old Testament was agreed upon by Jewish rabbis' who universally recognized the prophetic period ended with Malachi – the last true prophet of God. Therefore, they specifically chose books to be included in the canon of the Hebrew

⁵⁵ Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got The Bible*, p. 155

⁵⁶ The Roman Catholic Church does not consider *1 and 2 Esdras* and *The Prayer of Manasseh* as canonical. However, the remaining books of the Apocrypha are interspersed and, in some instances, inserted into the text of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament in Catholic Bibles, giving a total of forty-six books. A few non-Catholic English versions of the Bible prior to 1535, and early editions of the King James Version, included the Apocrypha but separated them from the canonical Old Testament.

Bible that were written by men known to have been prophets of God; that revealed divine truths clearly inspired of God; that contained relevant Jewish history; and were found to be free from errors in history, chronology, geography and theology.

The canon of the New Testament applied similar tests to determine which books were authentic and which were not. Essentially, three key tests were made to determine the canonicity of every book or letter of the New Testament era:

- *The test of apostolic authorship:* Every New Testament book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate of the apostles. For example, Mark, who was not an apostle, was a companion of Peter. Luke, who was also not an apostle, traveled and worked closely with the apostle Paul. James and Jude were both brothers of the Lord.
- *The test of apostolic teaching:* Beginning with the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) we are told that the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Therefore, when considering whether a New Testament book or letter should be regarded in the canon of Scripture, the first question asked was, "Does it agree with apostolic teaching?" This test was critically important, especially since false teachers had already begun spreading their false doctrines among the churches during the first century. False doctrine could be easily spotted simply because it contradicted the apostles' doctrine.
- *The test of acceptance:* This means if Christians of the first century accepted a particular book or letter; circulated copies of it among churches elsewhere; studied its message in their assemblies; used it in their teaching and preaching; revered it as Scripture; that book or letter was accepted into the canon of Scripture.

By the fourth century AD the canon of the New Testament was generally recognized as consisting of twenty-seven books and letters. Eusebius (c. AD 263-339) placed all books into three categories: (1) those that were universally accepted, (2) those that were disputed, but "recognized by the majority," and (3) those that were rejected. The books that were universally accepted were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation. The books that were questioned by some, but recognized by the vast majority included James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John. Books that eventually were rejected from the canon of the New Testament were the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Teachings of the Apostles*.

In AD 367 Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament that were accepted in his time. These are the same twenty-seven books and epistles that are recognized today. Athanasius added, "These are the springs of salvation. . . Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Festal Epistle*, 39

In conclusion, when it came to determining the canon of both the Old and New Testaments, the determination was primarily based on whether the writings were truly inspired by God. Essentially, we could say it was God who determined the canon of the Scriptures, not man. If God was the author, the book was accepted. If God was not the author, the book was rejected. The myth that the Roman Catholic Church determined the canon of the Bible is just that – a myth. Man merely discovered the divinely inspired character of those books that are included in Scripture. The decisions were simply based on whether the writing came with the authority of God; was written by a man of God; told the truth about God, man, etc.; had an innate transforming power to bring one closer to God; and had been received, collected, circulated, read and used by the people of God. No other book, religious or otherwise, can make this unique claim of canonicity.

Textual Criticism

Chapter Three

Over the past several centuries the Bible has been translated into numerous English versions and translations. However, not all of these versions or translations are in total agreement as to wording or even concerning the inclusion of specific verses. This has led to a lively debate between Biblical scholars regarding *Textual Criticism*, which is the science of determining the *genuineness* and *authenticity* of the Biblical text. The *genuineness* of the text refers to the origin of a particular manuscript (e.g. *authorship* and *date*), whereas *authenticity* concerns the trustworthiness of a manuscript (e.g. *integrity* and *credibility*). Any book of the Bible that can be shown to be the product of divine inspiration ("Scripture given by the inspiration of God" 2 Timothy 3:16) will be trustworthy and credible making the authorship genuine (written by "holy men of God moved by the Holy Spirit" 2 Peter 1:21). As stated in a previous lesson, there is overwhelming evidence for believing God infallibly and inerrantly revealed His will to mankind through "holy apostles and prophets" who either spoke or wrote the will of God. Those original writings (*autographs*) are, without question, genuine and authentic.

However, textual criticism is complicated by the fact that none of the original manuscripts of the Bible still exist, and by the fact that there are thousands of textual variations and obvious copyist or scribal errors among existing New Testament manuscripts. This raises several questions about the Bible as we know it today. Is there good reason for believing in the integrity of the Scriptures? Despite the large number of manuscripts that have been discovered in recent decades, how significant are the known variations – especially those in New Testament manuscripts? Do they have any bearing on the truth of the Scriptures?

To answer these questions, we need to first understand that textual variants essentially fall into three basic groups.

- *Trivial variants that do not affect the text.* These are generally spelling errors, the accidental omission of a word or a line of text, or variations in the proper spelling of names and places. For example, in Acts 18:24, is it "Apollus," "Apelles" or "Apollonios"? The Codex Sinaiticus reads "Apelles" while the Codex Bezae of the fifth century has "Apollonios." Similar variations in spelling are found in the text of John 5:2, where the pool is named "Bethsaida" in some manuscripts, and spelled as "Bethesda" or "Bethzatha" in others. Also, should Matthew 1:18 read "the birth of Jesus Christ," or "the birth of Christ Jesus," or as other manuscripts render it, "the birth of Jesus" or "the birth of Christ"? Despite these differences, none of these variations pose any significant problem with coming to a proper understanding of the text

- *Substantial variants that do not affect the text.* Some variations involve whole verses or even several verses. For example, the Codex Bezae has a peculiar reading of Luke chapter 6. It inserts verse 5 after verse 10 and inserts the following: "On the same day, seeing one working on the Sabbath day, he said to him, 'Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.'" This appears in no other manuscript, leaving most scholars to conclude it was not a part of Luke's original gospel. However, it doesn't affect the text of our Bibles because textual critics have completely rejected it.

Another example of a substantial variation is the story of the adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11. Most modern translations identify these verses as being of uncertain origin by separating it from the text by brackets or eliminating the text altogether. These include the American Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, the Contemporary English Version, and the New Century Version. This story does not appear in any manuscripts prior to the eighth century, with the exception of the fifth century Codex Bezae. This is not saying the story is untrue. The vast majority of New Testament scholars believe it may be true, even though it was not part of John's original Gospel. They believe it may have been a traditional story handed down from early Christians and was eventually incorporated into the Codex Bezae. While these textual variants are examples significant changes, they do not impact the overall understanding of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, nor any essential doctrinal truth. Furthermore, all modern English versions provide some kind of notation regarding these verses, even if they are omitted from the text by the editors.

- *Substantial variants that do affect the text.* An example of this kind of textual variant concerns the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:9-20). Almost all modern English versions either separate these verses from the text with brackets, eliminate them altogether or provide a shorter, alternate ending, which appears in only a few manuscripts. The Codes Vaticanus (c. AD 325-350) and Sinaiticus (c. AD 330-360) do not include the last twelve verses of Mark found in other versions, and neither do the oldest Syriac and Latin Vulgate manuscripts. However, these verses do appear in the Codex Alexandrius (c. AD 400-425) and the Codex Bezae, as well as a number of old Latin and Syriac manuscripts, although nearly all later manuscripts of Mark contain them. While some textual critics contend a slight stylistic difference in the text suggests it came from the pen of another, others suggest the text may be missing from some copies of Mark because it may have appeared on a portion of an earlier manuscript that was somehow lost. However, the most convincing evidence for including the "long ending" of Mark is that it was accepted by many of the so-called "early fathers" such as Irenaeus (d. AD 202), Eusebius (c. AD 263-339) and Jerome (c. AD 347-420). Furthermore, it agrees with the teaching of Luke chapter 24, and John chapter 20 and Mark 16:15 coincides with Matthew 28:18-20.

However, even if these verses were completely removed from the text of the New Testament, other passages whose origin is not in question clearly teach essentially the same things. For example, one merely has to turn to Acts 2:38 to find where belief and baptism are essential for salvation.

How Did The Textual Variants Originate?

Centuries of investigations into Biblical manuscripts has revealed two classes of textual variants: those that are unintentional and those that are the result of intentional changes. Unfortunately, whether these variants in the text were unintentional or intentional, they were sometimes copied and recopied hundreds or perhaps thousands of times.

- *Unintentional errors:* The vast majority of textual variants fit into this category, and are the result of simple errors made while copying the text. The oldest New Testament manuscripts are known as *Majuscules* (Latin *mâiusculus*: large letters) or *Uncials* (Latin *unciâlis*: tall), and date from the early to middle centuries AD, to *Minuscules* (Latin *minusculus*: smaller) or *Cursives* that date from the middle to later centuries AD. The oldest Uncials were manuscripts of the Greek text written entirely in capital letters with no space between words.

A common copyists error occurred when words were divided incorrectly. Geisler and Nix offer the following examples of how letters can be divided so as to give two entirely different meanings.⁵⁸ The letters "HEISNOWHERE" could either mean "HE IS NOW HERE" or "HE IS NOWHERE."

Also consider: "DIDYOUEVERSEEABUNDANCEONTHETABLE." Is it meant read, "DID YOU EVER SEE ABUNDANCE ON THE TABLE" or "DID YOU EVER SEE A BUN DANCE ON THE TABLE?"

Other common unintentional errors came from the omission of letters, words or even whole lines, or by accidentally inserting a word from a different line of text. Copyist errors also occurred when letters or numbers were transposed (reversed), or when words were simply misspelled through carelessness, or because a copyist misread the previous copyist's poor penmanship.

- *Intentional changes:* While most variations in the reading of manuscripts are attributable to human error, there are some that are the result of deliberate modifications of the text. In most cases the intentions of the copyist were good, but the end result was a variation from similar texts. Some of these changes are from simple attempts to improve grammar, or from a more deliberate attempt to harmonize two accounts of the same event. For example, some manuscripts of the "Lord's Prayer" in Luke 11:2-4 were deliberately changed to agree with the more popular version in Matthew 6:9-13.

⁵⁸ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 361.

Other intentional changes occurred when copyists' attempted to correct what they thought was an error. Some believe this explains the different readings of Revelation 1:5 where a scribe apparently changed *lusanti* ("freed" us from our sins), to *lousanti* ("washed" us from our sins).

However, some of the variations among manuscripts are the result of intentional doctrinal changes. One intentional change seems to have been the result of a major heresy early Christians faced concerning the deity of Jesus Christ. Arius (ca. AD 250–336), Bishop of Alexandria, denied the concept of the "Trinity" ("God the Father," "God the Son," and "God the Holy Spirit") and further contended that Jesus Christ was merely a created being.⁵⁹ It is believed that efforts to counter this heresy is the reason why later manuscripts of 1 John 5:7-8 include text that is not found in earlier manuscripts. This later variant reading has been incorporated into English versions of the New Testament such as the King James and New King James Versions. Consider the following comparison of the New King James Version (NKJV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation of 1 John 5:7-8:

For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. (1 John 5:7-8 NKJV)

For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (1 John 5:7-8 NASB)

In an apparent attempt to support the doctrinal belief of the "Trinity" the King James Version (and, subsequently, New King James Version) incorporated the alternate reading even though the reading is found in only three later manuscript copies of 1st John. Almost all other English versions omit these words in simply because they do not appear in earlier manuscripts.

Fewer Textual Variants in the Old Testament Manuscripts

In a rush to reproduce and circulate copies of the Gospels and the New Testament epistles among the churches, copyists did not always exercise the care needed to produce an error-free copy. Furthermore, many of the manuscript copies were produced by individuals or small groups of individuals who were more interested in quantity than quality. Fortunately, the abundance of New Testament manuscripts (over 25,000) makes it relatively easy to spot textual errors that were often inadvertently incorporated into these hurried copies.

But when we examine manuscripts of the Old Testament we not only find far fewer copies, we also find far more accurate (relatively flawless) transcriptions. The text

⁵⁹ This is the position taken by the Jehovah's Witnesses and is reflected in their *New World Translation* rendering of John 1:1 where they have changed "and the Word was God" to "and the Word was a son of god."

of the Old Testament was originally produced on scrolls of papyrus⁶⁰ and later on rolls of parchment.⁶¹ There are no manuscripts of the Old Testament that exist prior to the Babylonian captivity (586 BC), but there was a flood of copies during the Talmudic period (c. 300 BC – AD 500). These manuscripts fell into two general categories.

- *Synagogue scrolls*: These were regarded as the most sacred copies of the Old Testament text and were used during the worship in the synagogue. The scrolls were generally separated into the Torah (Law), the Prophets, the Writings, and others sacred text. Scribes followed the most strict rules for producing a new copy.

A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. The length of each column must not extend over less than forty-eight or more than sixty lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. The whole copy must be first-lined; and if three words be written without a line, it is worthless. The ink should be black, neither, red, green, nor any other color, and be prepared according to a definite recipe. An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate. No word or letter, not even a *yod*, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him... between every new *parashah*, or section, the breadth of nine consonants; between every book, three lines. The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line; but the rest need not do so. Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, wash his whole body, not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.⁶²

Sir Frederic Kenyon, British Biblical scholar (January 1863–August 23, 1952) describes the process used during the Masoretic Period⁶³ (AD 500-900) for checking the accuracy of a newly reproduced manuscript:

They numbered the verses, words and letters of every book. They calculated the middle word and the middle letter of each. They

⁶⁰ *Papyrus*: writing material used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans that was made from the pith of the stem of a water plant.

⁶¹ *Parchment* (Vellum): a creamy or yellowish material made from dried and treated sheepskin, goatskin, or other animal hide, formerly used for books and documents.

⁶² Samuel Davidson, *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament*, 2d ed., p. 89 as cited in James Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, 949.

⁶³ *Masoretic Period*: A period between the seventh and tenth centuries AD when *Masoretes* (Jewish scribes) copied, edited and distributed portions of the Old Testament, known as the *Masoretic Text*. The Masoretic Text differs little from fragments or partial scrolls of the Old Testament found among the *Dead Sea Scrolls* (first discovered in 1947) or from the *Septuagint*, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (completed in 132 BC) and the version most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

enumerated verses which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them; and so on. These trivialities, as we may rightly consider them, had yet the effect of securing minute attention to the precise transmission of the text; and they are but an excessive manifestation of a respect for the sacred Scriptures which in itself deserves nothing but praise. The Masoretes were indeed anxious that not one jot nor tittle, not one smallest letter nor one tiny part of a letter, of the Law should pass away or be lost.⁶⁴

These meticulous calculations were used to compare a newly copied manuscript with the existing one. If, for example, the middle letter of the middle word of the newly reproduced copy didn't match perfectly with the middle letter of the middle word of the existing manuscript the new copy was destroyed and the scribe set about once again to carefully hand-copy the existing manuscript. When the scribes were confident the Synagogue scroll had been meticulously and accurately copied, the original text was generally ceremonially destroyed. This is why there were no Hebrew manuscripts of portions of the Old Testament prior to *The Cairo Codex* (c. AD 895), *The Leningrad Codex of the Prophets* (c. AD 916), and *The British Museum Codex* (c. AD 950). The oldest complete Hebrew manuscripts of the entire Old Testament are *The Aleppo Codex*⁶⁵ (c. AD 920) and *The Leningrad Codex* (c. AD 1008). The 1947 find at Qumran of the Dead Sea scrolls pushed the manuscript history of the Hebrew Bible back a millennium. Before this discovery, the earliest Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament were the Codex Vaticanus (c. AD 325–350) and Codex Sinaiticus c. AD 330-360).

- *Private scrolls*: These copies of the Old Testament text were regarded as "common copies" and were not authorized for use in the Synagogue. Even though these scrolls were not reproduced by the strict rules governing the reproduction of Synagogue scrolls, they were copied with great care.

Development of the Critical Text

Since there are presently over 5,700 catalogued Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, in part and in whole, with variations in the wording as well as differing text-types, the task of coming up with the most accurate Greek-to-English translation is daunting to say the least. Even the finest Biblical scholars and textual critics disagree over which manuscripts may be closest to what the original text of a New Testament book or letter may have been. There are often substantial

⁶⁴ Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, p. 38

⁶⁵ The *Aleppo Codex* (named after Aleppo, Syria where it was kept in a Jewish synagogue for 500 years) was the oldest complete copy of the entire Old Testament. However, in 1947 Muslim rioters, enraged by the UN decision to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, burned down the synagogue where it was kept. The Codex disappeared, and re-emerged in 1958, when it was smuggled into Israel by a Syrian Jew. On arrival, it was found that parts of the codex had been lost.

disagreements over the best choice of wording as well as disagreements over whether some verses should be omitted since they are found in some manuscripts but not in others.

The first task undertaken by Biblical scholars and textual critics was to combine the best and most reliable manuscripts into one standard Greek version of the New Testament, known as a "critical text."⁶⁶ This task first began during the 1500's and is still going on today.⁶⁷

Prior to the Reformation Period (AD 1517-1648) the most common version of the Bible was the Latin Vulgate. However, the Vulgate had been revised so many times that the text was considered by most reformers to be totally unreliable. Therefore, the Protestant Reformation not only spawned a rapid departure from the control and traditions of the Roman Catholic church, it also spurred a renewed interest in translating the New Testament from Greek into the common languages of the day. To accomplish that task, scholars have worked through the centuries to compile standard Greek versions of the New Testament.

Today, every English translation or version of the Bible is based on one or more of these standard Greek New Testaments.⁶⁸ The most significant Greek New Testaments are:

- *Textus Receptus*: *Textus Receptus* (Latin: "received text") is the Greek New Testament compiled by Erasmus, a 15th century Dutch theologian, and became the standard critical Greek text upon which all translations of the New Testament during the Reformation period were based. Erasmus initially set out to improve on the existing Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament by including Greek text in a separate column next to the Latin. His Greek translation was based on only six manuscripts from the Byzantine text-type, also known as The Majority Text. The entire New Testament was printed in about six to eight months and published in 1516, but contained numerous errors, some of which were corrected in the second edition published in 1519. Two additional editions were published in 1527 and 1535. Erasmus' Greek text became the standard in the field, and other editors and printers continued the work after his death (d. 1536) until a final edition was

⁶⁶ *Critical Text* refers to a single Greek Translation of the New Testament compiled by Biblical scholars and textual critics who examined all the available Greek New Testament manuscripts of the Majority Text (the Byzantine text-type) and other text-types to eliminate scribal errors, and to determine the wording of various manuscripts believed to be closest to the original autographs. The critical text also documents all textual variants in the footnote, ranks the variants in degrees of importance and identifies the manuscripts where those variants readings are found.

⁶⁷ There have been several critical texts, dating from 1522 to the present, including Complutensian Polyglot (Stunica 1522), Erasmus 1527, Stephens 1550, Estienne 1550, Beza 1598, Elzevir 1624, *Textus Receptus* Erasmus (agreement of Stephens, Elzevir and Beza) 1633, Griesbach 1805, Lachmann 1842, Alford 1849 as revised in 1871, Wordsworth 1856 as revised in 1870, Tregelles 1857, Tischendorf 1869, Westcott & Hort 1881, Nestle–Aland (27th edition, 1975), United Bible Societies, (Aland et al. 1975), Hodges & Farstad 1982 as corrected in 1985.

⁶⁸ *Novum Testamentum Graece* (translated *Greek New Testament*) is the Latin name of the Greek-language version of the New Testament.

published in 1633 with the publisher's preface in Latin stating "*Textum ergo habes, nun cab omnibus receptum*" or "the (reader) now has the text that is received by all." From that publisher's notation has come the words "*Received Text*." The *Textus Receptus* became the dominant Greek text of the New Testament for the next two hundred and fifty years.

The *Textus Receptus* was the standard Greek text used by the forty-seven scholars who translated the King James Version,⁶⁹ as well as the standard Greek text for Martin Luther's German translation of the New Testament (using the second edition of the *Textus Receptus*) and Tyndale's English translation (which utilized the third edition of the *Textus Receptus*). Although based mainly on late Byzantine text manuscripts, critics are quick to point out Erasmus' edition differed markedly from the classic form of that text-type.

- *Westcott and Hort Text*: This is the Greek language version of the New Testament that is generally recognized as the first true critical text. It was published in 1881 by Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–1892), who worked together for twenty-eight years to develop what they believed to be a scholarly text of the New Testament.

In 1870 Westcott and Hort were commissioned by the Church of England to make the first major revision of the King James Version (Authorized Version), with as "few changes" as possible, and to put "the reason for the change" in marginal notes. However, what actually transpired was totally new translation known as the "Revised Version" (RV) was based on their own recently compiled Greek Text version of the New Testament known as "*The New Testament in the Original Greek*." It is principally based on the Alexandrian text-type manuscripts, fragments and codices discovered as late as 1881.

Two codices that were highly favored by Westcott and Hort were the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. They rejected the Western text-type since it was more of a paraphrased text than word-for-word, and therefore considered by Westcott and Hort to be less reliable. They also rejected the Byzantine text-type because they claimed those manuscripts were of later dates than the Alexandrian. However, recent critical examinations of more recently discovered Byzantine manuscripts reveal that many are of much earlier dates than originally believed, and may actually predate many Alexandrian manuscripts. Furthermore, contemporary textual critics no longer view the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus with the same degree of reliability they once held.

Westcott and Hort's "*The New Testament in the Original Greek*," which was the standard critical text for more than a generation, no longer holds that

⁶⁹ *King James Version* ("*Authorized Version*" in England). Translation began in 1604 and was first published in 1611 with subsequent revisions made in 1629 and 1638 to correct errors from successive printings – most notably the omission in the 1631 printing of the word "not" in "Thou shalt not commit adultery." The New Testament was translated from the *Textus Receptus*. The Old Testament was translated from the Masoretic Hebrew text.

position. The "Revised Version" (also known as the "English Revised Version" in England) is the known as the "American Standard Version"⁷⁰ in the United States. However, none of the major modern English Bible translations made since World War II used the Westcott-Hort text as its base.

The only current translation that is based on the Westcott-Hort text is the *New World Translation* of the Jehovah's Witnesses, with substantial prejudicial textual changes to support their doctrine.

- *Nestle-Aland Text (27th Edition)*: This is the standard critical text used today for all contemporary translations of the New Testament. It is also the only Greek New Testament today to go by the Latin title "*Novum Testamentum Graece*."

The Nestle-Aland Text is named after Eberhard Nestle (d. 1913) a German Biblical scholar and textual critic, and Kurt Aland (d. 1994) a German Theologian and Professor of New Testament Research and Church History for the *Institute for New Testament Textual Research*⁷¹ at the University of Münster, Westphalia, Germany. After the death of Eberhard Nestle his son Erwin Nestle (d. 1972) took over the publication and contributed substantially to a constant improvement of the editions. Kurt Aland joined the team in 1952 and made further improvements until the time of his death. Further revisions were made under the oversight of Aland's wife Dr. Barbara Aland, theologian and former Professor of New Testament Research and Church History.

The Nestle-Aland Text (given the title "*Novum Testamentum Graece*" by its publishers) is currently in its 27th edition and is the most widely recognized and critically acclaimed Greek New Testament, and is used as the basis of most contemporary New Testament translations and the standard for academic work in New Testament studies. Since 1975, the *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* has been based on the Nestle-Aland Text. Unlike its predecessors, the Nestle-Aland Text (27th Edition) incorporates the most extensive "textual apparatus"⁷² of any critical text.

However, the Nestle-Aland Text (27th Edition) is not without its critics. The text is not based on all 5,700 known catalogued Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, but only about twenty percent of that number, or perhaps as many as 1,100 manuscripts. Furthermore, the Nestle-Aland Text is remarkably similar, in many instances, to Westcott-Hort Text.

⁷⁰ *The Revised Version, Standard American Edition of the Bible* (or "American Standard Version"), published in 1901.

⁷¹ The *Institute for New Testament Textual Research* (INTF) has registered and catalogued every known manuscript in a large computer database. They have photographed almost ninety-five percent of this material, and have begun to digitize this information to make it available on various digital media and a future web site, including an online Virtual Manuscript Room.

⁷² *Textual Apparatus* (Manuscript or Critical Apparatus) is a catalog of every known variant reading found in every verse of the New Testament, a rating system for determining the significance of those variations, plus the source manuscripts where those variant reading are found. The manuscript apparatus provides an exhaustive bibliographic and genealogical reference, to scholar and student alike, for tracing the actual formation and development of the New Testament text over the centuries.

Critics claim the Nestle-Aland Text (27th Edition) frequently favors the reading of the Alexandrian text-type even when the overwhelming weight of the textual evidence suggests the more correct reading is that of the Byzantine, or Majority Text. One example of this is found in Matthew 5:22, where Jesus said anger "without a cause" as sin. However, the phrase "without a cause" (Greek: "*eike*") is omitted from all contemporary versions and Interlinear Greek-English New Testaments based on the Nestle-Aland Text. However, out of all the known Greek manuscripts of Matthew, only three omit this phrase. They are the Codex Vaticanus (c. AD 325–350) and Codex Sinaiticus (c. AD 330-360), and two manuscript fragments catalogued as "P67" (c. AD 150) containing two verses of Matthew 3 (verses 9 and 15) and seven verses of Matthew chapter 5 (verses 20-22 and 25-28). These three manuscripts are all Alexandrian text-type.

Critics say this is one of many examples where the Nestle-Aland Text gives preference to a few obscure readings from the Alexandrian text over hundreds of similar readings from the Byzantine (Majority) text. Although there are many considerations that go into the selection of a specific reading, the majority of the "witnesses"⁷³ has always weighed more heavily in the selection of one reading over another.

Since Nestle-Aland and Westcott and Hort both rely heavily on the Alexandrian text-type it should come as no surprise that all contemporary English translations based on these two critical texts also read quite similar. Modern English translations of the New Testament specifically based on the Nestle-Aland Text are the *Wuest Expanded Translation*, *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, *Revised Standard Version*, and the *New American Standard Bible*.

The history of the New Testament is generally divided into four basic periods.⁷⁴ These are:

- *Duplication* (from the first autographs to c. AD 325) – During this period, the original autographs were copied and recopied, and distributed by Christians throughout the Roman Empire.
- *Standardization* (c. AD 325-1500) – During this timeframe, great numbers of Greek manuscripts were carefully and faithfully copied, and the Masoretic Hebrew text of the Old Testament was produced. It was also during this period that the canon of the Scriptures was determined, and when parchment was first introduced, leading to the production of elaborate codices of the Bible.

⁷³ *Witnesses*, in the context of textual criticism, refers to specific manuscripts of the New Testament. Sometimes the term *Patristic Witnesses* is used to refer to quotes of the "church fathers" from various Biblical manuscripts which they recognized were reliable. The greater number of witnesses, the greater the evidence is for concluding particular words or verses are probably very similar to, if not the actual reading of, the original manuscripts (autographs).

⁷⁴ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pp. 392-393.

- *Crystallization* (c. AD 1500-1648) – Known as the Reformation era, this period of time is when the New Testament was first printed in Greek and other languages, the Masoretic text of the Old Testament, based on manuscripts from the fourteenth century, became the basis for all subsequent copies of the Hebrew Bible. It was also during this time that the Textus Receptus became the standard text from which the first Greek-to-English translation of the Bible was produced (the King James Version).
- *Textual Criticism* (c. AD 1648-to Present) – This era is when Biblical manuscripts were collected and systematically catalogued, when the device known as a critical apparatus (textual apparatus) was first included in codices, and when Biblical manuscripts were classified by text-type. This is also the period when textual critics made the first complete break from the Textus Receptus, and developed critical texts of the New Testament from which subsequent versions and translations would be based.

The Infallible, Inerrant and Eternal Word of God

While the battle rages over the reliability and dependability of the Scriptures as we have them today, Jesus settled the matter by giving us the assurance that the Word of the Lord is infallible, inerrant and eternal.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." (Mark 13:31)

Jesus not only claimed that His words are of divine origin, making them infallible and inerrant, but that His words were also eternal. The claim Jesus made regarding His words is also made by the apostle Paul concerning all Scripture given by the inspiration of God. In writing to Timothy, Paul stated:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

The term "Holy Scripture" as used by Paul on this occasion specifically referred to the Old Testament. However, Paul believed all Scripture was inspired by God (God-breathed). This is why Paul wrote:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

If the Old Testament Scriptures were inspired of God, so were the New Testament teachings of Jesus and his apostles. In fact, Jesus frequently contrasted His own teachings with those of the Law of Moses, giving greater importance and authority to His words than those of Moses (Matthew 5:27-48). Likewise, the apostles were

given the authority to bind and loose on earth what God had bound and loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). Add to this the fact that the church at Corinth was expected to acknowledge that the writings of Paul were "the commandments of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 14:37), and the church at Thessalonica received the words of the apostles "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The divine providence of God in preserving the Word of God through the centuries is, in fact, the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that His words would not pass away – not only the words He personally spoke, but also His words revealed to the apostles through the Holy Spirit.

"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-15)

The apostle Peter also gave assurance that the Word of God has been infallibly, inerrantly and eternally preserved. He wrote:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22-25)

Peter assured first century saints that the truth they had obeyed, and the truth by which they had been born again, was the Word of God that had been preached to them by the gospel. Furthermore, he affirmed that the very character and nature of the "word of God" (or "word of the Lord") is "incorruptible," "lives and abides forever," and "endures forever." By quoting Isaiah 40:6-8, Peter affirmed through divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the word of the Lord of Isaiah's prophecy (which "endures forever") is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter boldly asserted that the gospel which was proclaimed by the preaching of the apostles is infallible, inerrant and eternal. It is infallible in that the gospel originated from an *infallible* God, incapable of making mistakes. It is *inerrant* in that it is free of doctrinal error and preserved against any possibility of being corrupted. And it is *eternal* in that the gospel lives, abides, and endures forever as the infallible, inerrant and incorruptible Word of the Lord.

Conclusion

When all the textual evidence is compiled and critically examined, the Bible is unquestionably reliable. While some skeptics argue that there are too many variant

readings among manuscripts for the Bible to be considered trustworthy,⁷⁵ scholars who have spent a lifetime investigating these manuscripts say, when these variations are accounted for, the New Testament manuscripts are between 99.5 to 99.9 percent free from any substantial variant, and that the remaining variations in reading are of such little importance that their inclusion or rejection make no appreciable difference in the sense of the passage.

However, the most conclusive evidence for the reliability and dependability of the Biblical text comes from the Word of God itself. God revealed His word through the infallible and inerrant process of inspiration, and by His own divine power eternally preserves His word as unchangeable and incorruptible.

⁷⁵ There are approximately 200,000 known variant readings among the existing manuscripts of the New Testament. However, this number is not as great as it seems when one realizes a single misspelled word copied in 3,000 different manuscripts would be counted as 3,000 variants. In reality, the actual number of significant textual variants (discounting copyist errors, etc.) is surprisingly small (less than one-half of one percent), and none of these have any appreciable effect on doctrinal teaching.

Bible Versions and Translations

Chapter Four

When choosing a Bible, many make their choice simply on the *readability* of the text while others are more concerned with the *reliability* of the translation into English. Even translators differ as to which of these concerns are more important. Some argue in favor of a very literal translation from the Greek or Hebrew into English while others prefer a translation that is more functional to the average reader by simply capturing the essence of the message. These different philosophies carry over into every Bible version or translation, especially contemporary English versions of the New Testament. Should the version be more *form-driven* (word-for-word) or more *meaning-driven* (thought-for-thought)? No translation is completely one or the other. All show some degree of form-driven as well as meaning-driven. However, in most cases one approach will clearly dominate the other, and the difference between the two is rather significant.

Form-Driven Verses Meaning-Driven

A *form-driven* version places greater emphasis on the original (or "source") language of the text by attempting to translate what was written word-for-word. This type of version attempts to retain the original meaning of the Greek and Hebrew, as well as the word order and grammatical structure, thereby minimizing possible biases of the translator. Unfortunately, some form-driven versions are awkward for the average reader since the emphasis is not on readability as much as on accurately translating the text from the source language into English.

A *meaning-driven* version (which also includes the category of *paraphrased versions*) places greater emphasis on the language of the reader, making the text more readable and easier to understand. This is accomplished by attempting to capture the overall thought of the text and express that thought in natural, contemporary English. These versions generally referred to as thought-for-thought translations. In a meaning-driven version longer Greek sentences are often broken down into shorter English sentences. Word order is often rearranged, and a particular Greek or Hebrew phrase may be translated with a variety of contemporary English words depending on the context.

Advocates of meaning-driven versions stress that the translation should sound as natural to the contemporary reader as the Greek or Hebrew text sounded to the readers of that day. For example, consider how different 2 Samuel 18:25 reads in form-driven versions as compared to meaning-driven (and paraphrased) versions. In this passage David inquires about a messenger arriving with news from a battle.

Form-Driven Versions:

- "If he is alone, there is tidings in his mouth." (KJV, ASV, RSV, NRSV)
- "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." (NKJV, ESV)
- "If he is by himself, there is good news in his mouth." (NASB, NASBu)

Meaning-Driven Versions:

- "If he is alone, he must have good news." (NIV)
- "If he is alone, he is bringing good news." (NCV)
- "If he is alone, he must have some news" (CEV)
- "If he is alone, he has news." (NLT)

The Hebrew idiom "news in his mouth," although translated literally, is awkward in English. No native English speaker would use that expression. The *New Revised Standard Version* is even worse by using the archaic "tidings in his mouth." While some meaning-driven versions capture the same thought in contemporary English, others fail to convey the significance behind a single runner bringing good news. David was saying a solitary runner would be a sign of good news, whereas several runners would likely indicate soldiers fleeing from battle in defeat.

However, the biggest drawback to meaning-driven versions is they tend to fall victim to the interpretative biases of the editors or translators. A classic example of this bias is Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8-10 regarding being saved by grace through faith.

The *New King James Version*, one of many form-driven versions, seeks to give a literal word-for-word translation.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10 – NKJV)

The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, a meaning-driven paraphrased version, clearly shows the Calvinistic, salvation-by-faith-only, bias of the editors.

Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. (of Ephesians 2:8-10 – The Message)

A comparison between two popular English versions will help point out even more differences between a form-driven (word-for-word) version and a meaning-driven (thought-for-thought) version. The *New American Standard Bible Updated edition* (NASBu) and the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV) were both published in 1995, and yet are considerably different in the way they approach the Greek text of the Scriptures. The NASBu is clearly form-driven, taking a more word-for-word

approach to the text, while the CEV is a meaning-driven paraphrased translation and takes a thought-for-thought approach.

Compare Romans 3:21-26 in Two Versions:

NASBu	CEV
<p>21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.</p>	<p>21 Now we see how God does make us acceptable to him. The Law and the Prophets tell how we become acceptable, and it isn't by obeying the Law of Moses. 22 God treats everyone alike. He accepts people only because they have faith in Jesus Christ. 23 All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. 24 But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. 25-26 God sent Christ to be our sacrifice. Christ offered his life's blood, so that by faith in him we could come to God. And God did this to show that in the past he was right to be patient and forgive sinners. This also shows that God is right when he accepts people who have faith in Jesus.</p>

The difference between these two versions in the rendering of Romans 3:21-26 are very obvious. For example, the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV):

- Employs more sentence breaks (ten as opposed to two).
- Uses easier vocabulary ("makes us acceptable" vs. "justified"; "sets us free from our sins" vs. "justified"; "sacrifice" vs. "propitiation" etc.).
- Makes significant changes in the word order.

Since meaning-driven (thought-for-thought) versions are more concerned with readability and understanding than in translating the original text word-for-word, these versions not only run the risk of reflecting the doctrinal biases of the translators, there are often other significant differences between them. Consider the following text from the NASBu (a form-driven, word-for-word version):

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Although meaning-driven (paraphrased or thought-for-thought) versions such as the CEV and the *New Living Translation* (NLT) attempt to clarify the meaning of the text, they fail to adequately capture the meaning behind the three figures of speech "walk. . . stand. . . sit" which refer to progressive degrees in departing from the Living God. For example:

- The word "walk" is from the Hebrew "halak" and means "to go about or to go along." It suggests a casual movement along the way – moving in the direction of some destination, or to go forward. Within this verse, the word means one who is truly blessed and happy in his relationship with God does not even begin a casual movement toward wickedness.
- The word "stand" is from the Hebrew "amad" which carries the idea of "stopping to abide or dwell, to be in place, to tarry." In the text, the psalmist says that the godly refuses to stop to abide, dwell, or tarry among sinners. He does not remain close to, or choose to be with, those who live their lives contrary to God's Word.
- The word "sit" is from the Hebrew word "yashab" which means "to sit down, to settle down and remain, to make a habitation, to find comfort and ease." In the context of Psalm 1:1, the psalmist says the godly will never sit or settle down and remain in the seat of the scornful. He will never find comfort and ease with those who mock and scorn the commandments of the Lord.

Let's see how two contemporary meaning-driven (thought-for-thought) versions treat these verses by comparing the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV) and the *New Living Translation* (NLT).

Psalm 1:1-2 in Two Version:

CEV	NLT
1 God blesses those people who refuse evil advice and won't follow sinners or join in sneering at God. 2 Instead, the Law of the Lord makes them happy, and they think about it day and night.	1 Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. 2 But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night.

As you can see, the reading of these two versions is not only significantly different, but the idea of a steady progression deeper and deeper into sin is completely missed in both versions.

While most translations are characterized as being either form-driven or meaning-driven, there are some that blend the two and sit somewhere in the middle. One such translation is the *New International Version* (NIV).

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalms 1:1-2 - NIV)

In defense of attempts to balance the differences between word-for-word and thought-for-thought versions, consider the same verses from *Young's Literal Translation* (YLT)⁷⁶ which attempts to keep the word order and tenses of the Greek text.

O the happiness of that one, who Hath not walked in the counsel of the wicked. And in the way of sinners hath not stood, and in the seat of scorers hath not sat; but — in the law of Jehovah [is] his delight, and in His law he doth meditate by day and by night: (Psalms 1:1-2 -YLT)

Young's translation is so literal that it is difficult to for many to read and understand, especially when attempting to read lengthy passages. For example, consider *Young's Literal Translation* of the text examined earlier from Romans chapter three.

And now apart from law hath the righteousness of God been manifested, testified to by the law and the prophets, and the righteousness of God [is] through the faith of Jesus Christ to all, and upon all those believing, — for there is no difference, for all did sin, and are come short of the glory of God — being declared righteous freely by His grace through the redemption that [is] in Christ Jesus, whom God did set forth a mercy seat, through the faith in his blood, for the shewing forth of His righteousness, because of the passing over of the bygone sins in the forbearance of God — for the shewing forth of His righteousness in the present time, for His being righteous, and declaring him righteous who [is] of the faith of Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26 - YLT)

Paraphrased Versions

On the opposite end of the spectrum are *paraphrased* versions. Unfortunately, many paraphrased versions fall short of giving a reliable translation of the original Greek and Hebrew. The reason is simply because these versions are not a translation in the strict sense of the word. They are generally not translated into contemporary English from the Greek or Hebrew, but merely rephrase the wording of an existing English version. One example is Kenneth Taylor's *The Living Bible* (completed in 1971) which was an attempt to paraphrase the *American Standard Version* (ASV) of 1901. Generally speaking, paraphrased versions are known for using colloquial words and expressions, taking great freedom in expressing the thought of the text, and for reflecting the biases of the translator. For these reasons paraphrased versions are generally rejected by serious Bible students as a sole source.

⁷⁶ *Young's Literal Translation* is a translation of the Bible into English, published in 1862. The translation was made by Robert Young, compiler of *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* and *Concise Critical Comments on the New Testament*. Young produced a "Revised Version" of the translation in 1887.

Consider the following rendition of Psalm 1:1-2 from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*.

How well God must like you — you don't hang out at Sin Saloon, you don't slink along Dead-End Road, you don't go to Smart-Mouth College. Instead you thrill to God's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night. (Psalms 1:1-2 – The Message)

On the extreme outer fringe of the spectrum of Bible versions is the *Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament* (CPV); a highly paraphrased work of Clarence Jordan (d. 1969) which promotes itself as "a colloquial translation with a Southern accent." This version is so far removed from the norm that its rendition of passages is rather comical in some areas, while highly offensive in others. It takes place in the southern United States, and substitutes objects, places and names found in the New Testament. For example, Jesus is born in Gainesville, Georgia; Gabriel tells Mary and Joseph to flee to Mexico; John the baptizer is "dressed in blue jeans and a leather jacket, and...living on corn bread and collard greens"; and when Jesus came to John to be baptized, John "dipped" Jesus in the "Chattahoochee." However, critics have said the *Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament* goes overboard in attempting to capture the racial and ethnic biases between Jews and Gentiles during New Testament times.

Clearly, there are some major drawbacks to paraphrased versions of the Bible, especially when it comes to the New Testament. Not only do paraphrased versions frequently inject the personal doctrinal biases of their editors or translators, they often completely cloud or obscure the true meaning of the text. Serious Bible students will certainly refrain from using paraphrased versions as a sole source, if they use them at all. The best method for studying the Scriptures is to rely on recognized form-driven (word-for-word) versions of the Bible, and then compare and contrast the wording of these versions.

The Danger of Study Bibles

A study Bible (also called a *Reference Bible*) is an edition of the Bible that contains annotations and commentary for the purpose of giving the reader a greater understanding of the Biblical text. Unfortunately, these annotations often reflect the doctrinal or theological biases of the editor. Readers, whose knowledge of the Scriptures is insufficient to differentiate between Biblical truth and doctrinal error, are frequently misled by the annotations and commentary that appear under or beside the Biblical text. Unsuspecting readers often assume this information comes from reliable and recognized scholars who provide a straight-forward, unbiased interpretation of the text. However, that is not always the case.

All study Bibles reflect a certain amount of doctrinal or theological bias by virtue of the fact that they all contain commentary on the Biblical text. Doctrinal bias is unavoidable. However, some study Bibles are clearly worse than others. Some study Bibles are filled with annotations and commentary that are specifically

designed to promote the doctrinal beliefs of the editor. Study Bibles that are generally recognized as being highly biased include:

- *The Scofield Reference Bible*:⁷⁷ Among a number of doctrinal untruths found in *The Scofield Reference Bible* is dispensational millennialism. This is the belief that between creation and the final judgment there are seven distinct eras of God's dealing with man that will culminate in the rapture, tribulation and a literal millennial (one thousand year) reign of Jesus Christ on the earth. Dispensationalism, as this doctrine is called, teaches that the Jewish rejection of Jesus forced the Lord to postpone the establishment of the kingdom until His second coming, and established the church in place of the kingdom as an interlude between the two advents. This doctrine claims that the church is in no sense a fulfillment of Old Testament kingdom prophecies but something entirely new and initially unintended by the Lord.
- *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible*:⁷⁸ This study Bible, which contains notes on the entire Old and New Testaments by Finis Jennings Dake, was first published in 1963. It is considered by many in Charismatic circles as the top "Pentecostal Study Bible." In fact, the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*⁷⁹ says of Drake: "His notes became the bread and butter of many prominent preachers and the staple of Pentecostal congregations." However, Drake's teachings regarding the person of Jesus Christ and the Godhead are clearly heretical. He not only denies the pre-incarnate existence of Jesus Christ, but maintains that all the persons of the Godhead have bodies, souls and spirits just like humankind.
- *The Companion Bible*:⁸⁰ This study Bible is the work of E. W. Bullinger, the originator of the doctrine known as Ultradispensationalism (also called "Bullingerism"). While the Bible affirms that the church was established in Acts 2, Bullinger's "ultradispensationalism" claims the church began at some point after Acts 2 (i.e., Acts 9-13 or even after Acts 28). Bullinger's views also included what he described as "mortality of the soul," which means the soul ceases between death and the resurrection at which time the soul is recreated. This is very similar to the so-called "soul sleep" of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- *Ryrie Study Bible*:⁸¹ Like the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the *Ryrie Study Bible* reflects the premillennial and dispensational views of its editor, Charles C.

⁷⁷ *The Scofield Reference Bible* is a widely circulated annotated study Bible edited and annotated by Cyrus I. Scofield. Published by Oxford University Press and containing the traditional King James Version of the Bible, it first appeared in 1909 and was revised by the author in 1917.

⁷⁸ Finis Jennings Dake (1902-1987) was an American Pentecostal minister and evangelist known primarily for his writings on the subjects of Pentecostal (or Charismatic) Evangelical Christian spirituality and Premillennial Dispensationalism. His most well known work was the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible*.

⁷⁹ Stanley M. Burgess, author, editor; Gary B. McGee, editor; Patrick H. Alexander, editor: *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*,

⁸⁰ Ethelbert William Bullinger (December 15, 1837 – June 6, 1913) was an Anglican clergyman, Biblical scholar, and ultradispensationalist theologian.

⁸¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie (b. 1925), a religious writer and theologian, served for several years as professor of systematic theology and dean of doctoral studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Ryrie. In addition to its support of premillennialism, the *Ryrie Study Bible* teaches that New Testament baptism, which puts one into Christ, is not baptism (immersion) in water but "Spirit baptism." Consider Ryrie's comments on the following verses. Of 1 Corinthians 12:13 he writes, "... we were all baptized. The Spirit joins all believers to the body of Christ." Concerning Galatians 3:27 Ryrie writes, ". . . baptized into Christ. Not water baptism but Spirit baptism, which brings believers into a living union with Christ. (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13)" Of course, Ryrie is wrong on both counts.

Other study Bibles that reflect the doctrinal prejudices of their editors include:

- *Prophecy Study Bible*, edited by John Hagee (Pentecostal televangelist known for strong Pentecostal and premillennial teachings)
- *LaHaye Prophecy Bible*, edited by Tim LaHaye (fundamental Baptist with strong premillennial teachings)
- *Expositor's Study Bible*, edited by Jimmy Swaggart (Pentecostal televangelist also known for strong Pentecostal and premillennial teachings)
- *MacArthur Study Bible*, edited by John MacArthur (fundamental Presbyterian background with strong premillennial and Calvinist teachings)
- *Wesley Study Bible*, edited by Joel B. Green and William H. Willimon (fundamental Methodist teachings of John Wesley with strong Calvinistic leanings)

There are, however, some study Bibles where the editors have made an attempt to avoid theological bias. These are published by Zondervan and Thomas Nelson, and include the NIV Study Bible, NASB Study Bible, KJV Study Bible, etc. The new ESV Study Bible by Crossway is also recognized as being rather theologically unbiased.

Readability

As stated earlier, most people chose a version or translation of the Bible based on ease of reading. However, the problem facing editors of every contemporary English version is that the Bible is a book of law, history, poetry, straightforward narratives or stories, highly figurative and symbolic prophecy, and theological teachings that range from simple to most complex. The Bible does not employ one specific genre. Even the apostle Peter remarked about the complexity of Paul's epistles, "in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Since most newspapers today attempt to write articles on a middle-school level of reading comprehension (from sixth grade to eight grade), editors of contemporary English Bibles have also attempted to keep their versions at the same level of readability. This works well for genres such as narratives and even poetry (Hebrew poetry generally has shorter sentences). However, passages concerning detailed legal matters, or those that use the strong visual imagery and figurative prophetic

language, or which discuss complex theological concepts and teachings, are significantly more difficult to read and comprehend. In most versions passages like these demand a reading comprehension at a high school level or above. While some contemporary versions have attempted to simplify complex passages, they have often done so by dramatically increasing the word count. Consider the following comparison of reading levels and word count concerning the somewhat complex theological teaching of Paul in Ephesians chapter one:

Comparison of Ephesians 1:1-23⁸²

Contemporary Version	Overall Reading Level	Reading Level of Ephesians 1	Average Word Count*
NASBu	6.7	12+	+3.5
NKJV	6.8	12+	-1.9
NIrV	3.6	4.1	+12.6

* Average word count is based on words that are more or fewer than the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The *New International Readers Version* (NIrV) has an overall reading level of 4.1 (just above the fourth grade level), while the *New American Standard Bible Updated Version* (NASBu) and the *New King James Version* (NKJV) both have a reading level at 12+ (higher than a high school graduate). However, the *New International Readers Version* has the highest word count of any version (+12.6), making it the wordiest version of all.

More Literal Versions versus Less Literal Versions

Each form-driven, meaning-driven, and paraphrased version of the Bible (published since 1971) can generally be placed on a spectrum ranging from more literal to less literal. The following chart helps illustrate the relationship between many popular form-driven, meaning-driven, and paraphrased versions of the Bible and how the literalness of these versions are viewed by most textual critics.

Contemporary English Versions Arranged by Translation Philosophy⁸³

Form-Driven	Meaning-Driven	Paraphrased
NASB ESV NRSV NKJV RSV	NIV NJB JB NLT NAB REB NCV	JBP LB CEV Message
⇐ ⇐ More Literal		Less Literal ⇒ ⇒

⁸² Comparison based on the Flesch-Kincaid Scores: David Dewey, *A User's Guide to Bible Translations, Making the Most of Different Versions*, p. 75

⁸³ Contemporary English versions ranked from more literal to less literal: NASB (New American Standard Bible); NKJV (New King James Version); ESV (English Standard Version); RSV (Revised Standard Version); NRSV (New Revised Standard Version); NIV (New International Version); NAB (New American Bible); NJB (New Jerusalem Bible); REB (Revised English Bible); JB (Jerusalem Bible); NCV (New Century Version); NLT (New Living Translation); JBP (J.B. Philip's New Testament in Modern English); CEV (Contemporary English Version); LB (Living Bible); The Message

However, despite the fact that several contemporary English versions of the Bible are form-driven and fall into the category of being more literal than others, there still remains some significant differences in the text between these versions. How do we account for those differences, especially if each is striving to be faithful to the text?

The Significant Role of a Critical Text

Today, most English versions and translations of the New Testament are generally based on one of three texts: the Textus Receptus, Westcott and Hort, or Nestle-Aland (or the United Bible Society text which is largely based on Nestle-Aland). Other modern English versions of the New Testament are based on a particular version that is based on one of these three critical texts. For example, when comparing twenty of the most widely used English versions of the New Testament, those that agree *closest* with the Nestle-Aland Text are (in descending order):

- (1) *New American Standard Version*
- (2) *New American Standard Bible Updated (1995)*
- (3) *New American Bible**
- (4) *English Standard Version**
- (5) *Holman Christian Standard Bible*
- (6) *New Revised Standard Version**
- (7) *New English Translation*
- (8) *Revised Standard Version**
- (9) *New International Version*

** Although the versions identified with an asterisk are based on the Nestle-Aland critical text, they are actually a revision of the Revised Version (1881-1885) which was based on the Westcott-Hort critical text. This is further evidence that the Westcott-Hort critical text and the Nestle-Aland critical text, which are both based on the Alexandrian text type, are very similar.*

English versions that agree *least* with the Nestle-Aland Text (or the Westcott-Hort Text) are:

- (19) *New King James Version***
- (20) *King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version)***

*** These versions are based on the Textus Receptus.*

The textual variations between contemporary English versions of the New Testament, even though significant at times, only serves to point out the danger of contending that one version is "more accurate" than another. Despite the critical text or test-type upon which a particular version is based, there is simply no such thing as "the most accurate" version of the New Testament. They all have strengths and weaknesses. They all give preference to one variant reading over another, and they all include or exclude text based on critical scholarship.

This does not mean that the New Testament is unreliable. It simply means textual critics and Biblical scholars disagree over which critical text and which variant readings most closely represent the original autographs. Those who defend the *Authorized or King James Version* (KJV) and the *New King James Version* (NKJV) argue in favor of the Textus Receptus which is based on the Byzantine text-type (also known as the "Majority Text"). Those who defend the *Revised Version* (RV) and the *American Standard Version* (ASV) argue in favor of the Westcott and Hort critical text which is principally based on the Alexandrian text-type. And those who defend most contemporary English versions edited since 1971, including the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) and the *New American Standard Bible Update* (NASBu), argue in favor of the Nestle-Aland text (27th edition) which is very similar to the Westcott and Hort text and is likewise based on the Alexandrian text-type. The debate essentially comes down to which text-type best represents the original autographs: the Byzantine text-type or the Alexandrian text-type?

Getting Through the Confusion of Translations and Versions

Grasping a clear and concise understanding of Biblical truth is not only attainable, but should be the goal of every student of the Bible.

Despite the differences between versions, or between critical texts and text-types, it is possible to understand the Biblical text by simply comparing and contrasting different reliable versions, and selecting those readings that conform with everything else the Bible teaches on the same subject.

But which versions are reliable?

Every modern contemporary version of the Bible (particularly, the New Testament) has its own set of strengths and weaknesses. Consider the following:

- *The King James Version* (1611). Even its most ardent critics admit the *King James Version* (KJV) is by far the most important English translation of the Bible. It first appeared in 1611 as the "*Authorized Version*" (AV), and even though some claim the *King James Version* is about ninety percent similar to the Tyndale Translation⁸⁴ (the first English version of the Bible from the original languages), it is in fact a careful revision of Tyndale's work. The KJV, authorized by King James I in 1603, was the collaborative work of the most renowned and ablest biblical scholars of the Anglican Church. Not only was this version held in such high regard for hundreds of years among English-speaking congregations, it helped shape the English language for the next four centuries.

⁸⁴ William Tyndale (c. 1494 – 1536) was a 16th century scholar and translator who became a leading figure in Protestant reformism towards the end of his life. He was the first to translate considerable parts of the Bible into English, for a public readership. He was tried for heresy, strangled and burnt at the stake. The fifty-four independent scholars drew significantly on Tyndale's translations to create the King James Version (or "Authorized Version") of 1611. One estimation suggests the King James New Testament is 83.7 percent Tyndale's and the Old Testament 75.7 percent.

There are many common expressions today that trace their origin to the KJV, including:

- Fell flat on his face (Numbers 22:31)
- Escape with the skin of my teeth (Job 19:20)
- Dead flies in the ointment (a fly in the ointment) (Ecclesiastes 10:1)
- Pride goes before destruction (pride goes before a fall) (Proverbs 16:18)
- Sour grapes (Ezekiel 18:2)
- Pour out your heart (Psalm 62:8)
- Under the sun (everything under the sun) (Ecclesiastes 1:3, 9, 14, etc.)

While the Old Testament of the *King James Version* was based on the standard Hebrew (Masoretic text), many contemporary critics are quick to point out that the New Testament of the KJV was based on the Greek text of the Textus Receptus (Received Text). Critics claim the weakness of the Textus Receptus is being based on a few manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type, which are said to be of much later origin than those of the Alexandrian text-type. However, textual critics are now discovering that many manuscripts of the Byzantine text date much closer to the original autographs than first believed, and in some cases actually predate some of the oldest known Alexandrian texts.

- *The Revised Version* (1881-1885). The *Revised Version* (RV), which is sometimes called the *English Revised Version* (ERV), was the first major revision of the KJV. The revision took place in England toward the end of the nineteenth century following a decision by the Anglican Convocation of Canterbury in 1870 to publish a more contemporary English version. Like its predecessor the KJV, the Old Testament of the RV was based on the standard Masoretic text, while the New Testament was based on the updated Greek critical text produced by Westcott and Hort, both of whom were on the revision committee. Their Greek text was actually published five days before the revised New Testament first appeared in 1881. In time, the *Revised Version* became the standard Bible in England while the KJV still held wide acceptance in America.

On the positive side, the *Revised Version* helped clarify many obscure Old Testament passages in the KJV through advances in Hebrew scholarship over the preceding two centuries. However, despite the claims that the Westcott-Hort critical text of the New Testament was a vast improvement over the Textus Receptus, the *Revised Version's* rendition of the New Testament was considered by many scholars and critics to be quite inferior to the KJV in terms of English literary quality. Another failing of the RV was the determination of the revision committee to avoid any "modern" expressions, and therefore intentionally kept many of the archaic English expressions common to the KJV of 1611. Charles Spurgeon is reported to have said that the *Revised Version* "was strong in Greek but weak in English."

The *Revised Version* also drew considerable criticism from many conservative Greek and Hebrew scholars and theologians who charged this version of being theologically liberal. It is a well established fact that the membership of the Revision committee that produced this translation, with few exceptions, belonged to a liberal school of interpretation as evidenced by their own published writings and speeches. Among the Americans serving on the RV committee was Joseph Henry Thayer (Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*) and James Strong (Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*). Unfortunately, Thayer was a Unitarian and allowed some of his personal biases (such as denying the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and eternal punishment) to come through in his writings, and in his contributions to the RV.

Many scholars on the Revision committee differed from true Biblical doctrine in the following areas:

- Denying the virgin birth of Jesus,⁸⁵ and refusing to concede the full deity of Jesus Christ
 - Questioning the Messianic character of the Old Testament prophecies and Psalms
 - Questioning the concept of the Godhead (Trinity)
 - Denying the verbal inspiration of the original Old and New Testaments, and refusing to accept the religion practiced by Israel in Old Testament times as a revelation from the one true God
 - Accepting the critical hypothesis regarding the origin of the Old Testament writings while denying the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the unity of Isaiah, and the historicity of Job and Jonah
 - Questioning the authenticity of the Gospel of John, the Pauline authorship of some of his known epistles, the conservative dates of the writing of certain of the New Testament and Old Testament books, etc.
- *The American Standard Version* (1901). As British revisers met to work on the RV, they reached out to their American counter-parts to join the revision process, and an American committee was formed. However, since travel between America and England had to be done by long voyages on a steamship, the two committees never met. Instead, the British draft was sent to the Americans. who then returned it with their recommendations. Since this became an unworkable process, American input into the *Revised Version* was minimal. The American committee chose to produce its own version of the *Revised Version*, known as the *American Standard Version*

⁸⁵ One of the most notable controversies regarding the RV is Isaiah 7:14 which reads: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el." While the Hebrew word *almah* (al-maw') may be translated "*young woman*" there is nothing unique about a "*young woman*" conceiving and bearing a son. The "*sign*" that God was indeed among His people would be that "*a virgin shall conceive and bear a son*" (KJV) which occurred in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

(ASV). However, like the *Revised Version* (or *English Revised Version*), the ASV was also based on the Westcott-Hort critical text of the New Testament which is largely based on manuscripts of the Alexandrian text type.

Work on the American version began in 1897 and was published in 1901. It was hoped that the ASV would eventually replace the KJV on the American side of the Atlantic. However, many viewed the ASV as a "revision" and not a true "translation." To gain wider acceptance, the American committee chose to keep hundreds of KJV renderings that had fallen out of English usage by the end of the nineteenth century.

While the ASV is theologically more conservative than its English counterpart (such as retained the word "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14), the ASV is known for one particular idiosyncrasy – rendering the name of God in the Old Testament as "Jehovah" rather than "LORD" or "GOD." Their reasoning was the belief that the Jewish superstitions surrounding pronouncing the name of God should no longer have any bearing on modern English versions of the Bible. In doing so, the ASV introduced a name for God that was seldom used by anyone except the cult known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

- *The Revised Standard Version* (NT 1948; OT and NT 1952): The *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) of the New Testament purported to be a revision of the *American Standard Version*, although very little of the ASV remains in the RSV. The Greek critical text usually followed was the 17th edition (1941) of the Nestle text based on manuscripts of the Alexandrian text type. While the *American Standard Version* was credited for being a form-driven, word-for-word translation, the RSV tended to be more free in its renderings, but not to the point of being classified as a meaning-driven version. F.F. Bruce wrote that the RSV translators "blurred some of the finer distinctions in New Testament wording which. . . have some significance for those who are concerned with the more accurate interpretation of the text."⁸⁶

The RSV Old Testament was not well received outside of liberal circles, simply because the translators often rendered Old Testament passages in such a way that conflicted with the interpretations given in the New Testament. This was done on the principle that the Old Testament ought to be interpreted only in reference to its own historical (Jewish) context. But conservative critics charged that this amounted to a denial of the truth of the New Testament. As the conservative scholar R. Laird Harris wrote,

It is a curious study to check the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, a monument of higher critical scholarship, and note how every important Old Testament passage purporting to predict directly the coming of Christ has been altered so as to remove this possibility. . . . It is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that the admittedly higher critical bias of the translators has operated in all of these

⁸⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The English Bible: A History of Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961),

places. The translations given are by no means necessary from the Hebrew and in some cases ... are in clear violation of the Hebrew." ⁸⁷

The verse most often mentioned by conservatives was Isaiah 7:14, in which the RSV translators exhibited the same liberal biases as the committee responsible for the *Revised Version* of 1901. The RSV translators rendered the Hebrew word *almah* as "young woman" instead of "virgin." While this is not a deliberate violation of the Hebrew, the word *almah* must be interpreted in keeping with the context, which in this case is a prophecy that clearly points to the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. There are other instances that seem to reveal a pattern of systematic contradiction with New Testament interpretations of Old Testament passages. For example, in Genesis 22:18 the RSV renders an ambiguous sentence as "by your descendents shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves." This is contrary to the interpretation given by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:8 and 3:16 that the promise to Abraham was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, the "Seed" of Abraham.

There are other blatant contradictions within individual books of the Old Testament. For example, in Genesis 9:20, the ASV reads, "And Noah began to be a husbandman" (i.e. a farmer), while the RSV reads "Noah was the first tiller of the soil," thus generating a contradiction with the statements in Genesis 3:22 "the LORD God sent him [Adam] forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground," and Genesis 4:2 "Cain was a tiller of the ground." It was the belief of the RSV translators that the Book of Genesis is composed of traditional stories that frequently contradict each other, and were put together by ancient Hebrew writers who neglected to harmonize them in many places.

A Roman Catholic Edition of the RSV was published in 1971. The revisers of this edition cooperated with the Catholic church by inserting many apocryphal writings into the books of the Old Testament (literally blending apocryphal writings into the Biblical text). These apocryphal writings are only recognized by the Catholic Church as being worthy of inclusion in canon of the Scriptures. A number of other alterations were made in the New Testament in accordance with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church (e.g., Mary being identified as "full of grace" rather than "favored one" in Luke 1:28). This coincides with the Catholic Catechism which claims Mary not only "conceived without sin" but also redeemed and preserved from "original sin" at the moment of her conception.⁸⁸ For this, Pope Paul VI awarded Luther Weigle, the chief

⁸⁷ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study*. Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 58.

⁸⁸ Through the centuries the Catholic Church has claimed that Mary, "full of grace" through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin," (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 491*) "From the first instant of

editor of the RSV, with the "Papal Knighthood of St. Gregory the Great" in 1966. In 1969 six Roman Catholic scholars joined the RSV Committee, and the final RSV Catholic edition received the *imprimatur* (officially declared to be acceptable for use by Catholics) in 1971, and became the Bible of choice among many conservative Catholics who did not care for later versions sponsored by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, such as the *New American Bible* (rev. 1995) and the *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985).

- *New American Standard Bible* (1971; revised 1995). When attempts were made to revise the *American Standard Version* (ASV), many conservative scholars felt the product of that revision, the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), contained a theologically liberal bias. Therefore, fifty-eight conservative scholars, working under the patronage of the Lockman Foundation of La Habra, California, set about to produce a second revision of the ASV. The result was the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) which, like its predecessor, the *American Standard Version*, is based on the Nestle-Aland Critical Text based on manuscripts of the Alexandrian text type.

The purpose of the editorial board was "to adhere as closely as possible to the original language of the Holy Scripture, and to make the translation in a fluent and readable style according to current English usage." Most critics agree the NASB accomplished the first, but failed to achieve the second. While the NASB is hailed as the most consistently literal or formal equivalent English version produced over the last half century, it lacks clarity and readability. An undated edition of the NASB, the *New American Standard Bible-Updated Edition* (designated as NASU or NASBu) was released in 1995, which increased readability somewhat.

Although the Updated Edition is slightly less literal than the original, the NASB continues to be widely used among fundamental evangelical churches today. The following statement on the publisher's website expresses the view shared by many conservatives that a proper respect for the Word of God should include a respect for, and an interest in, the smallest verbal details of the text and a careful awareness of the difference between a *translation* and an *interpretation* of the Bible.

". . . Ultimately, what separates the New American Standard Bible from the various available versions is that the NASB is a literal word-for-word translation from the original languages. In contrast, the others stress either a loose, personalized paraphrase, or a free-style, thought-for-thought translation known as a dynamic equivalent. Both of these place the highest priority on ease of reading and a lower priority on word-for-word preciseness. While such versions may produce smooth English, the literalness of the Word of God is

her conception, she was totally preserved from the stain of original sin and she remained pure from all personal sin throughout her life," (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 508).

sacrificed. This has never been an option for the New American Standard Bible."

- *New International Version* (1973; rev. 1978, 1984, 1996, 2005) The NIV is the result of a trans-denominational effort of approximately 100 scholars, sponsored by the New York Bible Society (now the International Bible Society). Each book of the Bible was translated by a separate team of experts, then submitted to three successive editorial committees. The New Testament was released in 1973 and the whole Bible in 1978. A version with minor revisions was released in 1984. A children's version was published in 1996 known as the *New International readers Version* (NIrV) which is a simplified English version of the NIV for children and for adults with lower reading skills, as well as those for whom English is a second language. The NIrV is clearly a paraphrased version. A complete update of the NIV was released in 2005, known as *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) which fell victim to political correctness by the use of gender-neutral language.⁸⁹ According to its publishers, the rationale for the frequent updates of the NIV was to provide periodic revisions that keep pace with changes in the English language and advances in Biblical scholarship.

The members of the NIV committee sought to provide a translation that would avoid all the liberal bias of the RVS (and later, the NRSV). They succeeded in translating Old Testament prophecies so that they not only harmonized with one another, but with their fulfillment in the New Testament. The NIV committee chose to interpret the Hebrew word *almah* as "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 in keeping with the interpretation of the word in the first chapter of Matthew. There were other editorial changes that removed doubts over so-called contradictory accounts. One alleged contradiction is between Acts 9:7 and 22:9 concerning those who were with Saul of Tarsus when the Lord spoke to him. This alleged contradiction was resolved by rendering Acts 9:7 as "they heard the sound" and Acts 22:9 as "but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me."

There are, however, critics of the NIV (and the TNIV). Many conservatives contend that the NIV is more meaning-driven than form-driven (more "thought-for-thought" than "word-for-word"), and often trades textual and doctrinal accuracy for readability. As Daniel Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary observed, "Readability seems to have been a higher priority than

⁸⁹ Gender-neutral language is a style of writing that adheres to certain rules that were first proposed by feminist language reformers in universities during the 1970's, and which have been accepted as normative in many schools since about 1980. The rules prohibit various common usages which are deemed to be "sexist," such as the use of the word "man" and the generic use of masculine pronouns in referring to persons of unspecified gender. A number of new words were also recommended, as for example "chairperson," "spokesperson," etc., as substitutes for the so-called "sexist" words in common use. Feminists hoped that by means of such reforms in the universities the language of the whole society might gradually be reformed, and that by means of such a reform in the language, the *consciousness* of people would be rendered more favorable to feminist ideas.

anything else" in the making of the NIV.⁹⁰ For instance, the NIV occasionally fails to make distinctions between Greek words that are critically important to a proper understanding of the text. One example is the failure to distinguish between the words "bound" and "bondage" as they are used in Romans 7:2 and 1 Corinthians 7:15 concerning the marriage relationship. Consider these passages from the NKJV.

Romans 7:2 – For the woman who has a husband *is bound* by the law to her husband as long as he lives. (NKJV)

1 Corinthians 7:15 – But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister *is not under bondage* in such cases. But God has called us to peace. (NKJV)

Now consider these verses from the NIV:

Romans 7:2 – For example, by law a married woman *is bound* to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. (NIV)

1 Corinthians 7:15 – But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman *is not bound* in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (NIV)

The word "bound" in Romans 7:2 is from the Greek *deo*, which means to bind (in various applications, literally or figuratively), or to be in bonds, or to tie together. The word "bondage" in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is from the Greek *douloo*, meaning to enslave (literally or figuratively), or to bring into (or be under) bondage, or become (or make) a servant.

By a simple comparison of these two passages Paul makes it clear that a man and woman are *bound (deo – tied together)* until death. However, if an unbeliever deserts the believer, the believer is no longer under *bondage (douloo – a servant)* and is therefore not expected to continue performing marital responsibilities such as those commanded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5.

It should be noted that other versions likewise fail to make the distinction between the words "bound" and "bondage," including the RSV and NRSV. Failing to make this important distinction leaves the impression that desertion on the part of an unbeliever (or even desertion under any circumstances) is scriptural grounds for divorce and remarriage on the part of the believer. Naturally, this view finds wide acceptance in a time when

⁹⁰ Daniel Wallace, *The History of the English Bible Part IV: Why So Many Versions?*, November 2003.

nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. However, the Scriptures do not teach that desertion, under any circumstances, constitutes grounds for divorce and remarriage. Such divorce and remarriage is permissible only in cases of marital infidelity, and only for the one who did not commit adultery (cf. Matthew 5:32; 19:9).

- *New King James Version* (1982). While the NASB was a revision of the ASV, the *New King James Version* (NKJV) was a revision of the KJV, and was initiated by Arthur Farstad and sponsored by Thomas Nelson Publishers of Nashville, Tennessee. The NKJV was produced by more than 130 conservative scholars working over a seven year period. The New Testament appeared in 1979 and the whole Bible in 1982.

The primary distinction of the NKJV from other contemporary versions is its use of the Textus Receptus, the edition of the Greek New Testament upon which the KJV is based. However, to its credit, footnotes in the NKJV alert readers to different readings and textual variations among various critical texts. The primary goal of the editorial board of the NKJV was to consciously retain the cadence, style and idiom of the KJV while at the same time updating archaic words into modern, contemporary English.

The NKJV is not without its critics. Most criticism against the NKJV comes from those who are heavily biased in favor of the KJV and its choice of words, phrases, and Hebrew idioms (more commonly known as the "King James Only" advocates). This group has also criticized the NKJV's inclusion of textual footnotes identifying variant readings. It is argued these footnotes cast doubt on the reliability and infallibility of the Scriptures, and that they are a kind of "Alexandrian Text-Type Trojan Horse" by giving validity to variant readings. However, textual critics have praised the NKJV as being one of the most formal equivalents of the ancient text in modern times.

- *New Revised Standard Version* (1990). After the publication of the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) in 1952, attempts were made to eliminate the liberal biases of that version with a revision in 1990 known as the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger served as chairman of the translation committee. The revision was done under the sponsorship of the National Council of Churches which held the copyright to the RSV. Although some critics claim the New Testament of the NRSV is based on the Westcott-Hort critical text, the version is actually based on the United Bible Society's Greek Text, a critical text that parallels the Nestle-Aland Critical Text, 27th edition based on manuscripts of the Alexandrian text-type. Similarities between the Westcott-Hort and Nestle-Aland critical texts may be responsible for the confusion.

It is a well-known fact that evangelical believers had little input into the RSV and probably not a great deal more into the NRSV. Therefore, the NRSV continues some of the same liberal theological biases of its predecessor, the RSV, and in certain cases is even more biased. Evidences of this bias can be

found in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, the Hebrew word *rûach* may correctly be translated either *wind* or *spirit*. Consider the following from both the RSV and NRSV:

Genesis 1:2b - the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. (RSV)

Genesis 1:2b - a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (NRSV)

Critics are quick to point out that reference to the Holy Spirit in this important passage is completely omitted from the NRSV due to the theological biases of the translators (editors) who reject the concept of the Trinity. This is further borne out in a familiar New Testament passage regarding the Holy Spirit. Compare the following:

John 7:39 – But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (NKJV)

John 7:39 – But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (NASBu)

While the word "given" does not appear in any manuscript of John, translators understood the word was certainly implied. However, the NRSV omits the word "given" from the same passage:

John 7:39 – Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (NRSV)

To omit the word "given" leaves the impression that the Holy Spirit may not have even existed at the time Jesus made that statement. Oddly, the RSV includes "given" in this same verse:

John 7:39 – Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (RSV)

Other bias against the deity and Godhood of Jesus is likewise seen in the rendering of many Old Testament Messianic prophecies. For example, the NRSV, like the RSV, deliberately chose the phrase "the young woman" over "a virgin" in Isaiah 7:14, although they insert the phrase "the virgin" in the footnote.

Isaiah 7:14 – Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (NRSV)

This bias is also seen in the fact that the NRSV plays down Messianic passages in Old Testament by rendering "Lord" with the lower case "lord." These same Old Testament passages were used by the apostles in the New Testament to prove the Messiahship of Jesus Christ, affirming that He is "Lord." Even worse, the use of the lower case "lord" in the NRSV is inconsistent:

Psalms 110:1 – The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." (NRSV)

And yet, when the apostle Peter quoted this same prophecy on Pentecost and applied it to Jesus, the NRSV goes back to "Lord":

Acts 2:34-35 – For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" (NRSV)

There are also examples of editorial decisions to omit words that completely change the meaning and intent of the text. For example, in John 7:8-10 the NRSV omits the all-important word "yet" leaving the impression that Jesus may have lied to His brothers:⁹¹

John 7:8-10 – "Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. (NRSV)

Compare this to other versions:

John 7:8-10 – "You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come." When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee. But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. (NKJV)

There are other theological issues many conservative scholars have with the NRSV, particularly the idea that salvation is not immediate or instantaneous, but rather a growth process.

1 Peter 2:2 – Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation. . . (NRSV)

⁹¹ Other versions based on the Nestle-Aland/United Bible Society critical text also omit the word "yet" in John 7:8-10, including the NASV, ESV, etc.

No footnote is given to indicate why the translators changed the Greek text of the verse to suggest that one "may grow into salvation."

While the NRSV is recognized as a formal form-driven version, it was the first English version to consistently introduce gender-inclusive language for masculine generic terms in Hebrew and Greek. For example, the addition of "and women" to 2 Peter 1:21 suggests that some of the Old Testament prophets were women. While no one disputes this, Peter did not write "and women" in 2 Peter 1:21.

There are other examples of gender inclusive language. The word "brethren" (KJV, NKJV) or "brothers" (NIV) is the New Testament's most common word for Christians. Generally, the NRSV will put "brothers and sisters" in the text with a footnote "reading Gk *brothers(s)*." No one disputes that the term *brethren* includes both sexes, but whether this is necessary to clarify the meaning of the text is at best questionable. The Roman Catholic edition of the RSV changed *brothers* to *brethren* in passages in the Gospels referring to the Lord's immediate family. Of course, this is an attempt to get around the obvious reference to Mary's other children conceived after Jesus, which conflicts the Catholic doctrine of the "perpetual virginity of Mary."

The feminist movement among progressive ecumenical churches has led to the appointment of women bishops. The NRSV, either intentionally or unintentionally, supports that conclusion through a seemingly harmless paraphrase of Paul's statements to Timothy and Titus regarding the qualifications of bishops. Rather than say the bishop must be "the husband of one wife," the NRSV renders this phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 as "married only once." Obviously, the restriction of being "married only once" could apply to either a man or a woman; while "the husband of one wife" clearly identifies a "husband" (a man).

English Standard Version (2001). Some conservative scholars who were unhappy with the liberal theological bias of the RSV and NRSV, and who felt the NASB was too wordy, sought permission from the National Council of Churches to revise the 1971 edition of the RSV. The end result was the *English Standard Version* (ESV). The revision moved the text of the RSV in a more conservative, evangelical direction. Approximately 7 percent of the RSV has been changed. In addition to correcting certain RSV readings, such as returning to the use of "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 and "propitiation" in Romans 3:25, the ESV removes the archaic "thees" and "thous" common to the *King James Version* and *American Standard Version*.

In the Old Testament the ESV revisers tend to be more conservative than the RSV in their handling of text-critical questions. In many places where the RSV rendering was based upon an amended text, the ESV revision represents a return to the Masoretic text.

However, there are other examples where the ESV follows the RSV. In Galatians 1:15 the ESV's use of "reveal his Son *to* me" follows the RSV, but should have rendered the text as "reveal his Son *in* me." The preposition *εἰς* simply does not mean "to" but "in." The latter harmonizes with Paul's later statement in Galatians 2:20 where he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives *in* me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:3) While this and other examples may seem rather insignificant, they illustrate that the translators of the ESV favored the RSV in many instances.

Like the earlier NRSV, the ESV also tends toward gender-inclusive language. There is a tendency in the ESV to substitute the singular "man" for the plural "men," which explains the rather odd expression "the children of man" instead of the familiar "children of men" or "sons of men" in some places. For example, Mark 3:28 reads, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man." There is simply no justification for this change. We also see that the ESV often avoids translating the singular *anthropos* (*ἄνθρωπος*) as "man," despite the fact that it means just that in Greek. So, why the change? Once again, like all other gender-neutral versions, the change was made to be more "politically correct."

However, as modern versions go, the ESV should be counted as one of the best. It is more literal than the NIV, and is largely free of the problems that come with the use of so-called "dynamic equivalence" versions; but the ESV it is not so literal that ordinary readers struggle to understand it. Its English has been said to recall the classic diction of the KJV. Its handling of the Old Testament also agrees with conservative principles of interpretation. As a revision of the RSV, it is much better than the NRSV in several ways. However, for in-depth study, critics view the ESV as less suitable than the NASB or NKJV.

Final Word About Versions

Every serious student of the Bible should understand the background of the versions they choose, and should be aware of each version's strengths and weaknesses. There is good in nearly all reliable form-driven word-for-word translations, just as there are benefits in consulting some of the more reliable meaning-driven thought-for-thought versions. The latter, however, should be considered more of a *commentary* rather than a literal version or translation. The serious Bible student will frequently compare and contrast passages in a variety of versions. This method gives the Bible student a greater understanding of the true meaning of a given text.

Occasionally, there may even be some benefit in comparing passages in a reliable form-driven word-for-word translation to a few more widely accepted contemporary

paraphrased versions. However, all paraphrased versions should only be treated as a commentary rather than an accurate contemporary rendering of the text.

The goal of every Bible study should be to come to an accurate understanding of the text. Relying on only one version, especially a meaning-driven or paraphrased version, will often lead the student to an incorrect understanding or interpretation of critically important doctrinal teachings. However, as we have already seen, not even the best Biblical scholars (even the most conservative scholars) agree in every instance on the best rendering of a disputed Biblical text. Some show a clear preference for one critical text over another, and others allow even minor biases to influence their rendering of a particular text. Therefore, it is vitally important for the serious Bible student to always rely on a solid, dependable form-driven word-for-word version as the foundation of their study – a version against which all other versions or translations will be compared.

The four versions this study recommends are the *King James Version*, *New American Standard Bible Updated Edition*, *New King James Version*, and the *English Standard Version*. For ease of reading, and a clearer understanding of the text in contemporary English, the *New American Standard Bible Updated Edition*, and *New King James Version* would be suggested as the first choice, while the *English Standard Version* would be recommended as a close second.

General Overview of the Bible

Chapter Five

The book we call the Bible is uniquely different from any other book ever written. The adjective *unique*, from the Latin word *unus*, meaning *one*, is defined as: "1. being the only one, sole; 2. being without a like or equal..."⁹² That definition aptly describes the Bible – a book "without a like or equal." The unique nature of the Bible is seen in the fact that it was the first book ever printed and the first book read from space.⁹³ It has survived through time, through intense persecution to wipe it from the face of the earth, and through the most passionate examinations of its worst critics. In fact, we can say the word *unique* corresponds with everything we know about the Bible. It is truly the one and only "Book of books."

The Unique Claim of Inspiration

However, the most unique characteristic of the Bible is its claim of inspiration. As we learned in a previous lesson, this makes the Bible vastly different from every other book written in the history of humankind. The Scriptures provide ample *internal* and *external* evidence⁹⁴ to support the claim that they originated in the mind of God and are infallibly inspired by God.

Internal evidence:

Uniformity of the Bible: One of the most convincing pieces of internal evidence for believing the Bible is the product of a holy God is what we might call the *uniformity* of the Bible. Many fail to understand that the Bible is not a single book, but actually a collection (or library) of sixty-six books written over a period of approximately 1,600 years, spanning a period of time of approximately forty generations, and was written by approximately forty men who came from every walk of life. These men included:

- Moses: a political leader educated in Egypt
- Joshua: a military leader
- David: a shepherd who became a king
- Solomon: a king
- Amos: a shepherd and dresser of fig trees

⁹² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "Unique"

⁹³ Apollo 8 astronauts Jim Lovell, William Anders and Frank Borman took turns reading Genesis 1:1-10 on December 24, 1968 while 200,000 miles from earth on the way to the moon.

⁹⁴ *Internal evidence* means the Bible proves itself to be inspired, where as *external evidence* means there is evidence from outside the Bible (such as science and history) that affirm the Bible could not have simply originated in the mind of men.

- Nehemiah: a servant to a king
- Matthew: a tax collector
- Peter: a fisherman
- Luke: a physician
- Paul: a tentmaker

They wrote in a wide range of places such as the wilderness of a barren desert (Moses), in a palace (Daniel), inside a dark, cold dungeon (Paul), while traveling (Luke), while in exile on a small island (John). They also wrote at different times and during different moods such as during times of war (David), and times of peace and prosperity (Solomon). They wrote in three different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Complete harmony, unity and continuity: The Bible also deals with hundreds of controversial topics, and yet there is perfect harmony and unity among all the Bible's writers on these topics. These topics deal with such controversial subjects such as the origin of man and the origin of the universe, the nature of God, the nature of sin, and man's redemption. And yet, the writers of the Bible never contradict one another. They are in complete agreement on all these subjects. There is also complete continuity in the writings of the Bible – meaning the story starts in Genesis and ends in Revelation. "The Paradise Lost of Genesis becomes the Paradise Regained of Revelation. Whereas the gate to the tree of life is closed in Genesis, it is opened forevermore in Revelation."⁹⁵

It would be impossible to find such harmony, unity and continuity in the writings of mere men. Imagine what you would have if you took just ten authors from only one walk of life, during one generation, in one place, at one time, on one continent, speaking one language, and ask these men to write on just one controversial subject. What would you get? You would have a conglomeration of conflicting ideas – not perfect harmony and unity.

All these facts speak of the unity and harmony of the Bible, and of the fact that the Bible is not the product of mere men, but of holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were inspired of God. Remember, the apostle Peter wrote:

...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

This does not mean we do not have the right to interpret the meaning of the Bible for ourselves as we study God's word. This is why we study the Word of God; so that we may understand and interpret its meaning. When Peter said, "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation," he simply meant that "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." They did not inject their own

⁹⁵ Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 24

thoughts, ideas and opinions, and then attempt to pass off those opinions as having come directly from God. However, there are occasions when inspired writers of the Bible expressed personal opinions, but they always made a distinction between their opinions and the things God commanded through inspiration. A good example of this is when the apostle Paul expressed his own personal "judgment" regarding many things in 1 Corinthians 7.

Since God has revealed His will to His holy apostles and prophets through the process of inspiration, we must obey. However, when someone expressed his "judgment" about a matter (such as Paul in 1 Corinthians 7), we have the option of choosing whether or not to follow his wise counsel.

External evidence:

Scientific foreknowledge of the Bible: The term "scientific foreknowledge" simply means the Bible contains scientific truths that were unknown by ancient man, but were scientifically proven to be true or validated through the "Scientific Method"⁹⁶ centuries later. The writers of the Bible could not have known these truths on their own. The only reasonable answer is the Bible writers were given this information by the Creator of the universe – God. A few of these pre-scientific facts are:

- The roundness of the earth (Isaiah 40:22)
- The suspension of the earth in space (Job 26:7)
- The currents (paths) in the seas (Psalms 8:8)
- The springs of the seas (Job 38:16)
- All nations of common ancestry (Acts 17:26)

There are other examples of scientific foreknowledge in the Bible in the fields of astronomy, geology, archeology, oceanography, and biology, to name a few. However, like the examples just mentioned, these were not confirmed until modern times with the aid of modern scientific research and discovery.

Fulfillment of historical prophecies: There are numerous Old Testament prophecies that foretold, in detail, events that were beyond the ability of humans to manipulate or control the outcome. The writers of the Bible attribute this prophetic knowledge to God. More importantly, all of these prophecies were fulfilled exactly as they were foretold – further evidence of their divine origin. God declared that such evidence was proof of His existence and of His superiority over men and the so-called gods of the heathen nations.

Here are a few examples of prophecies made hundreds of years before those same prophecies were fulfilled exactly as the Lord said they would be fulfilled.

⁹⁶ Scientific method refers to a body of techniques for investigating phenomena, acquiring new knowledge, or correcting and integrating previous knowledge. To be termed scientific, a method of inquiry must be based on gathering observable, empirical and measurable evidence subject to specific principles of reasoning. A scientific method consists of the collection of data through observation and experimentation, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses.

- *The fall of Babylon:* Isaiah prophesied of the fall of Babylon two hundred years before it occurred. (Isaiah 13:17-22)
- *The fall of Egypt:* Isaiah also prophesied the fall of the Egyptian empire of his day hundreds of years before it actually occurred. (Isaiah 19:1-4)
- *The fall of Nineveh:* The prophet Zephaniah foretold that the city of Nineveh, the capitol of the great Assyrian Empire, and one of the oldest cities in history would be utterly destroyed. Like ancient Babylon, the city of Nineveh lies in ruins to this day. (Zephaniah 2:13-15)
- *The fall of Tyre:* The prophet Ezekiel not only prophesied that the heavily-fortified island-city of Tyre would be destroyed, but that the rock island on which the walled city once stood would become a place where fishermen would spread their nets to dry in the sun. (Ezekiel 26:1-5)

Fulfillment of Messianic prophecies: There are more than 300 specific Messianic prophecies all written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus and all fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Among these prophecies are several that are completely beyond the ability of any disciple of Jesus to control the outcome.

The following is only a partial list of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and their fulfillment in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. These clearly demonstrate how thoroughly the coming of Jesus Christ was foretold:

- Born of a woman (Genesis 3:15; Galatians 4:4)
- Born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25)
- A descendant of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:18; Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:16)
- From the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10; Luke 3:23,33)
- Of the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12; Jeremiah 23:5; Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:32)
- Born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4-7)
- His way prepared by a forerunner (Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:1-3; Luke 3:3-6)
- A prophet (Deuteronomy 18:18; John 6:14; Acts 3:20-22)
- A priest (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:5-6)
- Triumphant entry (Zechariah 9:9; John 12:12-16)
- Betrayal price (Zechariah 11:12-13; Matthew 26:15; 27:7-10)
- Abandoned by His disciples (Zechariah 13:6-7; Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:50)
- Silent before His accusers (Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 27:12-14)
- Beaten and spat upon (Isaiah 50:6; Matthew 26:67)
- Mocked (Psalm 22:7-8; Luke 23:35)

- Hands and feet pierced (Psalm 22:16; John 19:16-18)
- Crucified with transgressors (Isaiah 53:12; Mark 15:27-28)
- Lots cast for His garments (Psalm 22:18; John 19:23-24)
- Cry from the cross (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46)
- No bones broken (Psalm 34:20; John 19:31-36)
- Pierced in His side (Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34,37)
- Buried with the rich (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57-60)
- Resurrection and exaltation (Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 52:13; 53:10-12; Acts 2:25-32)
- Ascension into heaven (Psalm 68:18; Acts 1:9; Ephesians 4:8)
- Seated at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 1:3)

Peter Stoner⁹⁷ estimated that the mathematical probabilities of one man fulfilling these Messianic prophecies would be astronomical. Consider the prophecies that the Messiah would be: (1) born in Bethlehem; (2) preceded by a messenger; (3) enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey; (4) be betrayed by a friend; (5) be sold for 30 pieces of silver; (6) remain silent before His accusers; (7) be crucified with other transgressors; and (8) that the money with which the Messiah was betrayed (30 pieces of silver) would be thrown in God's house, and be used for a burial place in the potter's field. The mathematical probabilities that one man could fulfill just these eight prophecies has been calculated to be 1 in 10 to the 17th power (that's 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000).

In his book *Science Speaks*, Peter Stoner shows the probability of one man fulfilling these eight prophecies. He writes, "suppose we take 1 in 10 to the 17th power in silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man. . ."

Stoner has further calculated that the odds of one man fulfilling 48 prophecies would be 1 in 10 to the 157 power (that's 1 with 157 "0's" behind it). Now imagine the odds of one man fulfilling more than 300 Messianic prophecies. A messianic impostor might have been able to engineer the fulfillment of a few of these prophecies, but the vast majority would be beyond his reach. Jesus' sinless

⁹⁷ Peter Stoner, M.S.: Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and Astronomy and Chairman of the Departments of Mathematics, and Astronomy at Pasadena City College until 1953. Professor Emeritus of Science, and Chairman of the Science Division, Westmont College, 1953-57. Stoner's calculations concerning the probability of one man fulfilling the major prophecies concerning the Messiah were done by twelve different classes representing some 600 university students.

character, His miracle-filled ministry, and His resurrection from the dead could be accomplished by no one other than the Messiah.

Number and date of New Testament manuscripts: When the number and date of Biblical manuscripts are compared to other ancient writings, they stand alone as the best-preserved literary works of all antiquity. There are thousands of Hebrew and Greek fragmentary and complete manuscript copies of the Old Testament dating as far back as the fourth century AD.⁹⁸

Since the discovery of *The Dead Sea Scrolls* in 1947 at Qumran, the oldest copies of the Old Testament now date to the third century BC. This means there are less than 300 years between the writing of the last book of the Old Testament (Malachi, c. 400 BC) and the copies of Old Testament manuscripts found among *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. The discovery of these scrolls also provide astounding evidence for the accuracy and reliability of copies of the Old Testament scriptures when compared to manuscripts dating more than a thousand years later to the Masoretic Period of the tenth century AD.

The manuscript evidence for the New Testament is even more dramatic, with approximately 5,700 complete or fragmentary Greek manuscripts, plus another 20,000 full or partial manuscripts of the New Testament in Latin, Coptic, Syraic, Armenian and other languages.

Although the original autographs have not been discovered or no longer exist, there are a few manuscript fragments of the New Testament that may actually date to the first century AD. These include the Magdalen fragment from Matthew 26 believed by some to date as early as AD 70; and Gospel fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that possibly date as early as AD 50. If these fragments were truly written during the first century (which is vigorously debated among textual scholars) they would have been written during the lifetime of the apostles.

The John Ryland Manuscript, a small fragment of a few verses from the Gospel of John dates to approximately AD 130, but is believed by some scholars to have been written as early as AD 80.

Unfortunately, critics scoff at the irrefutable manuscript evidence of the Bible, despite the fact that this evidence far surpasses the manuscript reliability of all other ancient writings whose authenticity and accuracy are never questioned in academic circles.

⁹⁸ The *Codex Vaticanus* (c. AD 325–350) and *Codex Sinaiticus* (c. AD 330-360) were the oldest known complete Greek manuscripts of the entire Old Testament. The *Aleppo Codex* (named after Aleppo, Syria where it was kept in a Jewish synagogue for 500 years) was the oldest complete copy of the entire Old Testament. In 1947, Syrian Muslims, who opposed the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel, burned down the synagogue where this codex was kept. It disappeared for approximately ten years, but re-emerged in 1958 when it was smuggled into Israel. Scholars have discovered parts of the codex were missing, although some missing pages and fragments of the *Aleppo Codex* have recently resurfaced.

Consider the follow:

Author	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	No. of Copies
Sophocles	496-406 BC	AD 1,000	1,400 Years	100
Aristophanes	450-385 BC	AD 900	1,200 Years	10
Herodotus	480-425 BC	AD 900	1,300 Years	8
Euripedes	460-406 BC	A.D. 1,100	1,500 Years	9
Plato	427-347 BC	AD 900	1,200 Years	7
Aristotle	384-322 BC	A.D. 1,100	1,400 Years	5
Demosthenes	383-322 BC	A.D. 1,100	1,300 Years	200
Caesar	100-44 BC	AD 900	1,000 Years	10
Tacitus	AD 100	AD 1,000	1,000 Years	20
Pliny	AD 61-113	AD 850	750 Years	7
Suetonius	AD 75-160	AD 950	800 Years	8
New Testament	AD 45-96	AD 130	< 40 Years	25,000

Homer's Iliad, the most renowned book of ancient Greece, is the second best-preserved literary work of all antiquity, with 643 copies of manuscripts discovered to date. However, in those copies there are 764 disputed passages of text, as compared to approximately 40 verses in all the New Testament manuscripts.⁹⁹ In fact, many people are unaware that there are no surviving manuscripts of any of William Shakespeare's 37 plays (written in the 1600's), and scholars have been forced to fill some gaps in his works.¹⁰⁰ This pales in textual comparison with the over 5,700 copies and fragments of the New Testament in the original Greek that, when taken together, assure us that nothing has been lost. Add to this, the *Patristic Witnesses* (the writings of the "church fathers" of the second and third centuries AD), and it is possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament, with the exception of only eleven verses. As mentioned in a previous lesson, New Testament manuscripts are between 99.5 to 99.9 percent free from any substantial variant, and the remaining variations in reading are of such little importance that their inclusion or rejection make no appreciable difference in the sense of the passage.

Impact of the Bible on civilization: It is an accepted fact that the Bible has had a great impact on art, music and literature, as well as on education, judicial systems and even science. Consider the following quotes:

- "We cannot read the history of our rise and development as a nation, without reckoning with place the Bible has occupied in shaping the advances of the Republic." – President, Franklin Roosevelt
- "The fundamental basis of this nation's laws was given to Moses on the Mount. The fundamental basis of our Bill of Rights comes from the teachings we get from Exodus and Saint Matthew, from Isaiah and Saint Paul." – President, Harry Truman

⁹⁹ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody, Chicago, Revised and Expanded 1986, 366-67.

¹⁰⁰ <http://shakespeare.com/faq/>, Dana Spradley, Publisher, 2002.

- "If you take out of your statutes, your constitution, your family life all that is taken from the Sacred Book, what would there be left to bind society together?" – President, Benjamin Harrison

The Bible has also had a transforming impact on the lives of millions of people all over the world. For example, the Psalmist wrote,

"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward." (Psalms 19:7-11)

Other Unique Qualities of The Bible

The Bible is unique in its production: The Bible is a harmonious and continuous message from beginning to end, whose main theme is the person and work of Jesus Christ. The story of redemption begins in Genesis and runs through Revelation. But consider the incredible diversity which produced the Bible:

- *Authors.* There were approximately forty authors who contributed to the Bible, including a king, a herdsman, a fisherman, and a tax collector. They cover the range from educated to uneducated, from rich to poor. The Bible was written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) on three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa) under all types of conditions.
- *Time span.* The Bible was written over a span of about 1,600 years (c. 1500 BC to AD 100).
- *Literary form.* The Bible includes narrative history, poetry, biography, drama, exposition, letters, parables, prophecies, sermons, narrative stories, and wisdom literature. In spite of this diversity and the controversial topics addressed in the Bible, the books of the Bible are intricately woven together.

The Bible is unique in its preservation: The Scriptures have survived through time, persecution, and criticism. There have been numerous attempts to systematically ban or eliminate the Bible, but all have failed. In AD 303, the Roman emperor Diocletian issued an edict throughout the Empire to stop Christians from worshipping, and to destroy all copies of their Scriptures. Twenty five years later, the Roman emperor Constantine called for fifty copies of the Bible to be prepared at the expense of the Roman government!

The Bible has been subjected to more abuse, perversion, destructive criticism than any other book. Yet it continues to stand the test of time while its critics are refuted and forgotten. French philosopher and atheist Voltaire (d. 1778) predicted that Christianity would be swept from existence and pass into history within one-

hundred years of his time.¹⁰¹ Fifty years after his death, the Geneva Bible Society used his home and printing press to produce and circulate Bibles. How true is the statement:

All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever. (1 Peter 1:24-25)

The Bible is unique in translation and circulation: No other book has enjoyed such popularity. It has been copied and circulated far more extensively than any other book in human history. The Bible is one of the first major writings to be widely translated and circulated throughout the world. For example, the first version of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures translated into Koine Greek¹⁰² was the Septuagint, which was completed in 132 BC and was distributed to Jewish communities throughout the known world. The first hand-written English language Bible was produced in 1382 by John Wycliffe (also spelled "Wycliff" & "Wyclif") who translated the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate¹⁰³. The first Bible to be printed with a movable type printing press was the Latin Vulgate in 1456, which is also known as the Gutenberg Bible (named after the inventor of the printing press). The first Bible to be printed in English on Gutenberg's movable type press was the work of William Tyndale (martyred in 1536).

Chapters and verses were added by man to the Scriptures centuries after the Bible was completed. The chapter divisions commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions in place around 1227. The Wycliffe English Bible was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since that time nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions. The Hebrew Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan in 1448. Robert Estienne, who was also known as Stephanus, was the first to divide the New Testament into standard numbered verses (c. 1555). Stephanus essentially used Nathan's verse divisions for the Old Testament. Since that time, beginning with the Geneva Bible (1599), the chapter and verse divisions employed by Stephanus have been accepted into nearly all Bible versions.

Today, there are more than 2,400 various translations of the Bible.¹⁰⁴ Of the 6,909 known languages in the world today, the New Testament has been translated into 1,168 of the most common languages while the entire Bible (Old and New

¹⁰¹ *Voltaire*: "Another century and there will not be a Bible on earth!"

¹⁰² *Koine Greek* (Ελληνιστική Κοινή, common Greek; or, the common dialect) is the popular form of Greek which emerged during the Post-Classical Period and continued for a thousand years (c. 300 BC–AD 300).

¹⁰³ The *Vulgate* is an early 5th-century Latin version of the Bible, and largely the result of the labors of Jerome, who was commissioned to make a revision of the old Latin translations. By the 13th century this revision had come to be called the *versio vulgata*, that is, the "commonly used translation", and ultimately it became the definitive and officially promulgated Latin version of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁰⁴ Data available as of 2009: Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc. (WBT) Translation Statistics. August 14, 2009 (<http://www.wycliffe.org/About/Statistics.aspx>)

Testament) has been translated into 438 languages. At the current time there are an additional 1998 translations programs currently in progress.

It has been said, no other book has known anything approaching this constant circulation.¹⁰⁵ The United Bible Society (a partnership of 145 national Bible societies) reported circulating 28.4 million copies of the entire Bible with an additional 300 million portions of the Scriptures distributed worldwide during 2008. Other organizations like The Gideon's distribute more than 56 million copies or portions of the Scriptures on an annual basis. In 2009, the World Christian Database¹⁰⁶ reported that approximately 83 million Bibles were distributed worldwide by various organizations.

In his classic work *Principles of Interpretation*,¹⁰⁷ Clinton Lockhart said, "no man that reads the Bible merely as a collection of proverbs or disconnected texts can ever understand the real nature of the sacred volume." Therefore, to properly interpret the Scriptures we must begin by developing a broad and thorough familiarity with the entire Bible.

The Evidence is Overwhelming

The evidence is actually overwhelming for believing that the Bible is truly the Word of God. This evidence is not simply *subjective* but also *objective* or *direct*. The evidence offered to support the claim that the Bible is the Word of God is *subjective* in the sense that it cannot be proven based on the *Scientific Method* discussed earlier, but is accepted as true because it is more than simply "circumstantial evidence."¹⁰⁸

The evidence offered to support the claim that the Bible is the Word of God is also *objective* or *direct* in the sense that it can be proven to be true based on facts that substantiate those claims. Subjective evidence for believing the Bible is the Word of God is seen in its impact on our lives and the world in which we live. Objective evidence for believing the Bible is the Word of God includes its unity, foreknowledge, and fulfilled prophecies.

Two Main Divisions of the Bible

The Bible is a single book of Scripture divided into two parts called Testaments (the Old Testament and the New Testament). The Hebrew word for testament is *berith*, meaning "covenant, compact or arrangement between two parties." The Greek

¹⁰⁵ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*.

¹⁰⁶ World Christian Database: Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton (Boston), Massachusetts

¹⁰⁷ Clinton Lockhart (1901), *Principles of Interpretation*, p. 233

¹⁰⁸ Circumstantial evidence indirectly proves a fact. It is evidence that requires or allows a tier of fact to make a deduction to conclude that a fact exists. This inference made from a tier of facts supports the truth of assertion (in criminal law, an assertion of guilt or of absence of guilt). By contrast, direct evidence supports the truth of an assertion directly—i.e., without need for any intervening inference.

word often translated as testament is *diathēkē*, although a more correct translation of the word is "covenant."

The Old Testament contains a total of thirty-nine books that are divided into five categories, and then arranged chronologically within each category. The five categories or divisions of the Old Testament are:

- *Law*: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- *History*: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther
- *Poetry*: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
- *Major Prophets*:¹⁰⁹ Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel
- *Minor Prophets*: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

The New Testament contains a total of twenty-seven books and letters that are also divided into a total of five categories. The five categories or divisions of the New Testament are:

- *Gospels*: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
- *History*: Acts
- *Pauline Epistles (Epistles of Paul)*: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews (the authorship of Hebrews is often credited to Paul)
- *General Epistles*: James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude
- *Prophecy*: Revelation

Three Periods of History

The Bible also covers three major periods of history, from creation to the present day, known as "dispensations." The three major dispensations are:

- *The Patriarchal Dispensation*: This dispensation began with creation (Genesis 1:1) and derived its name from "*pater*" (father), when God spoke directly to the patriarchs or fathers of families through visions, dreams and angels. There was no written law during this dispensation.
- *The Mosaic Dispensation*: This dispensation began when God made a special covenant made specifically with the nation of Israel, and derives its name from Moses, the lawgiver. God expanded the method of revealing His will to mankind from the patriarch of a family to the entire nation of Israel through Moses, through whom God set down a definite written code for social,

¹⁰⁹ The terms "Major Prophets" and "Minor Prophets" does not refer to the prophet's importance, but rather to the length of the written text of each prophet. Larger volumes are designated as "Major Prophets" while smaller volumes are designated "Minor Prophets."

political and religious life – all centered around the Ten Commandments and contained in the "Book of the Covenant" (the written commandments of God given to Moses) was called "*the covenant*" Moses' day.

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of *the covenant* which the Lord has made with you according to all these words." (Exodus 24:7-8)

- *The Gospel (or Christian) Dispensation*: This dispensation began when the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ was first preached on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and will continue until the end of time. Jesus Christ is now recognized as having all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). The chief characteristic of this age is that God turned from revealing His will to family and nation to revealing His will to the entire world. God's will is revealed through the gospel of Christ contained in the pages of the New Testament. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose by providing eternal redemption from sins through His blood for all mankind.

Five Great Covenants¹¹⁰

In form, a *covenant* is an agreement between two people and involves promises on the part of each to the other. The concept of a covenant between God and His people is one of the central themes of the Bible. In the Biblical sense, a covenant implies much more than a contract or a simple agreement between two parties.

The word for "covenant" in the Old Testament also provides additional insight into the meaning of this important idea. It comes from a Hebrew root word that means "to cut." This explains the strange custom of two people passing through the cut bodies of slain animals after making an agreement (cf. Jeremiah 34:18). A ceremony such as this always accompanied the making of a covenant in the Old Testament. Sometimes those entering into a covenant shared a meal, such as when Laban and Jacob made their covenant (cf. Genesis 31:54).

Abraham and his children were commanded to be circumcised as a "sign of covenant" between them and God.

"This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you." (Genesis 17:10-11)

At Sinai, Moses sprinkled the blood of animals on the altar and upon the people who entered into covenant with God.

¹¹⁰ David Padfield, *Five Great Bible Covenants*, article used by author's permission (edited) (<http://padfieldconsulting.com/salvation/bible-covenants.html>)

So Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the Lord has said we will do." And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words." (Exodus 24:3-8)

The Old Testament contains many examples of covenants between people who related to each other as equals. For example, David and Jonathan entered into a covenant because of their love for each other – this agreement bound each of them to certain responsibilities.

Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. (1 Samuel 18:3)

The remarkable thing is that God is holy, omniscient, and omnipotent; but He consents to enter into covenant with man, who is feeble, sinful, and flawed.

God's Covenant With Noah:

Centuries before the time of Abraham, God made a covenant with Noah, assuring Noah that He would never again destroy the world by flood (Genesis 9).

Noah lived at a time when the whole earth was filled with violence and corruption. Yet, Noah did not allow the evil standards of his day to rob him of fellowship with God. He stood out as the only one who "walked with God" (Genesis 6:9), as was also true of his great-grandfather Enoch (Genesis 5:22). "Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations" (Genesis 6:9). The Lord singled out Noah from among all his contemporaries and chose him as the man to accomplish a great work.

When God saw the wickedness that prevailed in the world (Genesis 6:5), He told Noah of His intention to destroy the ancient world by a universal flood. God instructed Noah to build an ark (a large barge) in which he and his family would survive the universal deluge. Noah believed God and "according to all that God commanded him, so he did" (Genesis 6:22).

Noah is listed among the heroes of faith. "By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

With steadfast confidence in God, Noah started building the ark. During this time, Noah continued to preach God's judgment and mercy, warning the ungodly of their approaching doom. Peter reminds us of how God "did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5).

Noah preached for 120 years, apparently without any converts. At the end of that time, "when. . . the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah. . . eight souls were saved through water" (1 Peter 3:20).

People continued in their evil ways and ignored his pleadings and warnings until the flood overtook them. When the ark was ready, Noah entered in with all kinds of animals "and the Lord shut him in" (Genesis 7:16), cut off completely from the rest of mankind.

Noah was grateful to the Lord who had delivered him from the flood. After the flood, he built an altar to God (Genesis 8:20) and made a sacrifice, which was accepted graciously, for in it "the Lord smelled a soothing aroma" (Genesis 8:21).

The Lord promised Noah and his descendants that He would never destroy the world again with a universal flood (Genesis 9:15). The Lord made an everlasting covenant with Noah and his descendants, establishing the rainbow as the sign of His promise (Genesis 9:1-17).

Another part of the covenant involved the sanctity of human life, i.e., that "whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man" (Genesis 9:6). Every time we see a rainbow today we are reminded of that agreement – this covenant has not been done away with. As long as God still sends rainbows after a storm, capital punishment will still be a part of God's law for the human race.

God's Covenant With Abraham:

In making a covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless his descendants and make them His own special people – in return, Abraham was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel through which God's blessings could flow to the rest of the world.

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abraham's story begins with his passage with the rest of his family from Ur of the Chaldeans in ancient southern Babylonia (Genesis 11:31). He and his family moved north along the trade routes of the ancient world and settled in the prosperous trade center of Haran, several hundred miles to the northwest.

While living in Haran, at the age of 75, Abraham received a call from God to go to a strange, unknown land that God would show him. The Lord promised Abraham that He would make him and his descendants a great nation (cf. Genesis 12:1-3). The promise must have seemed unbelievable to Abraham because his wife Sarah was childless (Genesis 11:30-31; 17:15). Abraham obeyed God with no hint of doubt or disbelief.

Abraham took his wife and his nephew, Lot, and went toward the land that God would show him. Abraham moved south along the trade routes from Haran, through Shechem and Bethel, to the land of Canaan. Canaan was a populated area at the time, inhabited by the war-like Canaanites; so, Abraham's belief that God would ultimately give this land to him and his descendants was an act of faith.

The circumstances seemed quite difficult, but Abraham's faith in God's promises allowed him to trust in the Lord. In Genesis 15, the Lord reaffirmed His promise to Abraham. The relationship between God and Abraham should be understood as a covenant relationship – the most common form of arrangement between individuals in the ancient world. In this case, Abraham agreed to go to the land that God would show him (an act of faith on his part), and God agreed to make Abraham a great nation (cf. Genesis 12:1-3).

In Genesis 15 Abraham became anxious about the promise of a nation being found in his descendants because of his advanced age – and the Lord then reaffirmed the earlier covenant. A common practice of that time among heirless families was to adopt a slave who would inherit the master's goods. Therefore, because Abraham was childless, he proposed to make a slave, Eliezer of Damascus, his heir (Genesis 15:2). But God rejected this action and challenged Abraham's faith: "'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'" (Genesis 15:5).

Abraham's response is the model of believing faith: "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). The rest of Genesis 15 consists of a ceremony between Abraham and God that was commonly used in the ancient world to formalize a covenant (Genesis 15:7-21). God repeated this covenant to Abraham's son, Isaac (Genesis 17:19). Stephen summarized the story in the book of Acts (Acts 7:1-8).

The Mosaic Covenant:

The Israelites moved to Egypt during the time of Joseph. A new Pharaoh came upon the scene and turned the Israelites into common slaves. The people cried out to the God of their forefathers. "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exodus 2:24). After a series of ten plagues upon the land of Egypt, God brought the Israelites out "of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand" (Exodus 32:11).

Three months after leaving the land of Egypt, the children of Israel camped at the base of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1). God promised to make a covenant with the

Israelites (Exodus 19:3-6). Before they even knew the conditions of the contract, the people agreed to abide by whatever God said (Exodus 19:8).

The Ten Commandments are the foundation of the covenant, but they are not the entirety of it.

And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image — any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:1-14)

After giving the first ten commands, the people asked the Lord to speak no more (Exodus 20:18-20). Moses then drew near to the presence of God to hear the rest of the covenant (Exodus 20:21). After receiving the Law, Moses spoke the words of the covenant to all of the people, and the people agreed to obey (Exodus 24:4).

Moses then wrote the conditions of the covenant down, offered sacrifices to God, and then sprinkled both the book and the people with blood to seal the covenant (Exodus 24:8). This covenant between God and the people of Israel was temporary. God promised a day when He would make a new covenant, not only with Israel but also with all mankind.

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,

says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This covenant was between God and the people of Israel – we are not a party in this contract (and never have been). Moses told the Israelites:

"The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive." (Deuteronomy 5:2-3)

God's Covenant With David:

Another covenant was between God and King David, in which David and his descendants were established as the royal heirs to the throne of the nation of Israel (2 Samuel 7:12-13). This covenant agreement reached its fulfillment when Jesus, a descendant of the line of David, was born in Bethlehem. The gospel of Matthew starts off by showing Christ was "the Son of David" (Matthew 1:1), and thus He had the right to rule over God's people. Peter preached that Jesus Christ was a fulfillment of God's promise to David (Acts 2:29-36).

The Covenant Of Christ:

The New Testament makes a clear distinction between the covenants of the Mosaic Law and the covenant of Promise. The apostle Paul spoke of these "two covenants," one originating "from Mount Sinai," the other from "the Jerusalem above" (Galatians 4:24-26). Paul also argued that the covenant established at Mount Sinai was a "ministry of death" and "condemnation" (2 Corinthians 3:7, 9).

The death of Christ ushered in the new covenant under which we are justified by God's grace and mercy – it is now possible to have the true forgiveness of sins. Jesus Himself is the Mediator of this better covenant between God and man (Hebrews 9:15). Jesus' sacrificial death served as the oath, or pledge, which God made to us to seal this new covenant.

The "new covenant" is the new agreement God has made with mankind, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The concept of a new covenant originated with the promise of Jeremiah that God would accomplish for His people what the old covenant had failed to do (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 11:7-13). Under this new covenant, God would write His Law on human hearts.

When Jesus ate the Passover meal at the Last Supper with His disciples, He spoke of the cup and said, "this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Luke's account refers to this cup as symbolizing "the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). When Paul recited the account he had received concerning the Last Supper, he quoted these words of Jesus about the cup as "the new covenant in My blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

The Epistle to the Hebrews gives the new covenant more attention than any other book in the New Testament. It quotes the entire passage from Jeremiah 31:31-34

(Hebrews 8:8-12). Jesus is referred to by the writer of Hebrews as "the Mediator of the new covenant" (Hebrews 9:15; 12:24). The new covenant, which is a "better covenant. . . established on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6), rests directly on the sacrificial work of Christ.

The new covenant accomplished what the old could not, i.e., the removal of sin and cleansing of the conscience (Hebrews 10:2, 22). The work of Jesus Christ on the cross thus makes the old covenant "obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13) and fulfills the promise of the prophet Jeremiah.

Conclusion

Through the centuries there have been countless attempts to discredit the Bible as being the inspired Word of God. And yet, it has withstood those attacks and is still read and believed by millions all over the world. It is unlike any other book ever written – including the Qur'an (Koran) which is believed by millions of Muslims to be the words of Mohammed, who claimed to be a prophet of the God (Allah).¹¹¹ But unlike the Qur'an, the Bible has a wealth of internal and external evidences that prove it to be inspired. No other book, whose adherents claim is inspired of God, offers this kind of irrefutable evidence.

Years ago, poet John Clifford wrote the following poem about the enduring nature of God's divinely inspired word, the Bible.

The Anvil Of God's Word

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door
 And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime;
 When looking in, I saw upon the floor,
 Old hammers worn with beating years of time.
 "How many anvils have you had," said I,
 "To wear and batter these hammers so?"
 "Just one," said he; then with a twinkling eye,
 "The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."
 And so, I thought, the anvil of God's Word,
 For ages, skeptics blows have beat upon;
 Yet, though the noise of falling blows was heard,
 The anvil is unharmed - the hammers gone.

- John Clifford

¹¹¹ Muslims believe the Qur'an is the divine guidance and direction for all mankind, and consider the original Arabic text to be the final revelation of God.

Using Common Sense to Interpret the Scriptures

Chapter Six

Probably no other church in New Testament times was troubled by strife and division more than the church at Corinth. When the apostle Paul penned his first epistle to the church he stressed the necessity of finding common ground upon which the church could stand. He wrote:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10-11)

How is it possible for members of a congregation to all "speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions" among us? Although, on the surface, this seems like an impossibility, the solution is actually rather simple.

The only way we can be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" requires that we each properly interpret God's message – the Bible. However, to accomplish that task we must first all agree to some basic truths. Without achieving some sort of common ground all efforts to be of the same mind and the same judgment regarding Biblical teaching will simply fail.

Basic Truths and Principles We Must Accept

To find common ground doctrinally, there are some basic truths and principles we must all accept. These basic truths and principles are absolutely essential – without finding agreement here all further efforts to be of the same mind and judgment will simply fail. Therefore, we must all believe:

- *God is:* To properly understand and interpret the Bible we must first believe in the existence of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and that He has communicated His will to mankind. Unless we believe that God is and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him, there is simply no point in pursuing a study of the Scriptures or discussing the teachings of the Bible except for its intrinsic value. (Hebrews 11:6)
- *The Bible is the divinely inspire Word of God:* We must not only believe that the Bible is the product of God's communication to man, but that the Bible came through the process of divine inspiration. (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

- *The Bible is inerrant:* The word inerrant means "freedom from error or untruths." Synonyms include "assuredness, objective certainty." It is important to bear in mind that belief in the inerrancy of the Bible is in keeping with the character of God. If God is true (Romans 3:4), and if the Scriptures come from God, then the Scriptures, being the product of God, must also be true. This is why the Psalmist affirms, "The entirety of Your words are truth." (Psalm 119:160a; John 17:17)
- *The Bible is complete and final:* The Scriptures given by the inspiration of God must be recognized as a body of truth that is final and complete. Our faith rests on the historical, objective revelation of divinely inspired men (who were moved by the Holy Spirit) to make us sufficient and thoroughly equipped for every good work. This means we rule out all so-called latter-day prophecies, seers, or any other forms of new revelation. (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- *The Bible is capable of being understood:* The Scriptures, as God's revelation to man, are not only capable of being understood but must be understood. The word "revelation" means to "reveal, uncover, lay bare." Therefore, the divine truths contained in the Bible are meant to be uncovered so that any hidden or symbolic meaning may be clearly seen. (Ephesians 3:1-5; 5:17)
- *The Bible is authoritative and must be obeyed:* Since the Scriptures are God's final divinely inspired revelation to man, and since they are inerrant, complete and capable of being understood, it goes without saying that they must be obeyed. God does not give us the luxury of simply ignoring His will, nor does He leave it to us which commands and precepts we will follow and which we will reject. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10)

Using Common Sense in Studying the Bible

Once we have achieved common ground on these basic doctrinal truths, it's imperative that we approach a study of the Bible with the same logic and common sense as we would any other book or subject.

The Bible is not some mystical writing that cannot be understood. It was written in the common language of the day with the idea that it would be understood by the average reader. Psalm 119 frequently speak of the precepts and commandments of the Lord (the Scriptures) being the source of understanding and knowledge.

You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. (Psalms 119:98-99)

Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. (Psalms 119:104)

Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. (Psalms 119:129-130)

The apostle Paul never had any doubts about first century Christians understanding what he wrote:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets. . . (Ephesians 3:1-5)

Even Biblical prophecies were meant to be understood and properly interpreted. While some may appear to be beyond the ability of most to properly interpret, that's simply not the case. What purpose would be served in giving a prophetic warning that could not be understood. Prophecies, like all other Biblical statements, simply demand the student of the Bible employ common sense in arriving at an interpretation that harmonizes with truth taught elsewhere in God's book. Yet, sadly, many approach a study of the Bible as though the Scriptures are highly figurative, symbolic, and cloaked in some mystical language (or even code) which only the "enlightened" may properly interpret.

Violations of Common Sense that Lead to Misunderstanding

The following are some of the more common ways in which people cast aside common sense in approaching a study of the Bible. Any one of these will result in misinterpreting or misapplying the meaning of a passage, which ultimately leads to misunderstanding and doctrinal error.

- *Prejudice:* Prejudice is simply defined as having a spirit of partiality or personal bias that leads the Bible student to "color" his conclusions and interpretations based on his own personal likes and dislikes, thus never arriving at a true meaning.
- *Preconceived ideas and opinions:* This is simply the practice of assuming or presupposing something to be truth based on one's past beliefs or misunderstanding of Biblical truth. It is the practice of using (misusing) the Bible to *sustain* one's beliefs rather than using the Bible to *obtain* doctrinal truth.
- *Close-mindedness:* Those who close their minds to receive the truth of God's Word do so because they believe they have already arrived at a proper understanding of the truth. As a result, they refuse to consider the possibility that their understanding may be flawed. This attitude is just the opposite of the "readiness" of mind for which the Bereans were praised (Acts 17:11).

- *Wishful thinking:* This is where one's wishes or desires for something to be truth are so strong that those desires cloud out all objectivity, and lead one to believe something simply on the basis of the strength of their belief. It has been said: "Faith may move mountains, but only wishful thinking creates mountains where none exist."
- *Hasty generalizations:* This is the fallacy of simply jumping to erroneous conclusions before all the facts are in. The most common mistake here is to draw broad and sweeping conclusions from a particular set of facts or truths that may have no relevance, or that may be completely unrelated.
- *Appeal to human authority:* While every Bible student recognizes the value of gaining insights from scholarly sources, the wise student of the Bible also recognizes those sources to be human and fallible. It would be completely erroneous to assume that even the most renowned scholar always lays aside his own prejudices when expressing his views about a Biblical teaching. Those who appeal to human authority to support their conclusions may be doing so simply because they can find no Biblical authority elsewhere.
- *Appeal to the popular:* This is perhaps the most dangerous of all approaches to studying the Bible. It assumes the majority is always right – which rarely, if ever, is true. Citing what the majority may believe ignores the warning of Jesus that "broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." (Matthew 7:13)

Common Sense that Contributes to Understanding

Violating the simple rules of exercising common sense is not the only source of confusion and doctrinal error. Attitude plays a major role as well. Our attitude toward studying the Bible will largely determine whether we will come to a proper and correct understanding of God's will.

The following are some basic attitudes we must cultivate toward the Bible if we expect to truly benefit from a study of God's word.

- *Be prayerful:* We should approach every study of God's word in prayer asking for the wisdom to properly handle the Scriptures with the respect they deserve. We must always pray that our hearts will be open to receive, understand and properly apply the truth.
- *Be willing to learn:* This simply means we approach every study of the Word of God with an open mind, allowing the truth of Scriptures to enlighten our understanding rather than forcing our conclusions and opinions upon the Word.
- *Be trusting:* We must have complete trust and confidence in the reliability and truthfulness of the Bible. This assumes we are studying from a reliable translation of the Scriptures, and not simply from a paraphrased version of the Bible. Most paraphrased versions were written by those who are not academically qualified to properly interpret the Scriptures from the original Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew languages. As a result, paraphrased versions

often teach doctrinal error simply because the writer interpreted and paraphrased the standard Biblical text to fit his own personal biases and prejudices.

- *Be reverent:* Reverence is defined as "a respectful, submissive disposition of mind, arising from affection and esteem, from a sense of superiority in the person revered."¹¹² Reverence for the Word of God is essential to learning, since a respectful and submissive attitude toward the Scriptures will lead the student to refrain from forcing his own opinions on the text and simply allow the Bible to speak for itself.
- *Be honest:* One of the greatest hindrances to properly interpreting and understanding the Bible is intellectual dishonesty. Intellectual dishonesty is defined as, "the advocacy of a position which the advocate knows or believes to be false or misleading" or "the conscious omission of aspects of the truth known or believed to be relevant in the particular context." The most simple definition of this practice is "twisting (wresting) the Scriptures" simply to win an argument or defend an indefensible position. (2 Peter 3:14-16)
- *Be obedient:* The purpose behind a study of the Bible should be to properly understand God's Word so that we may faithfully do what He says. A mere academic understanding of the Word of God benefits no one. Our attitude toward the Scriptures should be that of the psalmist when he wrote, "Blessed are those who *keep* His testimonies, who *seek* Him with the whole heart!" (Psalm 119:2)

Common Sense in Interpreting the Scriptures

One of the most frustrating moments in discussing the Bible with others comes when one is shown from the pages of their own Bible some divine truth with which they completely disagree. As you attempt to explain what the Word clearly teaches, they quickly come back with, "That's your interpretation!" When one makes that statement, they often fail to realize the implications.

- They are implying the conclusions you have reached are your own personal interpretation, and they have just as much right to interpret the passage their own way.
- They are also implying one conclusion is as good as another – everyone is entitled to their own personal opinion.
- They are implying the Bible is really too vague to come to any concrete understanding of a controversial doctrinal teaching.
- Finally, they are implying truth is not absolute – it is relative.

Some will even go so far as to completely misquote Peter's teaching concerning the origin of divine prophecy.

¹¹² *The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia*

Peter wrote:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

The way many interpret this passage is to claim no one is entitled to their own "private interpretation" of the Scriptures – meaning you have no right to interpret the Scriptures and arrive at your own conclusions if your conclusions go against the accepted doctrinal teachings of their church. Mormons are notorious for misapplying this passage when the fallacies of their doctrinal beliefs are exposed. They will immediately claim you are not entitled to your own "private interpretation," or they will falsely assert that the Bible has been grossly mistranslated over the centuries to the point that no one can trust its accuracy or infallibility.

However, the point Peter made in 2 Peter 1:19-21 has nothing at all to do with how we interpret the Scriptures today. He claimed "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." This simply means the prophets of old never spoke their own personal thoughts or ideas when prophesying. They spoke the words of God as they were revealed to the prophet by the Holy Spirit. False prophets do just the opposite. In Jeremiah's day the Lord warned the people:

"Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:16)

False prophets have always spoken from their "own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord." Therefore, Peter wanted his readers to be assured that the "prophetic word" they have received came through prophets who did not give their own "private interpretation," but who "spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Furthermore, Peter urged his readers to "heed" the "prophetic word" because false prophets, with their false and destructive teachings, were rampant in the church of that day.

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. (2 Peter 2:1-3)

Peter concluded his second epistle with one final warning about false teachers and how they twist and pervert the Scriptures – especially passages that are difficult to understand.

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:14-16)

While Peter admits some of Paul's deep theological teachings are "hard to understand," they are not impossible to understand. It is only the "untaught and unstable" who twist the Scriptures to their own destruction. Therefore, to keep ourselves from being swayed by the seeming logic of false teachers, we must not only be able to properly understand the Scriptures, we must also be capable of recognizing false teaching when we hear it. To do this we must know how to properly interpret the Scriptures.

Finding a Method to Interpret Scripture

It seems only logical that anyone who loves the Word of God would want to find a reliable, logical, systematic, common sense method of interpreting the Scriptures. However, that's not always the case. Some people prefer to have no method of interpreting the Bible at all, and there are several reasons why.

- *Some claim extra-Biblical revelation or insight.* These see no need to have a systematic method of interpreting the Scriptures, or even a reliable, logical method of studying the Bible, because they believe God gives them special understanding and insight apart from the Word. They misapply passages that speak of being "led by the Spirit" (Romans 8:14), of God revealing truths through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-14), and of how we receive wisdom and knowledge through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:8-9), etc. It is simply impossible to discuss the Scriptures with someone who believes their understanding of the Word comes directly from God.
- *Some don't want to hear the truth.* These are those whose lives are out of harmony with God's word, and they want to live a lifestyle of their own choosing; or who don't want anyone to challenge their long-held personal and doctrinal beliefs.
- *Some believe truth is relative.* These believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. They believe what some may have considered truth at the time the Bible was written, is not necessary truth today – or they believe what may be truth for *you* may not necessarily be truth for *them*. In other words, everyone is allowed to either ignore the teachings of the Bible, or interpret the Scriptures any way we choose as long as we don't attempt to impose our own personal belief system on others.

- *Some believe the Scriptures are mystical and incapable of being completely understood.* These see the Bible as a book of symbolic and highly figurative teachings – from cover to cover – and that nothing is to be taken literal. They believe the Bible is purely subjective and should be interpreted based solely on one's own personal beliefs, ideals, opinions or culture. (Similar to believing truth is relative.)

Harmful Methods of Interpretation

Unfortunately, the methods used by some to interpret the Scriptures are as dangerous as having no method at all. These methods are solely responsible for numerous false doctrines that have led countless numbers into religious and doctrinal error. Sadly, some of these methods are actually finding acceptance among members of the Lord's church, which explains why we continue to face problems with religious division even among our own numbers.

- *The Rational Method (Modernism).* D. R. Dungan, in his book *Hermeneutics*, describes this rule of Biblical interpretation as "very nearly the rule of unbelief."¹¹³ The philosophy of *Rationalism*, in its modern sense, is "any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification."¹¹⁴ Essentially, this philosophy contends that reason has precedence over other ways of acquiring understanding and knowledge. In other words, rather than using reason and common sense as a *tool* for understanding, this position makes human reasoning the *supreme authority* in determining right from wrong, and truth from error. When applied to interpreting the Bible, this method of interpretation states all passages of the Bible are to be interpreted in such a way as to conform to rational human reasoning. This means only those parts of the Bible that are deemed as "reasonable" are accepted, and those that are deemed "unreasonable" (such as the virgin birth of Jesus, miracles, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and his post-resurrection appearances) are either discarded or labeled as myth.
- *The Literal Method.* As a reaction to the *Rational Method*, proponents of the *Literal Method* contend everything in the Bible must be interpreted in a very exact and literal manner. It forces various teachings of the Bible to be taken literally even when it is obvious they are symbolic and figurative in nature. This method also fails to recognize that many teachings in Scriptures must be interpreted in light of the times and the customs of the people, or of the particular circumstances under which they were delivered. The *Literal Method* also fails to consider that some teachings in the New Testament are stated in the form of principles rather than law. The result of this approach is that the real meaning of the message becomes lost to the need to keep details that are perceived as either *implied commands* or obligatory in nature.
- *The Apologetic Method.* This method is similar to the *Literal Method* in that it maintains everything in Scripture is a revelation directly from God – no

¹¹³ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 67

¹¹⁴ A.R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*

matter who is speaking, or what may have prompted their remarks. Dungan says, "this view binds its adherents to everything, and anything that can be found in the Bible, and regards it all as from God."¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, this unreasonable method stands opposed to one of the most basic rules of interpretation: *know who is speaking*. Was the one speaking inspired, or even claim to be? Was the person truthful in what they said, or even competent to speak on a particular subject? For example, Job's wife said, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9) Was this from God?

- *The Allegorical Method*. To counter the *Literal* or *Apologetic* rules of interpretation, this method looks for a symbolic or hidden spiritual meaning in the text when there is no reason or justification for doing so. Dungan says, "Interpreting by this method is not *exegesis*, but *eisegesis* – they do not obtain the meaning of the text, they thrust something into it."¹¹⁶ Some facts revealed in the Bible are to simply be taken at face value, with no symbolic or figurative meaning attached. Taken to an extreme, this method of interpretation promotes the idea that a person has the right to draw out of various passages of the Bible the lessons he feels are true for him. Rather than drawing meaning *from* the text, this method forces an unwarranted interpretation *into* the text. A classic example of this is to give a spiritual, symbolic or figurative interpretation to every person, creature or act described in the parables of Jesus. The result of this method of interpretation creates a situation where the Bible student can no longer see the forest for all the trees.
- *The Mystical Method*. A not-too-distant cousin to the *Allegorical Method* is this rule of interpretation which attaches a mystical meaning to everything in the Scriptures. This method contends that only those who have a "holy calling" and are "in tune with God" can properly interpret the deep spiritual meaning of a passage. This rule of interpretation also supports the belief that a literal interpretation of a passage is not only inferior, but dangerous, and that the real meaning and hidden truth of a passage is often altogether different from what is obviously stated. Dungan states, "If the Bible does not mean what it says, there is no way by which we can know what it does mean."¹¹⁷
- *The Extra-Biblical Method*. This method is somewhat similar to the *Mystical Method* with a few exceptions. The *Extra-Biblical* method of interpretation doesn't necessarily attach a "mystical" or deeply "spiritual" meaning to every teaching, but contends that only those who are "spiritually enlightened" or led through a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, can properly understand the true meaning of the text. This method also allows for a very personal interpretation of the Scriptures regardless of whether the Bible supports that interpretation. This view supports the belief that "revelation" is not static but on-going through time, and argues that God continues to reveal great spiritual truths today through modern-day revelation.

¹¹⁵ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 71

¹¹⁶ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 60

¹¹⁷ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 60

- *The Proof-Texting Method.* Sometimes called the *Dogmatic Method*, this method of interpretation begins with an assumption or a presupposition and proceeds to find some isolated passage to prove that assumption, even if the passage is taken completely out of context, or an unwarranted and unjustified interpretation is forced into the passage ("proof-texting"). Unfortunately, this method makes it possible for one to "prove" almost anything by twisting and perverting the Scriptures. Rather than use the Bible to "prove" doctrinal views or teachings, the reader should draw from the Scriptures a correct understanding of doctrinal teaching. The Bible was not designed to *prove* doctrine, but rather to *reveal* the doctrine of God to hearts that are open and receptive to its teaching.

So, what is the proper way to interpret the Scriptures? How can we study the Bible and understand the Word of God in such a way as to be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment?" (1 Corinthians 1:10-11)

The Inductive Method

This method of interpreting the Scriptures demands that we use our God-given reason and intellect to examine all the facts as they are revealed in a text or related texts, and then to draw a sound, logical conclusion from those related facts. The inductive method does not isolate one passage as a "proof text", nor does it force an interpretation on the text that may be subject to bias and pre-conceived ideas, but simply allows the Bible student to draw the meaning from the text itself. It sees the Bible as a source of divine revelation which can be understood by even the most basically educated. Although the Scriptures do not use the term "inductive method," we will see where this technique for understanding the text was used by Jesus and others as a means of revealing Biblical truth.

Inductive method of reasoning was first proposed by Roger Bacon (1214-1294), an English monk and philosopher, whose views were condemned by the Franciscans as heretical. When we consider the history of Roman Catholicism, which imposed an ecclesiastical or hierarchical method of interpreting the Bible in keeping with church dogma, it's easy to understand why Bacon met with such stern opposition.

Truth Must Always Harmonize With Truth

The *Inductive Method* of reasoning first demands all the facts a matter be gathered, and then allow the facts to speak for themselves. It operates on the premise that *truth always harmonizes with truth*; and a fact which does not harmonize with other facts cannot be true. The *Inductive Method* of reasoning differs from *Deductive Reasoning* in that the latter only allows one to come to a *valid conclusion* based on certain premises. Deductive reasoning does not seek to determine truth, but merely whether a conclusion is *valid* or *invalid*. Furthermore, deductive reasoning assumes the premises upon which a valid conclusion is based are true. However, the apparent flaw with deductive reasoning is that a premise can be false and the conclusion still valid, but not sound.

For example, I have an automobile that runs on gasoline. Therefore, I could say:

1. I have an automobile.
2. All automobiles run on gasoline.
3. Therefore, my automobile runs on gasoline.

However, even though the conclusion is valid (my automobile *does* run on gasoline) the premise that "all automobiles run on gasoline" is false. Some automobiles run on diesel or other hydrocarbon fuels such a propane, while others are electric powered. Therefore, while the conclusion may be valid, it is not based on sound logic.

Furthermore, deductive reasoning may lead to a *hasty generalization* in which both premises may be true, but the conclusion is invalid. For example:

1. I have a red car.
2. I have a car that runs on gasoline.
3. Therefore, red cars run on gasoline.

The preceding example is one in which both *premises are true* (I have a red car, and my car runs on gasoline). However, the *conclusion is invalid* because it makes a generalization that every red car runs on gasoline. That is simply not true.

Deductive reasoning, when applied to interpreting the Bible, can likewise lead to invalid conclusions based on flawed logic. For example, the disciples of the Lord were meeting in an upper room when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:13-15; Luke 22:10-13). The church at Troas observed the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week and met in an upper room (Acts 20:7-12). Therefore, it could be argued that Christians must partake of the Lord's Supper in an upper room. This reasoning, however, fails to take into consideration that the upper room in both cases is coincidental and immaterial to the institution and observance of the Lord's Supper. Only those employing an *Allegorical, Mystical, or Literal* method of interpreting the Scriptures would arrive at the false conclusion that the Lord's Supper must be observed in an upper room.

Essentially, *deductive reasoning* allows one to draw erroneous conclusions from faulty premises, or to simply read too much into a text and force it to teach something that is neither relevant or material. When this occurs the Bible student is forced to accept a conclusion that "proves too much" and binds a particular practice God has not bound. Conversely, when the *inductive method* of interpretation is applied to the Bible, it requires all the facts of a particular matter be gathered through an intense study of the Word of God, and then allows those facts to lead to a conclusion which is in complete harmony with all else the Scriptures teach on the subject. Biblical truth must always harmonize with Biblical truth.

Bacon's inductive method demanded free and completely unrestrained access to the Bible, and permitted one to study and search the Scriptures for himself to draw his own conclusions. It is understood, of course, that one's conclusions would be in complete harmony with other related Biblical truth. Oddly enough Bacon did not *invent* inductive reasoning, he simply *rediscovered* it.

Jesus Used the Inductive Method of Reasoning

In Luke chapter 10 Jesus was confronted by a certain lawyer who stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25) Jesus simply asked this man to draw his own conclusions based on his own studies of the law. Therefore, Jesus asked, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:26) This is a good example of inductive reasoning in which one is asked to arrive at a conclusion based on all the relevant facts of the matter – facts that are in complete harmony with all other related Biblical truth.

In Luke chapter 24 Jesus again encouraged the use of inductive reasoning. On the day Jesus was resurrected, two men were walking toward the small village of Emmaus and were confused over reports they heard regarding the empty tomb. As the men continued on their journey Jesus joined them, although they didn't recognize Him. When they expressed their confusion over why Jesus had been crucified, the Lord responded:

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

Jesus knew there was only way these men could understand why He had to suffer all these things. He needed to begin with Moses and the Prophets and expound to them everything the Scriptures taught concerning Him. They needed to see all the facts of the matter before they could arrive at a proper understanding of the truth. This is inductive reasoning.

Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:44-47)

Like the two men on the road to Emmaus, the Lord's disciples also needed to see all the facts written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Him. Jesus used inductive reasoning by simply introducing all the factual evidence from the Scriptures about Himself so that His followers could understand the truth

and arrive at the only conclusion to which the evidence pointed – Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Other Examples of Inductive Reasoning

In Acts chapter 8 Philip joined an Ethiopian eunuch who was returning from Jerusalem, and who was reading from the prophet Isaiah. When the eunuch asked of whom the prophet spoke, we're told:

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (Acts 8:35-37)

The only way the Ethiopian eunuch could arrive at a proper understanding of whom the prophet was speaking was for Philip to begin at the passage and show that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the only way the eunuch could understand his need to be baptized was for Philip to also explain the purpose behind the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was inductive reasoning in which all the facts about Jesus were presented, and were in perfect and complete harmony with all other facts revealed in Scripture about Him.

In Acts chapter 16 Paul and Silas were imprisoned for preaching Christ, and for liberating a demon possessed woman. At midnight, when a great earthquake sprang open the prison doors, the keeper of the prison feared everyone had escaped and was about to take his own life. Paul immediately assured him everyone was still there. We're then told:

Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. (Acts 16:29-34)

How was it possible for an unbeliever and his family to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" and to "believe in God?" The answer is simply that Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." The only way the Philippian jailer and his family could truly "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" was to be given all the facts concerning Jesus and His mission that are revealed in "the word of the Lord." That's inductive reasoning.

A Word About Hermeneutics

Chapter Seven

The word *hermeneutics* is not only difficult to pronounce, it seems to evoke anxiety in the hearts of some simply because they do not understand what the word really means or why it's so important.

The easiest way to understand *hermeneutics* is to look at the word's origin. The term comes from Greek mythology and is derived from "Hermes," the messenger of the gods and inventor of language. His Roman counterpart is "Mercury." Simply defined, hermeneutics is the study of the theory of interpretation, or the practice of interpretation. When applied to the Scriptures, hermeneutics is the methodology or practices used to interpret the Word of God.

Although the word hermeneutics does not appear anywhere in the Bible, a proper understanding of hermeneutics will make the difference between truth and error. The serious Bible student will not only seek to properly understand the term and the concept behind it, but will diligently apply these concepts in his everyday study of the Word of God. The apostle Paul instructed Timothy:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 – NIV)

The admonition to be one "who correctly handles the word of truth" means to handle the Scriptures "accurately" or, as the King James and New King James versions say, "rightly dividing the word of truth." The words "rightly dividing" literally mean "to make a straight cut" or "to proceed by straight paths, hold a straight course. . ."¹¹⁸

This method of handling the Scriptures is in clear contrast to those who mishandle the Word of God by intentionally, or even unintentionally, twisting and perverting the Scriptures to mean something God never intended. Paul told the Corinthians:

But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the Word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. (2 Corinthians 4:2-4)

¹¹⁸ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

Notice, Paul emphatically stated that he and those with him never handled the Word of God "deceitfully" – literally meaning "to corrupt, especially by mingling the truths of the Word of God with false doctrines or notions, and so handling it deceitfully."¹¹⁹ While the message of the gospel was "veiled" to some, Paul said the gospel was unable to be understood by "those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe."

The apostle Peter gave a similar warning about those who twist and pervert the simple message of the gospel. Peter urged his readers to look forward to the salvation in Christ:

"...as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Peter admitted that some things Paul had written are "hard to understand." Unfortunately, those difficult portions of Paul's epistles are frequently mishandled by "untaught and unstable people" who "twist" and pervert these truths. The words "untaught and unstable" refer to people who are simply ignorant of the truth of God's word and are prone to vacillate or waver back and forth when it comes to doctrinal teachings.

Therefore, those who accept the Bible as the Word of God believe God revealed His Word in a manner that it could be understood and properly interpreted by everyone who reads it. The apostle Paul affirmed the clarity of his words to the church at Corinth:

"For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end. . ."
(2 Corinthians 1:13).

Since the Scriptures were written in human language by "holy men of God" who "spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21), then we must conclude there is only one correct interpretation of any given Biblical passage – the meaning God intended when He "breathed" His Word into the human author.

If this view is correct, it follows then that there must be only one valid and true interpretation. While a particular passage may have many *applications*, it must have only one *meaning* - the one the Author (through inspiration of the Holy Spirit) intended.

¹¹⁹ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

The Relationship Between Exegesis, Interpretation and Hermeneutics

Traditionally, hermeneutics has been seen as part of a triangular relationship with exegesis and interpretation, although the distinctions between these are not always that clear.

- *Exegesis*: (from *ex*, meaning "out of," and *egeisthas*, meaning "to guide or lead"): the "application of the principles of hermeneutics in bringing out the meaning of any writing which might otherwise be difficult to understand."¹²⁰ In reference to Bible study, exegesis is the process one uses to determine the meaning of the Biblical text. Since the ultimate goal is to "draw out of" the text a proper and correct interpretation and meaning, it is imperative that we first gather all additional relevant passages dealing with the same subject. Only then can we begin to apply other rules of interpretation that will lead us to a proper understanding.

The opposite of exegesis ("to draw out") is *eisegesis* ("to draw in"). *Eisegesis*, which is often used as a derogatory term, implies the reader is importing their own meaning or interpretation into the text. While exegesis attempts to discover the meaning of the text objectively, *eisegesis* is the process of importing a subjective meaning into the text.

- *Interpretation (or exposition)*: generally the inductive analytical process by which one determines the meaning and application of the text for the present age. It has been suggested that exegesis is more concerned with the *meaning* of the Biblical text, while interpretation is more concerned with the *practical application* of the text. The interpretation process is set forth in a systematic set of rules based on a reasonable and logical approach to understanding the Word of God (see: *Fundamental Principles of Interpretation*, p. 131).
- *Hermeneutics*: "the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill and not by mechanical imitation."¹²¹ This means rules of interpretation are never intended to have precedence over sound reasoning and logic. Hermeneutics can also be defined as the rules and methodology one applies in moving from exegesis to interpretation. "Whereas hermeneutics seeks to establish the ruling principles of biblical interpretation, exegesis seeks to fix the meaning of individual statements and passages."¹²²

Why is this so important?

Obviously, the principles or methods one uses to interpret the Scriptures will determine, to a large extent, how one sees and understands the entire Bible and its teaching. Unless we can agree upon the principles or methods of interpretation we

¹²⁰ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 1

¹²¹ Bernard Ramm (1987), *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 1

¹²² *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 204-205

will come to different conclusions concerning some of the most basic doctrinal truths.

This was the primary reason for the rapid spread of Gnosticism in the first several centuries following the establishment of the church and the completion of the Bible. Toward the latter part of the second century AD (or CE) two divergent philosophies of interpreting the Scriptures had clearly emerged – the *Antiochene*¹²³ and the *Alexandrian*¹²⁴ schools of interpretation.

- *The Alexandrian school*: This method, influenced by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) and his student Origen (c. 185–254), interpreted the Old and New Testament in such a way as to harmonize with accepted Greek philosophy. As a result, this method emphasized more of an allegorical, symbolic and mystical approach to interpreting the Scriptures – which became the standard Roman Catholic interpretative method of the Middle Ages.

Finding its roots in the humanistic philosophies of the Greek philosopher Plato, this method did not deny the inspiration of the Scriptures, but argued that one should not interpret anything as literal if it is deemed by rational human reasoning to be irrational, contradictory, unworthy of the assumed character and nature of God, or unworthy of the character and nature of the Bible.

Philo, the leading proponent of the Alexandrian method, contended that the Scriptures can be interpreted literally with respect to specific commands, but the highest and best method of interpreting Scripture must be allegorically, looking for the deeper symbolism behind the biblical account – which is a very subjective method of interpretation.

- *The Antiochene school*: This method of interpretation finds its roots going back to the great rabbi Hillel (c. 110 BC–AD 10) who not only contended that the Scriptures were the product of divine inspiration, but advocated interpreting the Scriptures in light of its context, by comparing one passage with others, and by accepting the clear meaning of a given text over the more obscure meaning. Unfortunately, Hillel often made his rules of interpretation arbitrary leading to exegetical conclusions which the text could not support. Refined over the next few centuries, the literal method included examining the Scriptures in its grammatical and historical sense, and occasionally employing a typological¹²⁵ method of interpretation. But the standard interpretation given to a passage was literal, unless some other method was clearly intended.

With this stress on the literal and historical scope of interpretation, the Antiochene method became the hermeneutical standard for the Reformation Movement. Martin Luther (AD 1483–1546) favored the literal meaning of biblical statements over the traditions of Roman Catholicism, as evidenced by

¹²³ *Antiochene* school of interpretation, based in Antioch of Pisidia.

¹²⁴ *Alexandrian* school of interpretation, based in Alexandria, Egypt.

¹²⁵ *Typology* is the study of types and antitypes, or the figurative relationship between persons or events.

his famous quote, "I ask for Scripture, and you give me the fathers." John Calvin (AD 1509–1564) not only believed in the supreme authority of the Scriptures, but contended that the Scriptures are the best interpreter of Scripture.

Carried to the extreme, the literal method of interpreting the Scriptures has led to many issues, among which are dispensationalism (millennialism), faulty interpretation of Biblical prophecy, and an imbalance between obedience verses grace.

Two Fundamental Causes of Misinterpretation

So, why is the Bible so frequently misinterpreted. There are essentially two fundamental reasons behind a failure to properly understand and interpret the Scriptures.

Depending on others to interpret the Scriptures for us:

This is probably the main reason for confusion, disharmony and doctrinal error. When we rely on others to interpret the Scriptures for us, without investigating on our own to see whether or not their interpretation is correct, we leave ourselves open to the interpretative bias and poor or inadequate scholarship of others. This is especially true when we place an inordinate amount of trust in that person to accurately interpret the Scriptures.

In the days of Jesus one prominent religious group believed they were not only the defenders of the Jewish faith, they also believed they were the true interpreters of the Law of Moses. They were the scribes and Pharisees. When the Pharisees and chief priests sent officers to arrest Jesus for what they considered was blasphemy, the officers returned empty-handed because they had never heard anyone speak like Jesus. The reaction of the Pharisees was predictable.

Then the Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." (John 7:45-49)

The typical manner in which the Pharisees interpreted the Scriptures was in a very literal sense, but also in keeping with oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. The result of this method of Biblical interpretation not only obscured the true essence of the Law, but eventually led to elevating traditions above the Law itself. This is why Jesus condemned the Pharisees for transgressing and rejecting the commandment of God to keep their traditions (Matthew 15:3; Mark 7:9), and making the commandment of God of no effect by their traditions (Matthew 15:6; Mark 7:13). This is also why Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees, "blind leaders of the blind" (Matthew 15:14) and "blind guides" (Matthew 23:16, 24).

Relying on traditional interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) is still a practice of Jewish rabbis today. Following the destruction of Jerusalem in

AD 70, and over the next two centuries, generations of oral traditions were eventually collected and recorded in the *Talmud* which is a compilation of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history. If there are any questions about the meaning of a text, the Talmud becomes the primary source of interpretation.

The practice of allowing others to interpret the Scriptures is also a common practice among Roman Catholics. Consider the following statements regarding how Catholics interpret Scripture:

"In the exercise of their pastoral ministry, bishops, as successors of the apostles, are the first witnesses and guarantors of the living tradition within which Scripture is interpreted in every age. 'Enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they have the task of guarding faithfully the word of God, of explaining it and through their preaching making it more widely known' (Dei Verbum, 9; cf. Lumen Gentium, 25). . .

The Spirit is, assuredly, also given to individual Christians, so that their hearts can "burn within them" (Lk 24:32) as they pray and prayerfully study the Scripture within the context of their own personal lives. This is why the Second Vatican Council insisted that access to Scripture be facilitated in every possible way (Dei Verbum, 22; 25).

This kind of reading, it should be noted, is never completely private, for the believer always reads and interprets Scripture within the faith of the church and then brings back to the community the fruit of that reading for the enrichment of the common faith."¹²⁶

Relying in Bishops, who are allegedly "enlightened by the Spirit of truth," Catholics trust these men to explain the Scriptures to them "through their preaching." However, their interpretation of Scripture will always conform to the "living traditions" of the church. Although Catholics are encouraged to read and study the Scriptures on their own, they must interpret the Scriptures "within the faith of the church" – another way of saying, the Scriptures must be interpreted in keeping with the traditions and religious dogma of the Roman Catholic Church.

Failing to study with open hearts, receptive to the truth:

The New Testament writers like the apostle Paul often revealed it is the *spiritual state* of the reader, not the *intellectual state*, that prevents a clear understanding of Scripture. Speaking of his own Jewish brethren who continue to reject Christ, Paul wrote:

"But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.

¹²⁶ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*: Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993 (as published in *Origins*, January 6, 1994)

Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."
(2 Corinthians 3:14-16)

"But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them." (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

It is important to keep in mind that Paul's letters were read to the entire church – to all present, even Greeks with little understanding of Jewish culture. Scripture is able to be understood by all – by unbelievers who read it sincerely seeking truth, and by believers who read it seeking to have a deeper understanding of God's will for their lives. Therefore, it's imperative that we know how to properly handle the Word of God to find the one true interpretation, and avoid unintentionally twisting the Scriptures to our own destruction. But equally important is the need to know when others have mishandled the Word of God, forcing their own interpretations and meaning into the text, and thereby "handling it deceitfully."

Fundamental Principles of Interpretation

The ability to interpret the Scriptures accurately requires that we approach the process in a logical and reasonable manner, employing some basic, fundamental axioms.¹²⁷ Clinton Lockhart, a Christian, in his renowned work *Principles of Interpretation*,¹²⁸ offers the following fundamental axioms:

- *The true object of speech is the impartation of thought.* All speech, whether spoken or written, has but one objective – to convey the thought of the originator to the recipient. This suggests that the divinely inspired Scriptures are God's thought to those to whom they were directed. The Bible is the mind of God revealed.
- *The true object of interpretation is to apprehend the exact thought of the author.* While thoughts are conveyed in words, it becomes necessary for the recipient to logically process those words to arrive at a proper understanding of the thought conveyed. With respect to the Scriptures, they must be spiritually discerned.
- *Language is a reliable medium of communication.* The Bible is not only the mind of God revealed, which must be interpreted accurately to arrive at a proper understanding, it is written in the common languages of mankind – principally Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.
- *Usage determines the meaning of words.* Usage is simply the means by which we determine the meaning of a word by understanding how it was used by those to whose language the word belonged. Since the meaning of words change over time and from culture to culture, the words of Scripture

¹²⁷ Axioms are defined as an accepted set of general principles that are self-evident, or a well-formed formula or procedure that needs no proof.

¹²⁸ Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation*, (Delight, AR: Gospel Light), revised edition (1915)

must be interpreted in keeping with the meaning those words had to the ancients who used them. In applying this principle to defining biblical words, we must go back to the original meaning of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek.

- *Two writers do not independently express thought alike.* This takes into consideration that everyone expressed thoughts based on their education, life experiences, culture, and their own unique modes of expression. This accounts for the stylistic differences in biblical literature.
- *Every writer is influenced by his environment.* "Inspiration is simply one of the influences of the writer's environment. Inspiration did not remove the writers of the Bible from their natural surroundings, but merely enlightened them to meet the demands of their circumstances."¹²⁹
- *Any writing is liable to modification in copying, translating, and the gradual change of a living tongue.* Capturing the original meaning of any given passage of Scripture is the painstaking work of critical analysis of the biblical text from existing manuscripts, and translating that meaning into contemporary language – which is constantly fluid. This problem is only compounded by the fact that none of the autographs (the original manuscripts) have been found and may be lost to history.
- *By one expression, one thought is conveyed and only one.* This axiom simply means expressions are intended to convey a single thought. With reference to the biblical record each writer or speaker, in conveying his thoughts through the medium of language, intended only one meaning. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the reader or listener to determine that single thought.
- *The function of a word depends on its association with other words.* A word with more than one possible meaning must be interpreted in the context of the words that accompany it. Lockhart maintains "a lexicographer determines the meanings of words mainly by examining all their occurrences in literature and noting the association of each word."
- *A correct definition of a word substituted for the word itself will not modify the meaning of the text.* A good example of this is the word baptism or baptize. The biblical usage of the word describes an action, but not the element. In other words, it describes the act of immersion, submersion, dipping, plunging or overwhelming, but it does not define the element into which one is immersed, submersed, dipped, plunged or overwhelmed. In the context of salvation from sins the element was always water. Therefore, passages such as Acts 2:38, "Repent, and let every one of you be *baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. . ." could just as easily be translated "Repent, and let every one of you be *immersed* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."
- *One of two contradictory statements must be false, unless corresponding terms have different meanings or applications.* For example, consider the statement of Jesus to the Pharisees regarding tradition: "you have made the

¹²⁹ Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation*, p. 126

commandment of God of no effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15:6). Compare that with Paul's comment regarding tradition: "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Jesus condemned the Pharisees for following tradition, and yet Paul demands withdrawing from those who do not keep the tradition received from Paul. How do we rationalize this? Simply. Jesus was speaking about the "tradition of men" (Mark 7:8), or as Peter described it, "tradition from your fathers" (1 Peter 1:18), verses apostolic tradition identified by the apostle Paul as "traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

- *Truth must accord with truth; and statements of truth apparently discrepant can be harmonized if the facts are known.* Consider the alleged discrepancy regarding the hour Christ was crucified. At what hour was Christ crucified? Mark's account reads: "Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him" (Mark 15:25). However, the gospel of John reads: "Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' But they cried out, 'Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar!' Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away." (John 19:14-16).

This alleged contradiction is resolved when we understand that the Jews counted time by hours beginning at 6:00am (sunrise). Therefore, the third hour would correspond to 9:00am. The Romans, on the other hand, counted time by hours beginning at 12:00am (midnight). John recorded that Jesus was in Pilate's court at the sixth hour, or 6:00am. It was during that hour that the Jews and the chief priests debated with Pilate regarding the kingship of Jesus, and for Pilate to finally deliver Jesus to be crucified. It is quite reasonable to assume that it took approximately the next two hours for Jesus to be mocked by the soldiers (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20), led through the streets of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31), and eventually arrive at Golgotha where He was crucified at 9:00am – the third hour of the day (Jewish time), or the ninth hour of the day (Roman time).

- *An assertion of truth necessarily excludes that to which it is essentially opposed and no more.* Lockhart calls this the "law of opposition." However Lockhart adds, "A proposition purporting to set forth a truth must not be supposed to exclude everything as false that it does not contain."¹³⁰ When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved," they replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:30-31). The assertion of truth, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household," opposes the notion that salvation could be possible without believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is essential to salvation. However, the truth that the

¹³⁰ Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation*

jailer and his household must believe to be saved does not exclude as false the acts of repentance, confession and baptism as likewise being essential for salvation. In the same manner, the truth affirmed by Jesus that, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16) does not likewise exclude as false the need to repent and confess Christ before men.

- *Every communication of thought, human and divine, given in the language of men, is subject to the ordinary rules of interpretation.* Essentially, we must apply the same rules for interpreting the thoughts communicated by God in Scripture as we would to interpret the thoughts communicated by man in any literary work. There is not a separate set of rules for interpreting Scripture. Since God used the language of man to communicate His thoughts in Scripture, we must apply the same rules as we would for any other communication in the language of man.

With these fundamental principles in mind, we have the foundation upon which we can expand our understanding of hermeneutics and take the first steps to ensure we are properly handling the Word of God.

More About Hermeneutics

Chapter Eight

Basic Rules of Interpretation

In following lessons, we will examine specific rules for interpreting words and sentences, figures of speech, and the language of prophecy. However, first it is important to establish a few basic rules for interpreting the Scriptures from a much broader perspective. These basic rules are as follows:

- *Inspiration*: Is the writer or speaker inspired by God, and thereby moved by the Holy Spirit to infallibly and inerrantly declare the things they have written or spoken? In other words, did the writer or speaker reveal truths in words and manner of speech that is specifically directed by God, or is the writer or speaker expressing his own opinions, or merely repeating traditional beliefs of men that have no basis in Scripture?

There are numerous examples of both in Scripture. The Pharisees claimed the man blind from birth whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath could not have been healed miraculously for, they said of Jesus, "We know that this Man is a sinner" (John 9:24). The formerly blind man replied, "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him" (John 9:30-31). There is no evidence this man was inspired, but was merely voicing an opinion which was commonly accepted by Jews of that day based on several Old Testament passages (Psalms 66:18; Isaiah 1:14-15; Job 27:9; Jeremiah 11:11; Ezekiel 8:18; Micah 3:4; Zechariah 7:13). However, these passages affirm the prayers God will not hear are those offered in mockery, or when one willingly persists in committing sin and refuses to repent.

From a reading of Paul's first letter to Corinth, we can see he had been asked several questions concerning marriage – specifically the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever, the marriage of virgins, and the remarriage of widows. In many instances Paul gave inspired council which he received directly from the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:10, 17, 39). But on other occasions Paul identified his comments as his own personal advice and counsel as an apostle of Christ (1 Corinthians 7:6, 8, 25-38, 40).

- *Audience*: To whom was the writer or speaker directing their comments? While the Scriptures are timeless and were written for our learning and admonition, we must remember that the Bible was not written to us. The Scriptures were specifically directed to people living in Biblical times. Therefore, we must interpret a passage in light of the author's intent and purpose, and the meaning it had to those who were the recipients. Failure to do so will result in misapplying certain commands and promises to ourselves

when, in fact, they were never intended for us.

When Jesus met with His disciples on the evening of His betrayal He promised to send the Holy Spirit (Comforter or Helper) who would guide them into all truth and reveal things yet to come (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). That promise was not made to us. It was made exclusively to the apostles to whom Jesus was speaking on that occasion. Therefore, we cannot expect for the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth and reveal things yet to come.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth concerning spiritual gifts, he addressed the a problem concerning the misuse and abuse of those gifts. Women who prayed and prophesied like men must be veiled (1 Corinthians 11:5). Spiritual gifts exercised without love are useless (1 Corinthians 13:1-13). Those with the gift of speaking in tongues (foreign languages) must have someone present to interpret (1 Corinthians 14:6-19). There must be no more than two or three tongue-speakers, and they must speak one at a time (1 Corinthians 14:26-28). There must be no more than two or three prophets speaking, and they likewise must speak one at a time (1 Corinthians 14:29-33). Since none of these spiritual gifts exist in the church today, these admonitions serve only as divinely inspired principles of humility, and the need for us to do all things in our assemblies decently and in an orderly manner (1 Corinthians 14:40).

- *Historical Background:* The Bible student must also have some understanding of the society and culture of the times in which the Scripture was written. For example, much of Paul's writing on abstaining from meats (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:25) would make no sense at all unless we understood the problem that posed in his day. Much, if not all, of the meat sold in the markets of Corinth had been offered as a sacrifice to some pagan god, and the excess was then sold to the general public. This is obviously not an issue faced by Christians in modern times, but it posed a significant ethical and moral issue for some Christians living in first century Corinth – especially when the practice violated the conscience of another Christian.

Although we are not concerned with eating meat offered to idols today, the principles of guarding against offending the conscience of a weak brother are suitable in any age. If we can have in our mind what the writer had in his mind when he wrote – without adding any of our own cultural or societal biases – then we can capture the true thought of the passage and render an accurate interpretation.

- *Context:* The meaning of words and phrases must be gathered from the context in which they appear. Every word must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. Many passages will not be understood at all, or completely misunderstood, without carefully considering the context. A good example is the Mormon practice of using 1 Corinthians 8:5b, "...for there be gods many and lords many..." as a "proof text" of their doctrine of polytheism (that man may rise to the level to become a god). However, a simple reading of the whole verse in the context of the whole

chapter (where Paul calls these gods "so-called"), plainly demonstrates that Paul is not teaching polytheism.

The context of Scripture must also be considered in stages or degrees. The first question a Bible student must ask is, "What is the overall context of the letter or book?" This takes into consideration the author, the audience, and the historical and cultural background of the complete text. The next question should be, "What is the overall theme of the letter or book?" In other words, what is the central message the writer was attempting to convey to his audience? It should be possible to express the central theme in one concise sentence. From there, it is important to define the context of sub-themes and how each of these relate to the central theme of the writing. And finally, the Bible student must understand the context of words and sentences.

Consider the following contextual analysis of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus.

- *Overall context:*
 - *The author:* Paul, including all we know about the apostle, as well as when and where this letter was written.
 - *The audience:* The church at Ephesus, including how the church came to be, principle members of the Ephesian church, and Paul's involvement with this church.
 - *Historical context:* The history of Ephesus, including political, economic, cultural and religious influences, as well as the political, economic and religious influences in the surrounding region.
- *Overall theme:* The riches found in Christ.
- *Sub-themes:*
 - The believer's riches in Christ (Chapters 1-3)
 - Our spiritual possessions in Christ (1:3-14)
 - ♦ Our spiritual riches from the Father (1:5-6)
 - ♦ Our spiritual riches from the Son (1:7-12)
 - ♦ Our spiritual riches from the Spirit (1:13-14)
 - ♦ First prayer: For enlightenment (1:15-23)
 - Our spiritual position in Christ (2:1-22)
 - ♦ Raised and seated on the throne (2:1-10)
 - ♦ Reconciled and set into the temple (2:11-22)
 - ♦ Second prayer: For enablement (3:1-21) with verses 2-13 as a parenthesis.
 - The believer's responsibilities in Christ (4:1-6:20)
 - Unity (4:1-16)

- ♦ Maintaining unity of the Spirit with proper attitudes (4:1-7)
- ♦ Edifying the body of Christ by grace given to us (4:8-16)
- Purity (4:17-5:21)
 - ♦ Walk not as other Gentiles (4:17-32)
 - ♦ Walk in love (5:1-6)
 - ♦ Walk as children of light (5:7-14)
 - ♦ Walk as wise (5:15-21)
- Harmony (5:22-6:9)
 - ♦ Husbands and wives (5:22-33)
 - ♦ Parents and children (6:1-4)
 - ♦ Masters and servants (6:5-9)
- Victory (6:10-20)
 - ♦ Standing strong in the power of the Lord (6:10-13)
 - ♦ Equipped with the whole armor of God (6:14-20)
- Conclusion (6:21-24)
- *Definition:* What do specific words mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of words. Define the terms as they were used in the timeframe in which they were written, and then keep to the definition. The Bible student should conscientiously stay with the literal, plain and simple meaning of words. To properly define terms will require a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon, Bible dictionary (such as Vine) and Word Studies (such as Robertson, Vincent, or Wuest) to ensure that the proper sense of the English translation is clearly understood.

A classic example of the need to properly understand the meaning of a word is the Greek definition of the English word "love." The Greeks had no less than four words for love: *eros* (erotic or sexual love), *philo* (love between friends, or brotherly love), *storge* (family love, as between siblings), and *agape* (the highest and purest form of love, such as divine love).

Understanding these differences is crucial to understanding the exchange between Jesus and Peter following the Lord's resurrection (John 21:15-19). Peter, who had denied Christ three times, is now called upon by the Lord to affirm his love. Twice Jesus used the word *agapás* (agape) to ask Peter if he loved him, and each time Peter replied with the word *filoó* (philo). Jesus asked Peter the third time if he loved him, but instead of using the word *agapás* (agape) He used the *filoó* (philo). Once again Peter affirmed his love for Christ with *filoó* (philo). From this we gather that Peter could not honestly confess to having the highest and greatest form of love for Christ. However, when Christ asked the third time if Peter's love for him was truly a deep friendship, Peter was grieved. Peter's humbling experience of having denied Christ seems to have left the apostle with the painful realization that the depth of his love was not as great as he originally thought. And yet, in

each instance Jesus reaffirmed Peter's usefulness in the Lord's kingdom, and urged him to remain a faithful follower of the Christ.

- *Usage*: It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms found in the Old Testament were clearly understood by the people of the time – just as the words of Christ were clearly understood by those to whom Jesus spoke. The majority of the New Testament was likewise written in the environment of Greek-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture. Therefore, it is critically important to interpret those words and idioms in light of the culture in which they were written. Attempting to give an interpretation shaded by our own preconceived ideas about a given culture, or shaded by our own cultural biases, will result in an inaccurate and potentially harmful interpretation.

For example, the term "betrothed" ("espoused" KJV) in the Jewish culture of the first century conveyed an entirely different meaning than it would in our modern Western culture. A betrothal in Jewish culture was a solemn pledge or oath of faithfulness and purity between a man and woman eventually leading to marriage. It is more than simply an engagement (which in Western cultures can be made and broken at a whim). Betrothal was a formal ceremony conducted in the presence of witnesses, similar to a marriage ceremony, and which bound the couple to one another by an oath to marry once the customary amount of time had passed for the couple to make arrangements and preparation for a life together. The betrothed couple were often referred to as "husband" and "wife" (e.g. Matthew 1:18-21) or "betrothed wife" (e.g. Luke 2:4-5). The vows of betrothal could only be broken through an act of infidelity, and by a formal writing of divorce (e.g. Matthew 1:19).

- *Logic*: Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of sound reasoning is essential. We need to ensure the interpretation we're giving makes sense. The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason – it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other literary work by applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis. As Bernard Ramm said: "What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence. . . interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic. . . may have improper notions of implication and evidence. Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence." (Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956)
- *Precedent*: We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. For example, the word "baptism," which has been Anglicized from the Greek word "baptizo" means to immerse, dip, plunge, submerge or overwhelm. Furthermore, the practice of a full immersion in water as a means of ritual purification was widely practiced by the Jews in the days of Jesus (known as *mikveh*), and even before – just as it is observed today in both Orthodox and Conservative Jewish synagogues.

Therefore, to conclude that baptism for the remission of sins ("the answer of a pure conscience toward God" – 1 Peter 3:21) is anything other than full immersion in water would be without any precedent whatsoever. While there are other kinds or forms of baptism mentioned in the New Testament (e.g. baptism of the Holy Spirit, baptism of fire, etc.) none of these are associated with purification from sin.

Just as a judge must study previous cases to determine a legal precedent, the Bible student must use Biblical precedents to determine if there is enough evidence to support an alleged doctrine. Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12 who were called "more fair-minded" because they searched the Scriptures to determine if there was any precedent to support Paul's claim of a resurrected Christ.

- *Inference*: An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence, or a conclusion from a given fact or premise. Such inferences are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by *relevant*, *competent* and *satisfactory* evidence.
 - *Relevant evidence* means that which is relevant and material, or essential, in binding a particular practice. For example, consider whether there is any relevance of an "upper room" in the observance of the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12; Acts 20:7-8). The "upper room" is not relevant because it is immaterial to the purpose and symbolism behind the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. There is no symbolism to the "upper room."
 - *Competent evidence* means the evidence is sufficient to lead to only one conclusion – such as the resurrection appearances of Jesus being sufficiently competent to lead the brothers of Jesus to only one conclusion: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
 - *Satisfactory evidence* means the amount or weight of proof (sometimes called the "preponderance of the evidence") is such that it would satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt. Jesus used this rule when he offered satisfactory evidence concerning the resurrection of the dead in Matthew 22:23-33 to the unbelieving Sadducees.
- *Unity*: A proper interpretation of Scripture must be done in the light of all the Scriptures teach on the same subject. Every interpretation must be consistent with the rest of Scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity – the triune nature of God. While the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, it is consistent with the teaching of the whole of Scripture (e.g. the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit). Each person of the Godhead is referred to individually as "God." And yet, the Scriptures also teach "the LORD is one" (eg. Deuteronomy 6:4). Does this mean the Scriptures contradict themselves? Not at all. The Hebrew word "one" in Deuteronomy 6:4 is "echad" defined as "united. . . together or altogether." It is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 when speaking of husband and wife becoming "one flesh." Therefore, the Scriptures are in perfect unity when speaking of the triune nature of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- *Application:* Interpretation of Scripture has a purpose – to understand God’s Word more accurately with the goal of making a proper application of the text to our own lives and situations. This must be our ultimate purpose. Simply engaging in a study of the Scriptures as an intellectual exercise, or treating the Word as just another great piece of ancient literature, profits nothing. James, the Lord’s brother, explains the futility of this kind of study.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25)

Some Common Exegetical Fallacies

Unfortunately, each of the principles of interpretation we have considered may be abused in various ways. Fortunately, the remedy for the resulting misinterpretation is generally as simple as recognizing which principle has been abused and the proper reapplication of that principle to the passage in question. Here are some common exegetical fallacies resulting from the misuse of hermeneutic principles.

- *Taking Figurative Language Literally:* When Jesus says that He is the "door," few would take Him literally. Some, however, take figurative language, such as Jesus "sitting at the right hand of the Father," to mean that the Father has a literal right hand (and thus, a physical body). The phrase "at the right hand" was a figurative expression in Semitic cultures in Biblical times, signifying a position of authority, prestige and honor. It did not mean that the one exalted literally sat next to the one doing the exalting. The *Literal Interpretation Principle* does not mean we take every word in the Bible literally, but rather that we approach it as we would any other book, taking figurative phrases, hyperbole, poetic personifications, and other figures of speech into account in our interpretation. However, unless there is a clear and valid reason for interpreting a passage in a figurative way, we must assume it was meant to be interpreted literally.
- *Over-Contextualizing:* This is the fallacy of taking the context of a passage and making it say more than the context reasonably allows or permits. One example is found in Isaiah 44:8. Despite the fact that God was condemning idol-worship, some view the Lord's declaration that He does not "know" of any other God like Him to suggest the possibility of other subordinate gods. However, when considering the context of this passage, God is chastising those who worship idols and affirming the fact that none of the gods being worshipped are like Him – they are all false gods.

Another example is Acts 20:7 in which the church at Troas met on the first day of the week to break bread (observe the Lord's Supper). The passage reads, "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and

continued his message until midnight." (Acts 20:7-8) By means of an example this gives us the authorized day on which the Lord's Supper is observed ("the first day of the week"), and by means of inference this implies a regular occurrence on a weekly basis, and further implies no other day is authorized for observing the Lord's Supper. The context of Acts 20:7-12 shows this event took place in the evening hours of the first day of the week. This would have been Sunday evening and not Saturday evening, as some suppose, since Troas was a Roman city and would have counted a day from midnight to midnight rather than use the Jewish method of sundown to sundown. The context also suggests only one assembly of the saints in Troas on this first day of the week. This would be customary during a period of history when the first day of the week was given no special significance as a "day off." However, to force the context to suggest that a second assembly or a second serving of the Lord's Supper during a second assembly would be unscriptural is to over-contextualize this passage. It would be making the passage teach more than it was intended to teach.

While we must safeguard against taking words or phrases out of context, we must also guard against taking an absolute statement and forcing it to teach more than the context allows.

- *Allowing the Implicit to Explain the Explicit:* Jesus is called "firstborn" on several occasions in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:15, He is called the "firstborn of all creation." The Jehovah's Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals see these verses as evidence that the Son of God was a created being – the first creation of Jehovah. However, passages such as John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16 state that the Son pre-existed all things. The Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals argue that we must interpret these verses in light of Jesus as "the firstborn." Conversely, those who support the concept of a triune God argue that the "firstborn" passages must be viewed in light of John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16, and thus "firstborn" must be a figurative title.

The word "firstborn" has a figurative as well as a literal connotation. Even if taken literally, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals typically do not believe that the Son of God was literally born, and therefore believe that it *implies* the creation of the Son in some fashion. Other passages that speak of Jesus being "firstborn" are Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 1:6 and Revelation 1:5.

In figurative language, the term "firstborn" represents that which is most excellent. This expression is applied to Jesus in several New Testament passages – all of which point to Jesus' high standing and His unique relationship to His Father and the Church. The phrase, "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5), refers to Jesus' resurrection, which assures victory over sin and death to all who trust in and obey Him. Paul's description of Christ as "firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29) refers to His exalted position as head of the Church. Because of His atoning death and resurrection, Jesus Christ heads a new spiritual body – the church (Colossians 1:18). The author of Hebrews foresees a joyful gathering of "the church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23).

John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16 *explicitly* state that the Son existed before all things, and indeed that all things came into existence through Him. Allowing the *implicit* to explain the *explicit* - the *possible* to explain the *certain* - is not a sound interpretive principle. Scripture is able to interpret Scripture as long as clarity explains ambiguity, and not the other way around.

- *Modern Day Revelation:* Some groups claim God continues to reveal Himself in various ways to an elite group of spiritually mature and/or gifted individuals. Some, like Latter Day Saints (Mormons), believe modern-day revelation has produced new Scriptures. When contradictions between these so-called "revelations" and the Bible are pressed, these groups often respond that God's revelation is progressive, and are new or revised doctrines for the modern era. But so-called progressive revelation flies in the face of Jude 3 (the faith "once delivered"), and can never be used to overthrow the principle of the harmony of Scripture.
- *Harmonization by Denial:* The Bible declares that Jesus was a man (John 1:14; 1 Timothy 2:5; etc.). It also calls Him God (John 1:1; 20:28; etc.). God says in Hosea 11:9 that He is not man. Many skeptics believe these verses present an apparent contradiction, and therefore resolve this alleged contradiction by denying the fully Deity of Christ. They either favor grammatical arguments that remove the attribution of "God" to Jesus, or they argue that He must be a lesser divinity and not truly God in the fullest sense. It is certainly exegetically valid to deny what Scripture does *not* explicitly or implicitly affirm. However, to deny what Scripture *affirms* both explicitly and implicitly is not a sound hermeneutical methodology. If we truly believe in the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), we should then allow Scripture to shape our theology rather than our theology shape our interpretation of Scripture. When the Bible says Christ is both Man and God, we should allow these truths to shape our view of Christ's nature, rather than deny one or the other.
- *Problems Relating to Literary Genre:* To properly take genre into consideration we must first understand the genre in its historical context. In most cases, this is not difficult. However, some genres, such as "parables," offers some significant challenges.

The word parable is a transliteration of the Greek word "parabole" and comes from two Greek words, "para" (translated "beside") and "ballein" (translated "to throw"). Literally, the word parable means "to throw beside," or "to place beside, or to place together for the purpose of comparing, or making a comparison." They can usually be identified by the use of the word "like," as in Jesus' statement, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," or "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven" (Matthew 13:31, 33). In these examples, Jesus was comparing the kingdom of heaven to the attributes or characteristics of a mustard seed and to leaven (yeast). Some have defined the word parable as "a story by which something real in life is used as a means of presenting a moral thought." Others have said a parable "puts the known next to the unknown so that we may learn." They are usually a story or a narrative taken from nature or from everyday human experiences.

Perhaps the simplest definition of all is that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

On occasions, Jesus provided the interpretation of the parable. But on other occasions, we are left to interpret the parable for ourselves. When attempting to interpret parables, there are a few extremes to avoid. First, avoid the extreme of reading too much into the parable. Some make the mistake of reading deep spiritual truths into every minute detail (eisegesis), rather than drawing simple truths from the parable (exegesis). Parables are meant to reveal simple, basic truths to those who are seeking to understand the Lord's teaching, not to confuse His teaching with a wide range of endless theological speculation. The plain, simple truths contained in parables were meant to be carried away in the mind of the hearer, not examined under a microscope or dissected to reveal every minute detail. Therefore, look for the simplest explanation first – the general theme of the parable, then delve deeper into sub-meanings or sub-themes. Second, avoid the extreme of saying there is just one spiritual truth contained in each parable. However, make certain that the spiritual truths gleaned from the parable are not formulating some new or contradictory doctrine. Truth must agree with truth.

When interpreting a parable of Jesus, there are certain questions one should ask. First, ask who was the intended audience, or to whom was Jesus speaking? In most instances, the intended audience will be His disciples. But on other occasions, the audience will range from publicans and sinners, to the scribes and Pharisees. A good way to determine the intended audience is to ask who was learning the most from the teaching of Jesus at the time. Second, ask what did Jesus intend to accomplish by the parable? This may not always be obvious. For example, the "Parables of the Mustard Seed" and the "Parable of the Leaven" are very brief and offer no clear insight into why Jesus taught these parables. But when we understand that the Savior had just spoken two parables to His disciples that were somewhat discouraging (the "Parable of the Sower," and the "Parable of the Wheat and the Tares"), it seems probable that the "Parable of the Mustard Seed" and the "Parable of the Leaven" were spoken to encourage the disciples. On other occasions, the purpose of the parable will become obvious. Some were spoken to those who were more concerned about an outward display of religion than they were in the practical application of such (as in the "Parable of the Good Samaritan"). Others had problems with forgiveness, or with seeing themselves in need of forgiveness, or with the acquisition of wealth. And still others were intent on killing Jesus, even though they knew He was the Son of God, and needed to know that Jesus was well aware of their evil plans. Third, ask what is the lesson to be learned? Every parable has a simple lesson to teach. Some will be more apparent than others. But there is a simple lesson to learn from every parable of Jesus. Don't make the lesson so complex or highly theological. And don't forget that parables were intended to be simple, direct lessons that could easily be remembered, and whose truths would be unforgettable. Look for the "central" truth in every lesson.

- *Misunderstanding Proper Application of Grammar:* A wide range of fallacies can result from a misunderstanding or misuse of grammatical tools. For example, a simplistic approach to "word studies" can produce a number of problematic interpretations. A common misuse of lexicons or Bible dictionaries is to assume that the "literal" or "original" meaning of a word pertains in every context. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, defend the rendering of the Greek word "punishment" (*kolasis*) in Matthew 25:46 with what may be termed an "etymological fallacy" in their *New World Translation* (NWT) because their theology denies eternal punishment. The passage reads, "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:46 NKJV) However, the NWT translates *kolasis* as "cutting off." While *kolasis* originally had this meaning in classical Greek times, by the first century, *kolasis* had taken on the meaning "punishment," which is why the majority of English translations render *kolasis* this way. Witnesses confuse the original meaning of *kolasis* with the common meaning in the contemporary setting of Jesus' day. Some Witnesses may cite older lexicons in favor of the NWT translation, but no modern lexicon provides "cutting off" or "pruning" as a valid translation of any first century text, and a careful examination of the older lexicons reveals that they were dependent on *classical* Greek texts, not texts contemporary with the New Testament. While word studies are important to proper interpretation, we must be careful to use them as a part of an overall methodology that takes all aspects of the text – including then-current word usage – into account.
- *Historical Fabrication:* The reconstruction of Biblical history presents a whole host of opportunities for interpretive fallacies. The interpretations of the New Testament offered by scholars such as those of *The Jesus Seminar*, and popularized in many pseudo-documentaries on The History Channel or The Discovery Channel, depend largely on fallacious theoretical revisions and reconstructions of Biblical history. The same is true with historical revisionism and reconstruction of the Old Testament.

This new criticism of the Scriptural record claims, for example, that there is no evidence that any such person as Abraham ever lived or even *could* have lived in its new version of ancient Israelite history. It asserts there was no migration from Mesopotamia to any "Promised Land." It argues that stories about the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were woven together out of various bits of early local folklore. Furthermore, this revisionist approach to Biblical history asserts Moses was no more historically real than Abraham, for there was no Israelite sojourn in Egypt and the Exodus was a fiction. Revisionists deny Joshua conquered the "Promised Land," since the ancient Israelites were an indigenous culture already living in that land. What about the monarchs Saul, David, and Solomon and their empires? Were they historical persons who actually lived? Not according to the historical revisionists. They claim that Jerusalem priests in the seventh and eighth centuries BC probably invented them. As for religious beliefs, monotheistic Judaism, according to historical revisionists, was itself a late development – again contrary to the Biblical record – invented by Jewish scribes who

crafted stories of the patriarchs and judges to show that Israel was entitled to the land by rite of conquest. Probably not until we reach King Hezekiah in the eighth century BC do these extreme critics begin to grant historicity to the Old Testament narratives.

Such extreme views are the work of a number of sensation-seeking pseudo-scholars whose radical revisionism almost certainly guarantees media attention and ratings for the independent cable channels that frequently feature programming claiming to have found new "truth" about Biblical events and persons. While some, like the so-called *Jesus Seminar*, claim Jesus could not have said or done many of the things credited to Him in the Gospels, the more radical revisionists and reconstructionists based their pseudo-scholarship on what they deem is the *absence* of archeological evidence to support the Biblical account. The fundamental fallacies of this methodology are:

- Overusing arguments from *silence* or *absence* of archaeological evidence, despite the fact that such arguments have often been shown false by subsequent discoveries that provide such "missing" evidence.
- Assuming archaeology can explain more than is warranted by various finds. Archaeology is not the only source of evidence for reconstructing history. It must also be supplemented by relevant data from both sacred and secular history.
- Assuming that archaeology is objective and unbiased, when, in fact, some archeologists are just the opposite. Unfortunately, academic bias and world political pressures have also encroached on the discipline.
- Assuming there is agreement among archaeologists concerning time grids involving uncovered strata and the artifacts found in them. In fact, archeological interpretations of excavated evidence often differ widely. Often times much of this evidence is offered selectively rather than presenting all the evidence.
- Suggesting revisionist criticism represents the latest and best scholarly and archaeological research on biblical origins today. When the truth is that sound historical and archeological evidence presented by the "other side" is either completely ignored or grossly misrepresented.

Historical fabrication is an immense and ever-growing threat to Biblical truth. Recent issues of journals such as *BAR (Biblical Archeological Review)* and *Bible and Spade* are filled with biased historical revisionist critiques that often undermine the credibility of the Biblical record. While the revisionists may claim their deductions are based on certain passages of Scripture, it soon becomes apparent they have intertwined their reconstructions of history with Scripture to such a degree that it becomes difficult to separate the theoretical reconstructions from Biblical fact.

This fallacious approach to interpreting the Scriptures is not only responsible for discrediting and undermining the historical Biblical record, it is also responsible for the many attempts by scholars and theologians alike to deny

the Deity of Jesus Christ and the existence of the Holy Spirit as a third person in the Godhead. Most of this criticism is based on extra-Biblical, non-canonical texts of the second and third centuries AD, most of which is heavily influenced by Gnostic theology.

Conclusion

Some mistakenly view biblical hermeneutics as limiting our ability to learn new truths from God's Word or stifling the Holy Spirit's ability to reveal to us the meaning of God's Word. This is not the case. The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to point us to the correct interpretation which the Holy Spirit has already inspired into the text. The purpose of biblical hermeneutics is to protect us from improperly applying a Scripture to a particular situation, and from being influenced by historical revisionists.

Sound Biblical hermeneutics points us to the true meaning, understanding and application of Scripture. Hebrews 4:12 declares, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Biblical hermeneutics is keeping the sword sharp!

Interpreting Sentences and Words

Chapter Nine

When we pick up the Bible and open to a particular passage, the first thing we need to understand is we are reading God's divinely inspired Word. To give us this Word, God spoke *through* men, *to* mankind, *for the benefit* of mankind. Therefore, the language of the Bible is human language. It was meant to be read and understood. However, problems frequently arise when we attempt to *interpret* the Word of God. Why are so many divergent interpretations given to its teachings? How is it that two people can read the same passage of Scripture and come away with completely different understandings?

The reason for much of the religious confusion in the world, especially confusion over the teachings of the Bible, come from a failure to properly interpret the book with the same common sense rules we would apply to interpreting any book – examining the true and proper meaning of the words in their proper context, and doing so in the light of the times and places in which they were originally written or spoken, and in light of the history, conditions, needs and hopes of the recipients.

In this lesson we will begin the process of interpretation by first understanding how to properly interpret sentences and then proceed to interpreting specific words. It may seem out of order to consider guidelines for interpreting sentences before learning how to interpret words. If we don't know the meaning of the words how can we know the meaning of the sentence? However, understanding the basic meaning of a sentence will provide us with a starting place from which we can go back to look at specific words and understand how they are being used to construct the context of the sentence.

Rules for the Interpretation of Sentences

When we seek to understand a particular statement, we must always seek to interpret that statement in keeping with the author's intended purpose. This, of course, presupposes we *know* the author's intended purpose, which may not always be clearly understood. However, if the author has revealed his purpose (either directly or indirectly) then we must interpret the things he writes in keeping with that purpose. This will prevent us from forcing our own conclusions or suppositions into the text, and simply allow the text to speak for itself – to draw from the text the meaning the author intended to convey. No interpretation should be given that is not in complete harmony with the author's purpose.

How can we know the author's intended purpose?

- *Look for the intended purpose in the text.* In the case of parables, Jesus (or the writers of the gospels) would occasionally explained the purpose for the parables within the text itself. For example, in Luke chapter 18, Luke

revealed the purpose behind parables of "The Persistent Widow" and "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector." He wrote, "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart." (Luke 18:1) The same is true for the purpose behind the parables of "The Lost Sheep," "The Lost Coin," and "The Prodigal Son" ("The Lost Son") in Luke chapter 15. Luke tells us that the Pharisees and scribes complained about the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus. They said, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." These parables illustrate the fact that the mission of Jesus was to seek and save that which is lost.

- *Consider the immediate context.* Some statements are prompted by specific events or by the statements of others. For example, what event had just occurred when Jesus told Peter and Andrew, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19)? Jesus saw these fishermen casting their nets into the sea. Why did Jesus tell Peter, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matthew 26:34)? Peter had just claimed to have a greater faith in Jesus than any of the other disciples.
- *Make sure truth harmonizes with truth.* If we accept the fact that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God then the Bible must harmonize with itself. Dungan says, "Let it be remembered no doctrine can be true if it is opposed to any clear statement of the Word of God."¹³¹ In other words, don't interpret a statement in such a manner that the inspired author will be forced to say or imply something that contradicts Scripture elsewhere.
- *Interpret doubtful or difficult passages in light of everything else the author has said on the same subject.* For example, the apostle Paul had a great deal to say in Galatians and Ephesians about the Law of Moses no longer being in force, and therefore, no longer being a basis of authority for the New Testament Christian. He showed the Law had been taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. But was Paul speaking of just portions of the Law of Moses or all of it? If we compare what he wrote in Colossians 2:14-18 with 2 Corinthians 3:6-14 we would have no doubts. Paul was speaking about the removal of all the Law of Moses – the Ten Commandments engraved on stone, to the ceremonial laws concerning foods and drinks, as well as sabbaths and holy days.
- *Interpret a sentence in light of what all other writers of equal authority have written on the same subject.* If the apostles were inspired of God, then all they revealed concerning a subject must also be true. Therefore, when we consider what Paul taught about being saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-10) we must also consider what James, the Lord's brother, wrote on the subject of faith and works (James 2). Being saved by grace through faith does not negate our responsibility of being obedient to the commands of the Lord to believe, repent, confess, and be baptized into Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.

¹³¹ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 180

- *Use common sense.* We have the ability to think and reason, and God expects us to employ those *gifts* when we handle His divinely inspired Word. This means we must never take a position or arrive at a conclusion that conflicts with what we *know* God revealed elsewhere. We are never permitted to take liberty with the Word of God and insert our own opinions as a standard. We must *know* the truth, and then form our interpretations based on that truth.
- *Figurative speech must be interpreted as such in keeping with laws governing figurative speech.* Literal language should never be interpreted as figurative. However, we may interpret *figurative* language based on what we know about that which is *literal*. For example, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men." (Matthew 5:13) We understand salt can lose its ability to add flavor and taste; and when it does, it no longer serves any useful purpose. In a figurative way, Jesus applied this known fact to His followers, who likewise would serve no useful purpose if they lost their "flavor." However, we need to avoid forcing an incorrect interpretation on that which is *figurative* with what we know about that which is *literal*. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), the Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" (John 2:20) Jesus was not talking about the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, but rather about His resurrection from the dead (John 2:21-22). The critics of Jesus knew He could not raise the temple of Jerusalem in just three days if it were destroyed, and so they twisted the Lord's statement to imply something He never intended.

Rules for the Interpretation of Words

How can we know the meaning behind the specific words?

- *Interpret all words in literally unless it is evident that the meaning of the context forbids such interpretation.* Figures of speech and the symbolic nature of prophecy are the exception to this rule. We will deal with figurative and prophetic language later. However, we should not regard any word as figurative or symbolic unless the context clearly demands such. Those who approach a passage with preconceived ideas, or who consider anything contrary to their personal beliefs to be a misinterpretation, will most likely give *literal* words a *figurative* or *symbolic* meaning when there is nothing in the context to justify such an interpretation. For example, John addressed his second epistle to "the elect lady and her children." (2 John 1) Some attempt to allegorize this phrase to suggest John was actually addressing a specific congregation and its members who had unwittingly welcomed false teachers into their midst. However, there is nothing in the context of 2 John to suggest "the elect lady and her children" are anything other than a godly Christian woman and her children who had unintentionally extended hospitality to false teachers by opening her home to these teachers and giving them sanctuary and support.

- *Generally interpret all commands and ordinances in a literal sense.* Commands are rarely given in figurative language, although there are exceptions. When Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men..." (Matthew 5:16) everyone understands this command is using figurative language. Since the very nature of figurative or symbolic language may lead one to misinterpret the meaning, commands and ordinances are generally stated in clear and concise words easy to understand, such as; "repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), or "arise and be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). While one might debate the *meaning* of the phrase "in the name of Jesus Christ" or question the *interpretation* of "for the remission of sins," or argue the *meaning* of the words "wash away your sins," it is impossible for a sincere student of the Bible to misunderstand the *command* to "repent, and let every one of you be baptized," or the *command* "arise and be baptized."
- *The literal meaning of a word is to be understood in light of those to whom it was addressed.* For example, the word *baptize*, from the Greek "baptizo," was understood by Jews and Greeks of the first century to mean "immerse, submerge" or to "overwhelm." Therefore, when Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world, preaching the gospel and "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19), they understood Jesus was commanding immersion in water. Unfortunately, the meaning of "baptizo" has changed in modern times to include other methods, such as sprinkling or pouring water upon one being baptized. These methods are completely contrary to the meaning of the word *baptize* as it was understood by those to whom it was spoken, and are therefore a misinterpretation and misapplication of the word. However, this raises a question. How shall we determine the meaning a word had to those to whom it was addressed? While Bible dictionaries and lexicons may be helpful, we must remember they are the writings and opinions of mere men. Therefore, we may need to examine how the inspired writer, or other inspired authors of the Scriptures, used the word in other passages. If we are unable to find the word used elsewhere, and cannot determine its meaning from the context, we must resort to finding how the word was used in classical Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. These are the same methods lexicographers use in determining the proper use and meaning of words.
- *Allow the Bible to become its own dictionary or lexicon.* For example, the word *elder* is used throughout the Old and New Testaments, but with a wide range of meanings. To determine the manner in which the word *elder* is used, it must be considered in its context. In some instances the word pertains to local magistrates or rulers who had been delegated the authority to judge in legal matters (Exodus 18:13-27; Numbers 11:16, 24), or in criminal cases demanding the death penalty (Deuteronomy 19:12; 21:1; Joshua 20:4). The word *elder* is also be used to describe the rulers of the local synagogue – those who are usually associated with the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 15:2; 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:2; Luke 7:3; Acts 4:5,8,23; 6:12). *Elder* may also describe those who

have met specific qualifications and have the responsibility of overseeing a local congregation of believers (Acts 14:23; 15:2-16:4; 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5-11; 1 Peter 5:1-4) The context in which a word is used in Scripture is one of the best ways of determining its meaning – thus allowing the Bible to become its own dictionary or lexicon.

- *The definition given to a word in Scripture may be used in place of the word itself.* Although we have considered this fundamental principle of interpretation in a previous lesson, consider the following. In 2 Corinthians chapter 3 the apostle Paul compared and contrasted the Law of Moses with the Law of Christ. Notice the various ways the apostle defined the Law of Moses: "the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones" (2 Corinthians 3:7), "the ministry of condemnation" (2 Corinthians 3:9), and "what is passing away" (2 Corinthians 3:11). Conversely, notice how the Law of Christ is defined: "how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious" (2 Corinthians 3:8), "the ministry of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 3:9), and "what remains is much more glorious" (2 Corinthians 3:11). Consider also the definition Paul gave to the gospel: "it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16); and "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 1:1-4). Can there be any doubt that the Old Testament Law of Moses was inferior to the New Testament Law of Christ? This is why the Law of Moses had to be replaced by the New Testament Law of Christ. The Law of Christ could do things the Law of Moses was incapable of doing; namely release us of from past sins once and for all time.
- *At times the etymology (origin) of a word will determine its meaning.* Nearly all the names of persons and places in the Bible have a special meaning. *Beersheba* comes from the Hebrew "beer" meaning "wells" and "sebiah" meaning "seven." Thus, Beersheba was a place of seven wells. The word *Gehenna*, which is translated "hell" (Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; and James 3:6), came from the words *Ge bene Hinnom*: literally meaning "the valley of the sons of Hinnom." It was a deep, narrow valley immediately south of Jerusalem where the Jews once offered their children in sacrifice to Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2-6). This valley later became the dumping ground for all the refuse of the city – where the dead bodies of animals and criminals, and all kinds of filth, were cast and consumed by a fire that was never extinguished. It was used by the Lord to describe the fate of the sinner – a place of everlasting destruction. In the mind of the Jews in Jesus' day, spending an eternity in such a place would be the most terrible thing imaginable. It not only signified a place where unspeakable sins were committed, and where unimaginable filth was found, it signified a place of everlasting, eternal fire and separation from God. Therefore, knowing the origin of the names of persons and places help us understand the significance of those names.

Figurative Language

Chapter Ten

It should come as no surprise to anyone that much of the Scriptures is written in highly figurative or symbolic language, or uses various figures of speech to convey a specific meaning or teaching. Therefore, we must become familiar with way to first identify figurative language, and then to properly interpret it. Failure to do so will cause us to not only miss the true meaning of the text, but believe or teach something that is completely contrary to the divinely inspired message, making us a false teacher who has perverted the word.

Identifying Figurative Language

There are basic, common sense guidelines for knowing when the writer or speaker is using figurative language. These are:

- *Let the context determine when figurative language is being used.* Nothing should be regarded as figurative unless the immediate context demands so, or unless it is evident from the passage as a whole. In the gospel of John Jesus often uses several figures of speech to describe Himself: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35); "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12); "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7); "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11); "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).
- *A word or sentence is figurative when the literal meaning involves an impossibility.* A good example of this is the statement of Jesus, "I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). This statement was made immediately following the incident involving the rich young ruler whose money had become his god, and who could not part with his great possessions to follow Jesus. For that kind of rich man, it is impossible to enter heaven. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that no rich person can enter heaven. There are numerous examples of wealthy men of God who did not worship their wealth and used it to bless others. Another example is Revelation 6:13 where John records, "And the stars of heaven fell to the earth." Since stars are suns millions and billions times larger than the earth, the only way the statement can be interpreted is figuratively.
- *A passage may be regarded as figurative if a literal interpretation causes one passage to contradict another.* If the literal interpretation of two passages makes one contradict the other, we are safe in regarding the language of at

least one of those passages as figurative – it could also be that both are figurative.

- *When a passage demands actions that are wrong, or forbids those that are good, it may be interpreted as figurative.* A good example is found in the following statement of Jesus. "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire" (Matthew 18:8-9). While a few choose to interpret this literally, most clearly understand this to be figurative. In a literal sense our hand, foot or eye cannot *cause* us to sin. The cause of sin is outlined by James – namely, when we are drawn away and enticed by our own desires (James 1:14-15). Jesus obviously meant we must go to any reasonable extreme, if necessary, to avoid being cast into hell fire.
- *A passage is to be regarded as figurative when it is said to be figurative.* For example, Jesus told His accusers that if they destroyed this temple He would raise it up again in three days (John 2:18-22). Though His critics thought He was referring to the temple in Jerusalem, the writer tells he Jesus spoke concerning the temple of His body. Another example of this principle comes from perhaps the most misinterpreted book of the Bible – Revelation. Many attempt to make much of Revelation literal while at the same time contending that portions are to be taken figuratively. And yet, they offer no way of knowing when the text should be regarded as literal or figurative. However, John opened the letter with these words:

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the Word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1:1-3).

John said God "signified" this message, meaning the message points toward something by use of signs or symbols. Furthermore, John said, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10), which is "a state of ecstasy capable of receiving revelations,"¹³² or was in a state of rapture when he received a vision. Everything in Revelation points to the figurative language commonly associated with prophecy. Finally, John said the things of which he wrote concerned "things which must shortly take place" because "the time is near" (Revelation 1:1, 3). Revelation is not only figurative in nature, the prophecy must also be interpreted in light of what it meant to those to whom it was written.

- *A phrase may often be regarded as figurative when the definite is put for the indefinite.* Peter came to Jesus with a question: "Lord, how often shall my

¹³² *Pulpit Commentary*, The Book of Revelation

brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). While Peter obviously meant a literal "seven times," Jesus replied with a number that is obviously figurative – "seventy times seven." The message Jesus conveyed in the following parable of "The Unforgiving Servant" (Matthew 18:23-34) was the need for complete and unlimited forgiveness.

- *Figurative language is generally being employed when it is said in mockery.* A classic example of this is when the enemies of Jesus mocked Him while He was on the cross by saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God" (Luke 23:35). The rulers who sneered at Jesus were not admitting to Him having saved anyone, but were in essence saying since He cannot save Himself, He obviously has not saved others.
- *Figurative language is also determined by plain common sense.* Dungan writes, "When God says that He will make His 'arrows drunk with blood' or Paul declares that he is less than the least of all saints, there is nothing deceptive to those who will employ their common sense in the interpretation."¹³³

¹³³ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 202

More on Figurative Language

Chapter Eleven

Identifying passages where the Bible uses figurative language is only half the battle. The real challenge comes in interpreting figurative language. By *figurative language* we mean language that involves a comparison – where something is representative of, or stands in the place of, what is literal. Since all words of human communication, including the Bible, are to be understood either literally or figuratively, what rules should we observe when interpreting figurative language.

Interpreting Figurative Language

The guidelines for interpreting figurative language in Scripture are essentially the same as we would use in interpreting figurative or symbolic language in secular writing.

- *Let the author give the interpretation.* This principle applies to literal as well as to figurative language. The only exception is that the author would seldom, if ever, provide an interpretation of that which is to be understood literally. However, when the language is highly symbolic it is not uncommon to find an interpretation, or at least a clue to interpretation, provided in the text. For example, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-10) would be difficult to understand were it not for the interpretation provided in the prophecy itself (Ezekiel 37:11) where we are told the prophecy pertains to the house of Israel. They were scattered in captivity and were ready to give up all hope of ever returning home. Therefore, the vision of Ezekiel sent the message that, though they were scattered, God would bring them back together again into their own land. The prophecy was fulfilled in the return of the children of Israel to their homeland during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Jesus occasionally provided His disciples with the interpretation of His parables simply because they could not understand the meaning. In the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9), Jesus spoke of a sower broadcasting or sowing seed on four kinds of soil with four different results. When the disciples failed to grasp the meaning, Jesus gave the interpretation of the parable (Matthew 13:18-23). Any interpretation of Ezekiel's prophecy or of the parable of Jesus which is not in harmony with the interpretation given by each is a misinterpretation.
- *Figurative language must be interpreted in keeping with the context.* We've already seen how important this is when interpreting the literal meaning of Biblical text. This becomes even more crucial when interpreting figurative or symbolic language commonly found in the Scriptures. We must never lose sight of the context. A classic example of the misuse of this rule is found in a familiar prophecy of Isaiah:

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.' Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit" (Isaiah 14:12-15).

When one examines the context in which these verses appear it is easy to see they have no reference to Satan at all. Isaiah was speaking prophetically of the fall of the king of Babylon.

It shall come to pass in the day the Lord gives you rest from your sorrow, and from your fear and the hard bondage in which you were made to serve, 4 that you will take up this proverb against the king of Babylon... (Isaiah 14:3-4).

Therefore, it becomes imperative to always examine the context in which figurative language is being used. Failing to do so will almost always lead to an erroneous interpretation which God never intended.

- *The figurative cannot teach something different from the literal.* In other words, figurative statements must always harmonize with literal accounts or statements that speak of the same thing. We see the application of this rule in the Messianic prophecies which are often given in figurative language, but fulfilled in a very literal sense. For example:

But He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Compared to:

So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him (John 19:1).

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness — by whose stripes you were healed (1 Peter 2:21-24).

- *The meaning of figurative language must be interpreted in light of the specific characteristics, attributes or event to which the figure is being compared.* Jesus is described as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29, 36) and to "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). How is He both a lamb and a lion? The first figure speaks of the qualities of gentleness and innocence of Christ, while the latter speaks of the might, power and fearsomeness of the Christ who comes to judge the nations of men. In the Lord's rebuked the scribes and Pharisees by calling

them "blind guides," saying they were like "whitewashed tombs," and said they were "serpents, brood of vipers" (Matthew 23:16, 27, 33). The implication is clear when we understand Jesus was rebuking them for their spiritual blindness, hypocrisy and corruption, and their deceitful treachery.

- *The facts of history and biography may also assist in the interpretation of figurative language.* The most classic example of this would be Nathan's scathing rebuke of David for having committed adultery with Bathsheba and ordering the death of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband (2 Samuel 12:1-4). The prophet told the touching story of a man who treasured his only ewe lamb that had grow up together with his own children, but was taken from him by a rich man and served as a meal to a traveler. The prophet's figurative language is simple to decipher. Uriah was the man who treasured Bathsheba, his only ewe lamb, while David was the rich man who had taken the lamb and consumed it for his own pleasure. Another example is found in Paul's writings to the church at Corinth:

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

When conquering generals returned to Rome from a successful military campaign, a procession would wind through the streets of the city led by those bearing censors of incense. To the victorious soldiers and commanding officers, the fragrant incense was the aroma of victory. However, to the defeated enemy combatants taken in battle, the same fragrance was to them the aroma of their impending death. As Paul and others proclaimed the gospel of Christ throughout the world, and "the fragrance of His knowledge" was diffused in every place, to those who accepted the gospel the message was to them the aroma of everlasting life. But to those who rejected the message of the gospel it symbolized the aroma of eternal death.

- *Figurative language must not be given a multitude of interpretations.* Dungan writes, "Many have proceeded in the interpretation of figurative language as if it was their privilege, or rather their calling, to invent as many features of similarity as their genius could originate, and then demand a corresponding thought and purpose for each."¹³⁴ This is one of the most common mistakes in interpreting the parables of Jesus. In the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:30-35), the simple message of being a neighbor to those in need – regardless of who they are – is often distorted by giving everything in the parable a "spiritual" meaning. They will ascribe an interpretation to the thieves who robbed and beat the traveler, the wounds of the man who fell among thieves, the bandages, wine and oil used by the Samaritan, etc. When figurative language is treated in this manner, the message is often confused or missed altogether.

¹³⁴ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics*, p. 215

- *Figurative language must be interpreted in harmony with Biblical truth.* The only correct interpretation of figurative or symbolic language is one that is in complete harmony with the inspired teachings of Scripture. We cannot take a position regarding figurative language that is in conflict with whatever else the Word of God reveals on the subject. Truth must harmonize with truth. For example, much of the language of Jesus in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 is figurative. The context makes it clear that Jesus was warning His disciples of the impending destruction of the temple, including the city of Jerusalem, in which "not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6). However, many who hold to false teachings about the so-called "end times" interpret the words of Jesus to be speaking prophetically of "signs" that will warn of the Lord's second coming in the not-too-distant future. Not only is the figurative language of Jesus in these verses taken completely out of context (both textual context and historical context), they are made to teach just the opposite of what the Scriptures teach elsewhere regarding the coming of Christ at a time when it is least expected (cf. Matthew 24:45-52; 25:1-13).

Common Figures of Speech Used Throughout the Bible

The Bible expresses its unique message in a variety of literary forms. As we read, interpret, and seek to apply the truths of Scripture, we must be careful not to overlook commonly used figures of speech or we may completely miss, and perhaps even distort, the message. The following list is not complete, but it outlines the major figures of speech used in the Bible.

Common Figures of Comparison:

- *Simile:* A simile involves an explicit comparison of two unlike things using the words "as" or "like." Examples include, "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6); "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:27).
- *Metaphor:* A metaphor involves a direct or implied comparison of two unlike things. An example of this is the statement of David, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer" (2 Samuel 22:3). The seven "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John are all metaphors: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35); "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12); "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9); "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); "I am the true vine, and My father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).

Figures of Association:

- *Metonymy:* In metonymy, the name of one person, object or concept is used to represent another because of an association or similarity between the two. An example is the statement of Jesus, "They have Moses and the prophets;

let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). This is a metonymy, because "Moses and the prophets" stands for the writings of Moses and the prophets. Jesus also employed metonymy in the institution of the Lord's Supper. When Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, he gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body" (Matthew 26:26). The unleavened bread stands for His body. Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). The "cup" (the contents of the cup) stands for the blood of Christ that ratified the New Covenant. Other examples are found in Paul's writings. In Romans, Paul writes, "There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Romans 3:30). In this metonymy, "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" is another way of saying "Jew" and "Gentile." In Ephesians 5:18-19, Paul writes, "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." By metonymy, Paul's use of the phrase "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18) means to be filled with the power, influence and authority of the Spirit by letting "the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16). By metonymy, "the Spirit" is used to represent "the word of Christ" because of the close relationship between the two – "the Spirit" revealed "the word of Christ" through the inspired apostles. To be filled with one is to be filled with the other.

- *Synecdoche*: In a synecdoche, a part is used for a whole, or a whole is used for a part. "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). The word "world" is used for the people in the world. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16). The words "All Scripture" is used for every part of Scripture.

Figures of Humanization:

- *Personification*: Personification is a figure of speech which takes a human characteristic and applies it to an object, quality, or idea. An example from the book of Proverbs is the personification of "wisdom." "Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?" (Proverbs 8:2). Another example from the Sermon on the Mount is the statement, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (Matthew 6:34).
- *Anthropomorphism*: Anthropomorphism is a figure of speech which takes a human characteristic and applies it to God. Examples include, "Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:23); or "He who touches you touches the apple of His eye" (Zechariah 2:8).
- *Apostrophe*: Apostrophe is a figure of speech in which an exclamation is addressed to an object as if it were a person. Jesus used this figure of speech when He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" (Matthew 23:37).

Figures of Illusion:

- *Irony*: Irony is an expression that denotes the opposite of what is meant by the words themselves. "And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened'" (1 Kings 18:27). Paul also used irony in his epistles to the Corinthians. "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!" (1 Corinthians 4:10-11).
- *Hyperbole*: The psalmist wrote, "I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears" (Psalm 6:6). Jesus also used hyperbole in the Sermon on the Mount. "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck out of your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:4); as did the apostle John in his gospel, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Extended Figures of Speech:

- *Parables*: Parables are figures of comparison that often use short stories to teach a truth or answer a question. While the story in a parable may not actually happened, it is true to life, not a fairy tale. Jesus frequently used parables in His teaching (see Mark 4:34) and used them in response to specific situations and challenges. His parables are drawn from domestic and family life as well as business and political affairs. He used imagery that was familiar to His hearers to guide them to the unfamiliar. Some of the parables were designed to reveal mysteries to those on the inside and to conceal the truth to those on the outside who would not hear (Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12). This was especially true of the parables that related to the kingdom of God. However, other parables like the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25- 37) could be grasped by unbelievers.

Parables have one central point; the details are not intended to call attention to themselves but to reinforce the single theme of the parable. In most parables, assigning allegorical meanings to each of the details can lead to confusion and obscure the point. The story parables (e.g., the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the workers in the vineyard, the rich man and Lazarus, the wise and foolish virgins) are all designed to be clearly understood and immediately bring a response from the hearers. It's been said, "The moment a parable is grasped, the point of the parable penetrates like the point of an arrow." Nathan's parable of the rich man who slaughtered the poor man's lamb pierced David's heart the moment Nathan said, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7).

- *Allegories*: While a parable is an extended simile, an allegory is an extended metaphor. The allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15, for example, develops the metaphors of Christ as the true vine (vs. 1, 5), the Father as the vinedresser (v. 1), and believers as the branches (v. 5). Allegorical

stories have several points of comparison. In John 10:1-18, the allegory of the good shepherd draws a point-by-point comparison between a number of elements (the door of the sheepfold, the shepherd, the sheep, the thief, and the hireling) and corresponding spiritual truths. On rare occasions, the New Testament allegorizes Old Testament stories, such as Galatians 4:21-31 where the apostle Paul turns the story of Hagar and Sarah into an allegory of law and grace.

Antithesis, Symbols and Typology:

- *Antithesis:* The word *antithesis* is from the Greek *anti*, meaning "against", and *thesis*, meaning "to set, or lay down." Merriam-Webster's Dictionary¹³⁵ defines antithesis as, "the rhetorical contrast of ideas by means of parallel arrangements of words, clauses, or sentences." This figure of speech allows us to understand the meaning of words, phrases or sentences by understanding words, phrases or sentences that are set in opposition. For example, belief is the antithesis of unbelief. We can understand all the causes of unbelief by understanding everything that leads to belief. Several examples of antithesis are seen in several of the teachings of Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount where He repeatedly told His audience, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you" (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 24, 28, 39, 43, 44). Other examples include Paul's statements concerning the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
- *Symbols:* The word *symbol* is from the Greek *sumbolon* which literally means "to throw together with." Symbols are figures of representation in which one thing stands an emblem of another, or a literal object that conveys a lesson or truth. The pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22) symbolized God's glory and presence among His people. Blood symbolized the life of an animal or human (Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:23-25). Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) symbolized the judgment and restoration of Israel. We must exercise great caution when interpreting symbols. Many symbols are interpreted, in part or in whole, by their inspired authors or by other inspired writers, such as the symbol of the image in Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 2:27-45). For the rest, we must interpret the meaning of symbols in light of the condition of those to whom the symbols were given and what they would have best understood those symbols to mean (such as the Jews in Ezekiel's day who were longing to be restored to their land). The book of Revelation is almost entirely written with the use symbols. We must not only interpret these symbols in light of conditions of Christians living in the regions of the seven churches of Asia, we must also interpret these in keeping with the general use and understanding of similar symbols found in the prophecies of Old Testament prophets.
- *Typology:* This is the use of *types* and *antitypes*. The word *type*, from the Greek *tupos*, from *tuptein*, means "to strike." It pertains to the mark or impression of that which was used to make the mark or impression. When a

¹³⁵ Merriam-Webster's Dictionary: Antithesis

signet ring or stamp is pressed into sealing wax the image created in the wax is the type while the signet ring or stamp is the antitype. In the Scriptures, a type is a person, place, thing, or event that typically foreshadows a future person or event. The antitype is the person, place, thing, or event the corresponding type foreshadowed. Therefore, the antitype is always superior to the type. For example, there are a number of Old Testament types that correspond to New Testament antitypes. Melchizedek was a type of Christ who is the antitype (Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7:1- 10). The serpent lifted up in the wilderness was a type of Christ being lifted up on the cross, the antitype (Numbers 21:9; John 3:14). The earthly tabernacle was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:5). The saving of Noah and his family in the Genesis flood is a type of salvation through baptism which is the antitype (1 Peter 3:18-21). It should be remembered that the relationship between types and antitypes generally point to only one meaning or relationship which is often explained in the Scriptures. The most common misuse and misapplication of typology is to make every person, place, thing, or event in Scripture a type of something, or to force too many points of analogy between a type and its corresponding antitype.

The Language of Prophecy

Chapter Twelve

We have already seen many rules for the interpretation of prophecy. Prophecy is not a figure of speech but is a form of divine communication that employs figurative language and the use of symbols and types. Therefore, to properly understand prophetic language we must first understand the purpose for prophets, then examine practical guidelines for the interpretation of prophetic language.

The Prophet

The word *prophet* is from the Greek *prophetes*, which is from *pro*, meaning "before," and *phanai*, meaning "to speak." According to Thayer, the word prophet means:

"an interpreter or spokesman for God; one through whom God speaks;" and then adds, "one who, moved by the Spirit of God and hence, his organ or spokesman, solemnly declares to men what he has received by inspiration, especially future events, and in particular such as relate to the cause and kingdom of God and to human salvation."¹³⁶

The prophets may have foretold certain events, or may have revealed events in past history (such as Moses revealing the events of creation in Genesis), or may have even revealed God's displeasure over the current spiritual condition of the people. In other words, prophets were not merely "fore-tellers" but also "forth-tellers" – not merely foretelling future events, but more often boldly speaking the pronouncements of God against every form of moral, ethical, political, economic, and religious disenfranchisement of their day.

In all cases, prophetic revelation originated with God and was given to chosen men who infallibly and inerrantly spoke or wrote down that revelation in the common language of the day. Consider the following claims:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

As mentioned earlier in this study, the process God used to convey His will to the writers of Scripture is explained in the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. He wrote:

¹³⁶ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets... (Ephesians 3:1-5)

Paul said God revealed "the mystery of Christ" to his "holy apostles and prophets" by "the Spirit" (the Holy Spirit). Paul further explained he had "written" down the things revealed by the Spirit, so that when others read what he wrote, they "may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ." This is the process of inspiration:

- God reveals His will to mankind through "revelation."
- The Holy Spirit is the One through whom God reveals His will to His holy apostles and prophets.
- God's holy apostles and prophets either write down or speak the things revealed to them through the Holy Spirit.
- The things revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets were recorded in the Bible.
- When we read what the holy apostles and prophets wrote or spoke in the Bible we understand God's will.

The Elements of Prophetic Revelation

The prophets of the Bible differ significantly from the so-called seers, prophets or oracles of the nations of antiquity. At times, these pseudo-prophets uttered predictions that were merely "educated guesses" or reasonable predictions based on what they were able to observe. On other occasions, these prophecies were either wishful thinking on the part of these prophet, or predictions deliberately made to win the favor and praise of the king and his people. Because the outcome of these predictions were uncertain, they were often worded in a vague and ambiguous manner so that they could be as easily interpreted one way as the other. The same kind of vague and ambiguous prophetic revelations are uttered today by so-called prophets and astrologers.

However, Biblical prophets often foretold events that were unpopular with the king and his people, and put the lives of the prophets at risk. Some were even imprisoned and slain for their unfavorable prophetic utterances. Furthermore, many of the prophecies in the Bible, especially among Old Testament prophets, are rather clear and direct. Therefore, it's important to understand the basic elements of prophetic revelation contained in the Bible, and how distinctly different Biblical prophecy is from mere prediction.

- *The divine element of prophecy:* As mentioned above, there is an element in prophecy that is not found in predictions. The word *predict* means "to

declare or indicate in advance" or to "foretell on the basis of observation, experience, or scientific reason."¹³⁷ This simply means predictions are based on current or historical circumstances or events from which certain logical or reasonable conclusions may be drawn. However, prophecy is completely different. Many of the events foretold in prophecy have no prior historical reference (such as the virgin birth of Jesus), or are so far removed from current circumstances or events that there is no possibility of drawing a logical or reasonable conclusion based on observation, experience, or scientific reason. Prophecy also contains an element not found in mere predictions – the *divine element* of inspiration. According to Thayer, *prophecy* is:

"discourse emanating from divine inspiration and declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproof and admonishing the wicked, or comforting the afflicted, or revealing things hidden; especially by foretelling future events."¹³⁸

Prophecy originates with God and is passed to the prophet through the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

- *The supernatural (providential and miraculous) element of prophecy:* In reference to the supernatural providential element of prophecy, there are prophecies of events that are beyond the ability of mere men to accomplish without divine intervention. They may, on the surface, appear as natural events, but are supernatural in nature when the events prophesied are brought about directly by the hand of God. The rise and fall of kingdoms, or the victories and defeats of armies are natural events. They occur all the time. However, when such events are foretold in prophecy, God is directly involved by either revealing the outcome in advance, or by bringing about a desired outcome through divine intervention. In reference to the supernatural miraculous element of prophecy, there are prophecies whose outcome is beyond the rules of nature and are fulfilled in a miraculous manner. One example of this element of prophecy is that which pertains to the virgin birth of the Christ (Isaiah 7:14).
- *The preparatory element of prophecy:* Prophecy sets the stage for the unfolding of future events. They point forward to specific persons, places, events and times, all of which must be fulfilled exactly as the prophecy foretold, otherwise the prophecy is false. If the event prophesied was in the immediate future of the ones to whom the prophecy was given, they would have time to prepare for the event. This is especially true of the prophecies of Jesus concerning the coming destruction of Jerusalem. When those first century Christians living in Jerusalem and Judea saw the events foretold by the Lord unfolding, they would have time to flee from the city and surrounding countryside.

¹³⁷ *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*: Predict, Prediction

¹³⁸ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

- *The timing element of prophecy:* Prophecies that point to a specific timeframe for their fulfillment cannot be delayed or postponed without rendering the prophecy and the prophet false. In his classic work, *God's Prophetic Word*, Foy E. Wallace, Jr. says this regarding the so-called "postponement theory" which is popular among those advocating a millennial, or one thousand year reign of Christ on the earth:

"There is no such thing as the postponement of prophecy. The idea that a prophet of God could speak a prophecy at a certain time, and in later centuries his prophecies be changed as to meaning and time of fulfillment from what the prophecy meant when spoken or written, is incompatible with the integrity of the prophet, inconsistent with the meaning of prophecy and is impossible in the very nature of things. Yet, strange as it may seem, that idea prevails – that certain kingdom prophecies when spoken referred to the first coming of Christ, but because of circumstances unforeseen and unexpected in reference to national Israel's attitude, the fulfillment of said kingdom prophecies was automatically deferred. That is known as the postponement theory, but in reality it means that the prophecy failed to come to pass, went by default, and makes false prophets out of the prophets of the Old Testament. It takes the element of inspiration out of their utterances, unless it is to be conceded that inspiration is not verbal nor plenary nor inerrant."¹³⁹

Those who advocate the doctrine of *premillennialism*¹⁴⁰ are forced to either admit the Old Testament prophecies concerning the establishment of the kingdom of God were fulfilled in the first century AD with the establishment of the church, or must admit the prophecies and the prophets failed. Therefore, any theory that advocates or promotes the belief that prophecies pointing to a specific timeframe for fulfillment were inadvertently postponed, are theories that essentially deny the inspiration of the Scriptures.

Basic Guidelines for Understanding and Interpreting Prophecy

The only correct interpretation of prophecy is an inspired interpretation. In other words, the only correct interpretation of a specific prophecy is one that is in complete harmony with the divinely inspired Word of God. Any other means of interpreting prophecy is fallible and subject to a gross perversion and misinterpretation of the prophetic word. This principle is borne out by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

¹³⁹ Foy E. Wallace, Jr. (1946), *God's Prophetic Word*, p. 60

¹⁴⁰ Premillennialism: This is a doctrine concerning the end times (eschatology). It claims there will be a future millennium (1000 years) where Christ will rule and reign on the earth, following His second coming. The doctrine also claims Satan and his angels will be bound at the beginning of the millennium and peace will exist on the entire earth during the 1000 year reign of Christ.

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:7-13)

Paul said the "wisdom of God" concerning Jesus Christ – the prophecies concerning Christ – was cloaked in mystery in previous ages, but was now being revealed to the apostles through the Holy Spirit. He further stated that the Spirit of God is the only one who knows the "things of God." Since the Spirit is the only one who knows the "wisdom of God" concerning Jesus Christ, He is the only one capable of giving the apostles the ability to "know the things that have been freely given" to them by God. However, the manner in which they teach the knowledge of this mystery is through words "which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." This means the inspired apostles declared the mystery by comparing spiritual revelation with other spiritual revelation – by comparing the things revealed to the apostles by the Spirit to the things declared by the Spirit through the prophets of old.

Therefore, all rules for understanding and interpreting prophecy must be based on a comparison of the prophecy with spiritual truths revealed elsewhere in the Scriptures. It is also imperative that the basic rules for understanding and interpreting the Scriptures be applied to prophetic revelation as well, especially because of the figurative nature of prophecy. With this in mind, here are some basic guidelines:

- *Many prophecies in the Old Testament find their interpretation and fulfillment in the Old Testament:* These Old Testament prophecies point to a definite period of time for their fulfillment, either within the lifetime of the ones to whom the prophetic promise is made, or during a future generation. We can determine the time when God intended to fulfill the prophecy when we find the fulfillment of the prophecy. For example, the promise of God that Abraham would have an heir (Genesis 15:2-4) was fulfilled years later in the birth of Isaac. The prophetic promises God made to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the seashore or the stars of the sky (Genesis 12:2-3; 15:6; 22:17) were fulfilled in the rise of the Hebrew people. Likewise, the promises God made to Abraham concerning his descendants inhabiting the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:7; 26:1-5; 28:10-15) were fulfilled generations later in the conquest of Canaan under Joshua and the expansion of the kingdom of Israel under Saul, David and Solomon (Joshua 21:45; 23:14; 1 Kings 8:54-56). The prophetic

promise God gave to Jacob during his vision at Bethel. the promise that he would someday return to his homeland (Genesis 28:15), was also fulfilled years later in Jacob's lifetime (Genesis 32:9-12; 33:1-20). This principle of interpreting Old Testament prophecies that point to a definite time for their fulfillment is also seen in God's promises to restore His people to their land following their captivity and enslavement in Assyria and Babylon. These prophecies were fulfilled some two generations later in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Therefore, when an Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in the lifetime of the one to whom it was given, or perhaps generations later, we know the timeframe in which God originally intended to fulfill the prophecy. The *first* occurrence of the prophecy's fulfillment *is* the fulfillment.

- *The meaning or interpretation of a prophecy may not have been understood by the prophet:* Old Testament prophets were led by the Holy Spirit to reveal future events without knowing when, where or how those events were to be fulfilled. This is especially true of the Old Testament prophecies pertaining to Jesus Christ and the salvation He would bring. The apostle Peter wrote:

"Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things which angels desire to look into. Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 1:10-13)

Therefore, since neither the prophet nor his contemporaries understood the proper meaning or interpretation of the prophecy, they had no reason for assuming its fulfillment would be in their immediate future. Neither can we make that assumption. For example, there is no reason to believe Isaiah nor any of his contemporaries understood the time, place or manner in which the prophetic declaration given to King Ahaz would be fulfilled, namely: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Nor is there reason to believe Micah understood the prophecy he recorded would be fulfilled in the work of John the Baptist, whose preaching prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:1) Since neither the prophet nor his contemporaries understood the manner in which the prophecy would be fulfilled, we can reasonably conclude they did not look for a the fulfillment of the prophecy in their immediate future. The manner in which this effects

the interpretation of prophecy leads us to the next point, namely, that we must first seek to interpret Old Testament prophecy in light of its New Testament fulfillment.

- Some prophecies in the Old Testament find their interpretation and fulfillment in the New Testament:* This is true of all the Messianic prophecies in the Law, the prophets and the psalms which were completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus specifically pointed to these prophetic revelations and claimed to have fulfilled them all (Luke 24:44). Prophecies relating to the giving of the a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) were fulfilled in the preaching and teaching of the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Hebrews 8:7-13; 9:13-15). The prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32) was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21). Many claim Joel's prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and prophetic revelation is being fulfilled today. However, Peter said, "this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). By divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter declared the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy was happening on Pentecost. Likewise, Old Testament prophecies concerning a future kingdom of God were fulfilled in the establishment of the Lord's spiritual kingdom (Daniel 2:36-45), the church (Colossians 1:9-14). When it comes to Old Testament prophecies, they were either fulfilled in the Old Testament or they were fulfilled in the New.
- Interpret all Old Testament prophecies as having been fulfilled, either literally or figuratively:* No Old Testament prophecy remains unfulfilled, especially those that pertain to Christ, the giving of the New Covenant, or the establishment of the Lord's spiritual kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17-18). As stated earlier, Jesus also said all that was written of Him in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms had been fulfilled (Luke 24:44). Therefore, Jesus assures us that nothing written in the Law or the Prophets remains unfulfilled. Furthermore, the apostles repeatedly quoted specific Old Testament prophecies and spoke of their fulfillment in the establishment of the church, in the new covenant, in the kingship and priesthood of Jesus Christ, etc. However, there are other Old Testament prophecies that are never mentioned in the New Testament. For example, there are two prophecies of Isaiah that many claim have yet to be fulfilled. One is, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4). The other is the latter part of Isaiah 65 where God promises "new heavens and a new earth" in which "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox..." (Isaiah 65:17-25). While there may be a temptation to equate the "new heavens and a new earth" of Isaiah 65 with the "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" of 2 Peter 3:13, the first speaks of a *fulfilled* event while the second speaks of a *future* event.

How are these prophecies to be interpreted? They must be interpreted so as to harmonize with New Testament teaching. Since war is a constant reality, and since predatory animals do not naturally feed together or eat the same foods, we must conclude these events will either be fulfilled literally in the future, or have been fulfilled figuratively in the past. However, knowing all Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled (everything in the Law and the Prophets), and understanding the figurative and symbolic nature of prophecy, we can only conclude the prophecies of Isaiah 2 and Isaiah 65 have been fulfilled in a *figurative* way. These two prophecies speak figuratively of peace and harmony. But where in the New Testament do we find a prophetic fulfillment of peace and harmony? The answer is in the numerous references concerning the uniting of Jews and Gentiles together as one flock, under the leadership of one Shepherd, in one body in Christ, or the church (John 10:15-16; Ephesians 2:11-22).

- *Some prophecies are to be understood in light of the past history of the people to whom the prophecy is given:* During Old Testament times many of the prophets spoke of the judgment God would bring upon the people for their moral, religious and political compromise. Not only had the people often departed from the Lord's commandments concerning moral and ethical conduct, many of the leaders of Israel and Judah sought to make alliances with surrounding nations for protection rather than repent of their willful disobedience and turn to God for deliverance. Therefore, the only way to properly understand those prophecies is to understand the historical setting in which those prophecies were given. In applying this principle, the Bible student should ask several questions, such as "what was the spiritual condition of the people," "who were their leaders and what is known of their personal history, and their moral and ethical values and practices," "who were the enemies of God's people and who were their allies," etc. Even though there were occasions when the people turned to God for deliverance, the Lord refused to respond and pronounced impending doom and destruction through the prophets. Why would God not deliver His people on these occasions? Only by examining their past history will it become apparent that they had often pleaded in the past with the Lord for deliverance from their enemies, only to go back to their wicked and disobedient lifestyles once the threat passed (Amos 2:4-16).
- *Some prophecies are to be interpreted in light of the current conditions of the people to whom the prophecies were given:* This is especially true of the prophetic revelations in John's letter to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation). Toward the end of the first century, the church was facing a rapid rise of persecution in certain cities in the form of "Caesar worship" and from Jews who sought to win the favor of Rome by bringing false accusations against Christians as being unpatriotic and disloyal to the Emperor. Because of this, many Christians were finding it easier to either compromise their convictions or to simply blend in with society to avoid detection. Both were unacceptable to the Lord. However, for those who remained faithful to Christ, there would naturally be questions about the future. Will persecutions increase, how long will they last, and what will be

the outcome? To answer these questions the Lord sent a message through the apostle John to the seven churches of Asia. This message was written in highly figurative and symbolic language to conceal the message from those who were bring persecution against the Lord's people, but could be interpreted within the churches by those whom the Lord had given the spiritual gift of interpreting prophecy (Revelation 1:3). The message itself was simple. Persecution will not only continue for a while, but will actually increase (Revelation 6:9-11). However, in the end, the Lord will bring His divine wrath against the persecutors with the political and economic collapse of the Roman Empire (Revelation 18:1-19:24), but will victoriously lead the church safely through the fires of persecution.

- *At times, the language of prophecy is very literal:* For example, the prophetic promises given by God concerning the Egyptian bondage of Abraham's descendants (Genesis 15:13-14) and the extent of the land they would eventually inhabit as their own (Genesis 15:18-20) are very literal. These prophecies were fulfilled in detail (Exodus 2:23-12:40; Joshua 21:45; 23:14; 1 Kings 8:54-56).
- *At other times, the language of prophecy is figurative or symbolic:* Much of the prophecy of Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24, Mark 13; Luke 21) is figurative or symbolic, such as "the abomination of desolation" spoken of by Daniel (Matthew 24:15), or the statement that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). Even the statement that "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" is figurative. Great care must be taken when interpreting prophetic revelation written or spoken in figurative language.

The most basic principle to apply in these cases is to interpret the prophecy in such a way that harmonizes with everything else the Scriptures reveal on the subject. Truth must harmonize with truth. The prophecy must be interpreted in its textual and historical context, and by applying all the other rules for interpreting figurative or symbolic language.

Another basic principle to apply in these cases is to interpret the figurative and symbolic language of a New Testament prophecy in light of the Old Testament meaning of those same figures or symbols. For example, the prophetic figures and symbols found in Matthew 24 are also found among the Old Testament prophets. Whatever those figures and symbols represented then, we must conclude they would represent the same thing in the prophetic warning of Jesus in Matthew 24. We have no logical reason for assuming otherwise. For example, Jesus said, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). Similar figures of speech are found in the prophecies of Isaiah (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4) regarding the judgment of God against wicked nations (Isaiah 13:1), and in the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezekiel

32:7) concerning the judgment of God against Egypt (Ezekiel 32:1-2). Why would we depart from the context in which Jesus spoke these things (the destruction of the temple) and not interpret similar figures of speech in Matthew 24 to refer to the judgment of God against the wicked and corrupt nation of Israel? Similar figures or symbols used by Jesus in Matthew 24 are found in the Old Testament prophets to refer to the suddenness of judgment, such as "lightning" and "coming in the clouds" or "coming with the clouds." Why would we not interpret similar figures and symbols in Matthew 24 to mean the same thing?

- *Prophecies can only be fulfilled once:* While there may be timeless spiritual principles that can be drawn from a given prophecy, the prophecy itself can only be fulfilled one time. Therefore, the *first* instance in which the specific conditions of a prophecy are fulfilled constitutes the *fulfillment* of the prophecy. The very nature of a prophecy demands fulfillment, otherwise the prophecy and the prophet that uttered it are false (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20-22). To claim a so-called *secondary fulfillment* of a particular prophecy not only makes the prophecy vague and ambiguous, but open to virtually any interpretation one may wish to give. Prophecies are either fulfilled or they are not. If they are not fulfilled, they are simply false. However, once the prophecy is fulfilled it is "filled full."