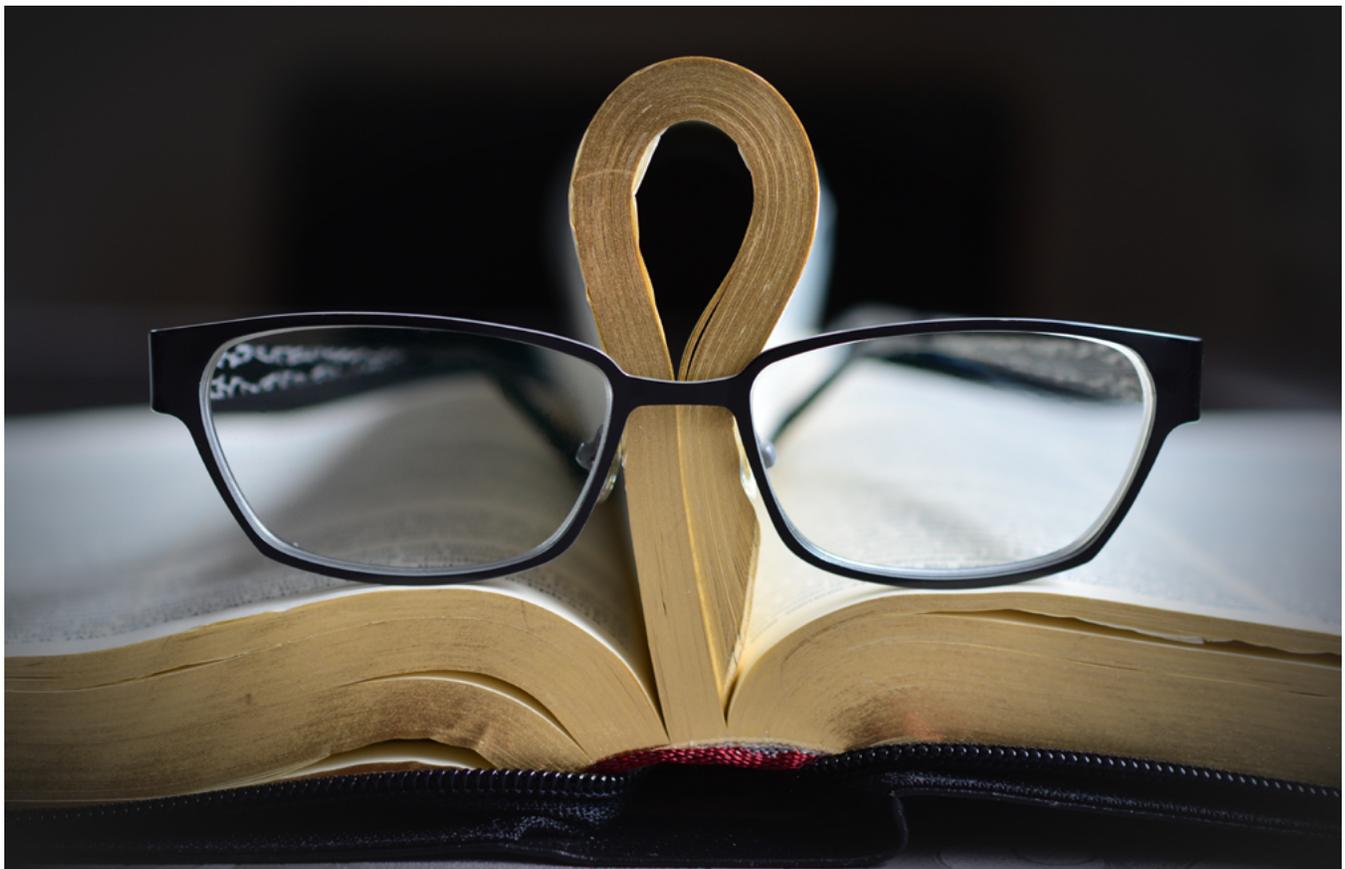


# Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses

**21 Rules For Interpreting The Bible**



2020 Edition  
By Roderick Graciano

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#### PLEASE NOTE

1. As in the original language Scriptures, I use the masculine pronoun sometimes in reference to a specific male *and* sometimes in reference to a person or persons generically. In other words, except when a specific male is in view, I use *he* or *him* to mean *that person* regardless of sex.
2. Throughout this document biblical references appear (usually) with the 3-letter book name abbreviations used by Logos Bible Software. The book name abbreviations are not followed by a period, but a period rather than a colon separates chapter and verse numbers. For example, Act 2.39 would designate the 39th verse of the second chapter of Acts.
3. Any transliterations of Greek words in this work are given according to the conventions of Modern Greek pronunciation.

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# Abbreviations

## Abbreviations For Bible Versions

CSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i> , © 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers.
GNT	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , 4 <sup>th</sup> Edition, © 1975 by the United Bible Societies.
HNT	<i>Hebrew New Testament</i> , © 1999/2013 by The Society For Distributing Hebrew Scriptures.
LXX	The Septuagint (ancient Greek version of the OT)
NAU	<i>The New American Standard Bible</i> , © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.
NIVO	<i>The Holy Bible: New International Version</i> , © 1984 by International Bible Society.

## Abbreviations For Bible Books

1Ch	1 Chronicles	Eph	Ephesians	Luk	Luke
1Co	1 Corinthians	Est	Esther	Mal	Malachi
1Jo	1 John	Ex	Exodus	Mar	Mark
1Ki	1 Kings	Eze	Ezekiel	Mat	Matthew
1Pe	1 Peter	Ezr	Ezra	Mic	Micah
1Sa	1 Samuel	Gal	Galatians	Nah	Nahum
1Th	1 Thessalonians	Gen	Genesis	Neh	Nehemiah
1Ti	1 Timothy	Hab	Habakkuk	Num	Numbers
2Ch	2 Chronicles	Hag	Haggai	Oba	Obadiah
2Co	2 Corinthians	Heb	Hebrews	Phil	Philippians
2Jo	2 John	Hos	Hosea	Phm	Philemon
2Ki	2 Kings	Isa	Isaiah	Pro	Proverbs
2Pe	2 Peter	Jam	James	Psa	Psalms
2Sa	2 Samuel	Jdg	Judges	Rev	Revelation
2Th	2 Thessalonians	Jer	Jeremiah	Rom	Romans
2Ti	2 Timothy	Job	Job	Rut	Ruth
3Jo	3 John	Joe	Joel	Song	The Song of Songs
Act	Acts	Joh	John	Tit	Titus
Amo	Amos	Jon	Jonah	Zec	Zechariah
Col	Colossians	Jos	Joshua	Zep	Zephaniah
Dan	Daniel	Jude	Jude		
Deut	Deuteronomy	Lam	Lamentations		
Ecc	Ecclesiastes	Lev	Leviticus		

## Bibliographic Abbreviations

1Ma	First Maccabees
<i>De Doc</i>	Augustine, <i>On Christian Doctrine</i>
LXX	<i>The Septuagint</i> (Ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Pss	Psalms Of Solomon
Tob	Tobit

## Miscellaneous Abbreviations

Ch.	Chapter
<i>et al</i>	and others
Grk	Greek
Heb	Hebrew
Ibid.	in the same place
Ms, Mss	Manuscript, Manuscripts
<i>op cit</i>	in the work cited
V., vv.	Verse, verses



# Introduction



**T**he Greek verb ἐρμηνεύω (ĕr-mĕ-nĕv-ō), appears in passages like Joh 9.7, and means “interpret” or “translate.” From this verb we derive our English word *hermeneutics*. With this word we refer to the study and application of principles for interpreting texts. As Bible students, we have an interest in *biblical hermeneutics*, the application of hermeneutical guidelines for interpreting the biblical text.

As serious Bible students, we must develop a personal set of hermeneutical rules or principles<sup>1</sup> by which we consciously handle the biblical text. Until we do so, we will tend to interpret and expound biblical passages in an inconsistent and less than compelling manner. On the other hand, when we do consciously embrace a set of interpretive principles, we will expound the Scriptures more convincingly, and avoid much confusion and unnecessary doctrinal debate.

When a person has adopted a set of interpretive principles in his writing or teaching, we say that he has, or uses, a certain *hermeneutic*. Depending upon his theological presuppositions and political or activist leanings, we might say he is teaching or writing from a Reformed hermeneutic, or a feminist hermeneutic, etc. By this we mean that this person interprets and expounds the Bible through the lens of his Reformed leanings, or feminist concerns. Ideally, we would all simply hold to a Christian hermeneutic, but to avoid misunderstandings we have to recognize that within the larger Christian community a person might have a Lutheran hermeneutic, a baptistic hermeneutic, a Pentecostal hermeneutic, or a Calvinistic hermeneutic, etc. By this we mean

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<sup>1</sup> Exegetes hesitate to offer “rules” of hermeneutics, because few principles of interpretation will apply universally without exception throughout the biblical corpus. Below I offer the reader “rules” by which I mean “principles” or “guidelines.”

that he interprets the Bible through the lens made up of the distinctive beliefs of his particular religious heritage. Even more fundamentally, it behooves us to know whether a person holds to a hermeneutic that presupposes a high or low view of inspiration; a person who believes that the Bible is the word of God will interpret Scripture differently from one who believes that the Bible is only inspired in the same sense as Shakespeare's plays. I have written this little book for people with a high view of biblical inspiration. For the sake of full disclosure, let me say that I subscribe to the Verbal Plenary Theory of inspiration, believing that God superintended the writing of the entire Bible in such a way as to make it free from error, utterly authoritative in the truths it affirms and rightly called the word of God.<sup>2</sup> As to my own *hermeneutic*, I can say that it is generally Evangelical.<sup>3</sup>

Many helpful and thorough books on hermeneutics already exist, so why have I written this brief introduction to the subject? For the following reasons:

- To emphasize the importance of our theological presuppositions in the process of interpretation (Rules 1-7).
- To highlight a principle that cannot be overemphasized today, namely, the Rule of Using Clear Passages To Interpret Obscure Ones (Rule 14).
- To propose some vital presuppositions and principles for interpreting Bible prophecy from a futurist perspective.
- To stimulate the reader to develop his own set of consistently utilized hermeneutical guidelines.

I present the following study with these purposes in mind. As you continue developing your personal hermeneutic beyond this introductory study, you will want to deepen your understanding of hermeneutics by reading some of the books in the bibliography.

## Levels Of Meaning In Biblical Interpretation

We use hermeneutical rules to interpret the biblical text. The goal of interpreting a text is to understand, share and apply its meaning. Having identified meaning as our goal, the first challenge of interpretation suddenly looms before us, namely, the challenge of defining *meaning*. *What is meaning?* What exactly do we identify as *the meaning* of a biblical passage? We cannot answer this question as easily as one might expect. Over the centuries of biblical exposition, interpreters have subscribed to one or more of the following levels of meaning in the Scriptures; I present them in the order of their importance, with most important first:

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2 Robert L. Plummer in *40 Questions About Interpreting The Bible*, concisely addresses theories of inspiration and the question of inerrancy in his response to questions 3 and 4.

3 Baptist, Calvinistic and Charismatic streams of tradition have all influenced my theological presuppositions.

## A. The Conventional Meaning

The **conventional meaning** is the literal meaning of the words and phrases themselves, read *before* interpreting any figures of speech or irony that the author may have used. We can compare this level of meaning to the *p'shat* reading in the Jewish PaRDeS<sup>4</sup> system of interpretation, although *p'shat* does take into account figures of speech. Identifying the conventional meaning and the intentional meaning (described below) is the essential starting point of biblical interpretation; without these two meanings, the other levels of meaning remain detached from the text, and therefore devoid of value for the believing community.

## B. The Intentional Meaning

The **intentional meaning** (also called the objective meaning)<sup>5</sup> is the meaning that the author(s), divine and human, intended to convey by a given text. We must contend with a bit of circularity in pursuing this level of meaning since the only window into the authors' intentions is the text itself. Thus, we must study the text to discern the authors' intended meaning, and we must discern the authors' intended meaning to correctly understand the text.<sup>6</sup> This is why studying the **conventional meaning** (above) must always precede our understanding of the **intentional meaning**. In other words, we must first study the lexical, grammatical and syntactical meanings of the words and phrases of a passage (the **conventional meaning**) before we decide what meaning the authors intended by arranging these words and phrases together in their larger context.

Thus, to grasp **intentional meaning**, the interpreter must take into account such things as historical setting and literary context, figures of speech and irony. While it may be challenging to discern authorial intent "it seems plausible," as David S. Dockery writes, "that through determined and dedicated effort the interpreter may reach back and read the text in light of its original context, culture, and setting."<sup>7</sup> We must accept the challenge of determining authorial intent, because though this level of meaning does not exhaust the entire meaning of a text, it trumps in importance all the other levels of meaning that follow.

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4 The acronym PaRDeS stands for four levels of interpretation, *p'shat* (straightforward, contextual interpretation), *remez* (interpretation making use of metaphors and allusions in the text to reveal the deeper meaning), *d'rash* (contemporary relevance, moral, homiletic application that may make use of allegory) and *sod* (mystical interpretation, perhaps using numerology).

5 David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church*, p. 177.

6 A truth we must take from this paradox is that we cannot conjecture an intentional meaning for a text that is not supported by the text itself.

7 David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church*, pp. 177-178.

In fact, many have rightly argued that this is the *only authoritative meaning* of a biblical text. As Fee and Stuart put it, "... the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. This is the starting point."<sup>8</sup> Or as Augustine summed it up much earlier, "Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray..."<sup>9</sup> If we declare, "The Bible says ...," our next words must present the authors' **intentional meaning**. As explained above, this does not negate the necessity of sorting out the **conventional meaning** first, nor does it imply that the authors' intentional meaning exhausts the *significance* or *applications* of a text for its readers, i.e., the **practical meaning** (point E, below). However, as Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. warns, "To confuse meaning and significance [i.e., meaning and application] is to reduce all hermeneutics to shambles."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, our assumption that the authors of Scripture *intended a specific meaning for what they wrote* establishes the need for interpretation (and hermeneutics): No intentional meaning = no need to interpret.

### C. The Typological Meaning

The **typological meaning** is the foreshadowing (and sometimes commemorating) accomplished by the things or events described in a passage. The typological meaning directs the reader to important things or events in God's redemptive plan that would occur after (and sometimes *before*)<sup>11</sup> the things or events described in the passage under consideration. See further information on typology in the Excursus after Rule 10, below.

### D. The Resonant Meaning

The **resonant meaning** of a passage is its literary echo of preceding biblical narratives or statements. This level of meaning has a similarity to the *remez* interpretation (in the Jewish PaRDeS system) which looks for allusions to other passages in the text. However, unlike with *remez*, we note the resonant meaning of a text not to formulate a "deeper meaning" for the passage under scrutiny, but rather to understand how the passage coordinates with the narrative and teaching of the larger biblical revelation, perhaps reviving or carrying forward an earlier biblical theme. The interpreter must exercise caution with regard to resonant meaning, because personal theological biases may prompt thematic associations in one's mind that were never intended by the

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8 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 30.

9 *De Doc* 1.36.41.

10 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. K. S. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), reprinted by permission in G. K. Beale, *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994).

11 The baptism of the Levitical priests (Ex 29, 40; Lev 8), for example, "typified," or commemorated the preceding judgment-deliverance-consecration at the Red Sea (Ex 14; 1Co 10.1-2).

biblical authors. Furthermore, with resonant meaning one must resist the temptation to prioritize allusion over the direct referent of the text (i.e., replace the intentional meaning with the resonant meaning).

## E. The Practical Meaning

The **practical meaning** of a text is similar to what Stephen I. Wright calls the *responsive meaning*.<sup>12</sup> It is the reader's personal response to a biblical text as he applies it for his own instruction, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2Ti 3.16). This level of meaning overlaps with the *d'rash* interpretation in the Jewish PaRDeS system; *d'rash* may use typology and allegory as it seeks the practical and homiletical message of a passage.

Let us note here that while we can confidently affirm that the author of a biblical text had only one fundamental meaning for a particular statement (the **intentional meaning**, number 2 above), he may well have had multiple applications in mind (**practical meanings**) from the outset. For example, Pro 11.4 says,

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,  
But righteousness delivers from death.

As a wisdom saying, the one fundamental meaning of this proverb is: Righteous living, far more than material wealth, is apt to protect a person from the retributions of offended parties. However, while the author of this proverb undoubtedly had an everyday application in mind, namely that living righteously will help a person avoid offending others, the use of the phrase *day of wrath* is calculated to make the reader think of a judgment-day application as well.

## F. Esthetic Meaning

The **esthetic meaning** of a text is the poetic and spiritual beauty that the reader or hearer of Scripture perceives subjectively from the sound, repetition or other aspects of the text.

## G. Mystical Meaning

Popular both among rabbinical interpreters (cf. the *sod* interpretation in the PaRDeS system) and medieval Christian interpreters, the **mystical (or anagogical) meaning**<sup>13</sup> is that "hidden meaning" discovered by clever expositors using numerology or over-allegorization to make passages about practical and earthly things speak of ethereal things. The mystical level of meaning holds little value in biblical interpretation, for as Bruce Corley, et al, write, "The Bible is not a jumble of religious opinion or a mystical cryptogram that the contemporary reader sorts out ac-

12 Stephen I. Wright, "Exegesis And The Preacher," *Evangel*, Summer 1999, pp. 62-67.

13 Also called *sensus mysticus* or *sensus spiritualis*. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms : Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985).

ording to whim or fad. On the contrary, God purposed to speak through human language and to be understood.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, since mystical meaning emerges from subjective choices made by the interpreter (often strongly influenced by his personal soteriology or ecclesiology) it tends to detach itself from the text, or at least from the text’s intentional meaning.

To help solidify these seven kinds of meaning in our minds, let’s illustrate them using Ex 29.4:

Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the doorway of the tent of meeting and wash them with water.

We can express the seven meanings of this text in the following ways:

- **Conventional Meaning**: God commanded Moses to bring Aaron and his sons to the tabernacle entrance and wash them there with water (immerse them, according to rabbinical understanding of the text).
- **Intentional Meaning**: God instructed that a water ceremony (i.e., immersion) be part of marking the end of the priests’ private lives and the beginning of their public service to Himself and His people.
- **Resonant Meaning**: The immersion of the priests would serve as a reminder of Israel’s break from her old life in Egypt, when God brought the nation across the Red Sea to begin her new life of service to Him as “a kingdom of priests” (Ex 19.6). The immersion of the priests resonates with the earlier “baptism” of the nation “in the cloud and in the sea” (1Co 10.2).
- **Typological Meaning**: The immersion of the priests foreshadowed the baptism of Jesus in particular and the baptism of His followers in general; in every case, baptism marks the beginning of priestly service to God.
- **Practical Meaning**: Christ followers must see themselves as priests and ministers, and understand that by their baptism they are consecrated to service in God’s kingdom.
- **Esthetic Meaning**: The revelation of the profound privilege of being called into God’s work as a “coworker” warms the heart. The imagery of leaving the old life behind on the far shore of the sea leaves one in awe.
- **Mystical Meaning**: **Roman Catholic**: The immersion of the priests points to the power of sanctified water to remit sin. **Lutheran**: As the ceremonial water sanctified priests, so baptism sanctifies us by producing faith and effecting our new birth. **Evangelical**: The baptism of the priests points to the fact that God’s servant must be born again by “the washing of regeneration” (Tit 3.5).

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14 Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke and Grant Lovejoy, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 2nd ed., (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), p. 8.

I reject all the above mystical meanings for Ex 29.4, and acknowledge that the esthetic meaning for any passage will be highly subjective. I see the practical, typological and resonant meanings of a passage as potentially very helpful, but as a Bible teacher I would only feel the need *to defend* what I perceive as the intentional and conventional meanings of a text. It is for the sake of extracting the meaning of a passage on these two levels, that I offer the following introduction to hermeneutical principles.

## Our Hermeneutical Glasses

We all read the Bible through mental lenses. We acquired these interpretive lenses over the course of time, through our life experiences and by absorbing the ideas of our teachers. We don't think about our mental lenses much, so we rarely "get our glasses checked." Consequently, we may have blind spots that allow us to drift into fallacious interpretations of Scripture. Our interpretive lenses get marred, or may have been defective from the beginning, but they need not remain so. We can use hermeneutical principles to polish, or even re-grind them.

Before we begin to polish our interpretive lenses, however, we must pause to acknowledge the importance of our glasses frames. When it comes to interpreting Scripture, the mental framework that supports our interpretive lenses consist of our presuppositions about God and the Bible. Obviously, if we disbelieve that God exists, or doubt that He is omnipotent or personal, our presuppositions will slant our lenses radically as we study the Bible. The hermeneutical principles that I share below are based on the presuppositions that God *does* exist and *is* omnipotent and personal, and that He has inspired the canonical Scriptures. Furthermore, I believe that God sovereignly rules the universe, working all things together for His purposes, and that therefore the observable universe can be rationally understood. In other words, our world is amenable to reason rather than absurd, and therefore, we can apply rules of logic as we study its parts, including the biblical text. If the reader concurs with these presuppositions, if he is comfortable wearing these mental frames, we may return to the matter of the lenses.

# The Seven Unities

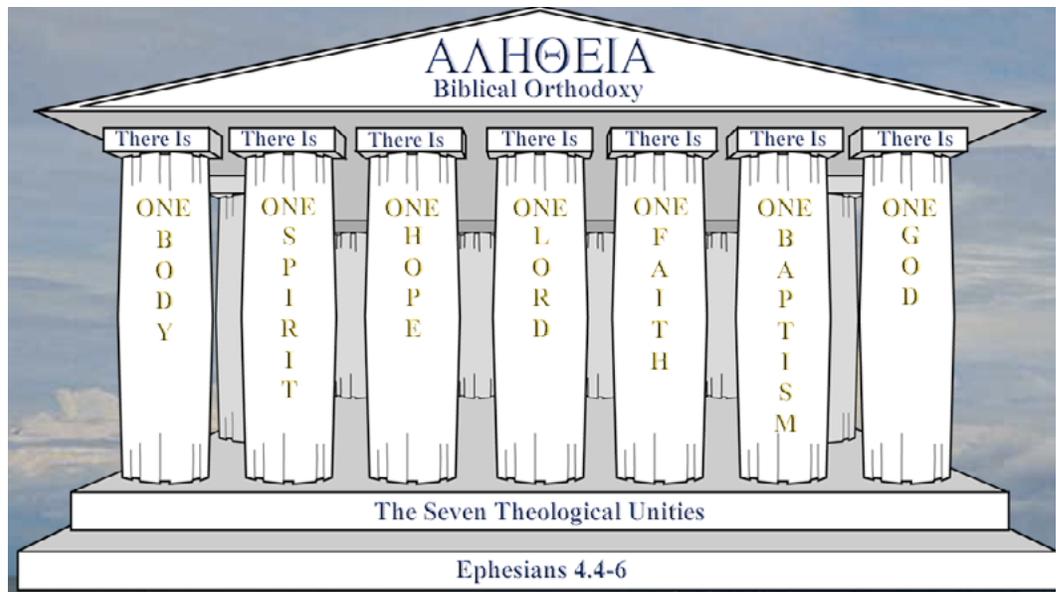
## The Theological Foundation

Of the various agents we can use to polish our interpretive glasses, the most important ones are theological truths. Of course, there are countless theological perspectives, and even the best theologians' attempts to distill the most important truths of the Bible have often provided us with more information than we can assimilate. So what theological truths should we pick for polishing our glasses? Thankfully, the Holy Spirit Himself has given us a concise list of the most fundamental of all theological principles. They appear in the apostle Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, Eph 4.4-6:

There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We call this set of theological principles **The Seven Unities**. We call them unities because each item in this list names a thing of which only a unit exists. The Seven Unities also have a unifying effect

upon the people who believe them. Paul's immediate purpose for listing The Seven Unities was to call the Ephesian church to unity among themselves. Since the Ephesian believers were inherently one body,



indwelt by one Spirit, ruled by one Lord, etc., there was every reason to work together harmoniously, forgiving one another and avoiding all schisms and selfish agendas. However, The Seven Unities also provide us with excellent material for polishing our hermeneutical lenses. One of my mentors, William Round, helped me realize that Paul's Seven Unities are like pillars that support the edifice of biblical orthodoxy. I have illustrated them as such with the graphic above.

We believe many other theological truths, but any truly Christian truth rests upon and amplifies these seven.

Returning to our lens-polishing analogy, I propose that applying the Seven Unities can take some major flaws out of our hermeneutical lenses. Let's start polishing our glasses with them and see if our interpretive vision improves.

## 1. There Is One Body

Let's apply the polishing agent of the first unity: **there is one body** (Eph 4.4). We do have to jump ahead for a moment, and apply the all-important **rule of context** (rule 11 below), to identify the "body" of this first unity. Upon examining the rest of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, and checking his other epistles, we find that the body to which Paul refers here is the corporate community called "the church" (Greek: ἐκκλησία, ěk-klē-sē-ə), an identification he makes explicit in Col 1.18,24 (cf. Eph 5.23). Thus, the first unity tells us that in God's economy, there is *only one* body, or community of people, connected with the Spirit, the hope, the Lord, the faith, the baptism and the Father, and this body is called "the church."

With this first of the Seven Unities in mind, let's look at a historically controversial passage, Mat 16.18, where Jesus said:

... I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (ἐκκλησία), and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Among other controversies, this passage has engendered a debate over when the body we call "the church" began. Many Christians have interpreted this prediction of Jesus, "I will build my church," to mean that the church would originate at a time subsequent to the time of that utterance. People who so interpret Mat 16.18 favor the day of Pentecost, described in Act 2, as the date of the church's birth. However, a Pentecost birthday for the church directly implies that the church *excludes* all the saints of the Old Testament. Many Christian teachers do indeed affirm that the church excludes Old Testament believers, *as well as* believers who come to faith after the catching up of Christians at the second coming of Christ (1Th 4.16-17). Does this kind of teaching not violate the first unity? Does it not imply more than one body?

Now, those who teach that the church includes *only* the saints after Pentecost have arguments to support their position, but we cannot fully analyze those argument in this short study on hermeneutics. My point here is only that the first of the seven unities, "there is one body," cautions us against hastily dividing up the people of God who have lived in different ages. Before jumping to the conclusion that the church "was born on Pentecost," we must carefully work through the many biblical references to an ἐκκλησία, including the 103 instances in the Old Tes-

tament (LXX), to see if the term really describes *only* a post-Pentecost entity. The unity of the one body encourages us to reexamine Mat 16.18, and to consider the possibility of an alternate interpretation that would not divide up the one body.

Upon that reexamination, we discover that the underlying Greek word for the verb “I will build,” does not mean “to found,” or “to begin,” but rather to “build, build up or strengthen.” Some years ago, a visit to northern England reminded me that many of the ancient church buildings had buttresses or other reinforcements added to them, not when they were first built, but when they began to show signs of weakness or decay. This phenomenon suggests an alternate interpretation for Mat 16.18. The church already existed (and awaited the Messiah) in the second-temple era, but had fallen into doctrinal and spiritual decay. Christ announced to His disciples that He would build up and reinforce the church by Peter’s (and their) living testimony of the Messiah’s divine identity and imminent work of redemption.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the first of The Seven Unities has helped us polish our hermeneutical glasses and understand Mat 16.18 in a way that may be superior to the “Pentecost birthday” reading.

## 2. There Is One Spirit

Let’s continue buffing our interpretive lenses with the second unity: **there is one Spirit** (Eph 4.4). The One Spirit Paul referred to throughout his epistle to the Ephesians is the Holy Spirit of God, by which we have access to the Father (Eph 2.18) and by which we were “sealed” once we believed (Eph 1.13). The second unity teaches us that there is only one Holy Spirit, i.e., God has only one divine Spirit, just as a man or woman has only one human spirit.

The direct application of this second Unity for the Ephesians was that since there is only one Holy Spirit sanctifying, empowering and guiding the church, they should remain unified as believers and not think that the Holy Spirit would lead one believer in a manner contrary to the way he would lead the others, nor think that a prophetic word (or other charismatic manifestation) received by one would somehow obviate the Spirit-led ministry of another. However, regarding the hermeneutical value of this unity of the Spirit, let’s look at another passage. When the apostle John was caught up to heaven, as recorded in the book of Revelation, he saw a richly symbolic vision of God’s throne involving various living entities. In Rev 4.5, John reported that:

...Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Someone unfamiliar with the Seven Unities might be confused by this reference to “the seven

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15 Mat 16.18 has an interesting **resonant meaning** in that it uses the same verb, *build up*, used in Gen 2.22 (see LXX and HNT). Eve, the archetypal bride, was “built up” from the preexisting flesh from Adam’s side. Conversely, the **typological meaning** of Gen 2.22 is that the LORD would eventually build up the ultimate bride from a subset of Adam’s descendants.

spirits of God,”<sup>16</sup> and start telling others that God consists of seven spirits rather than just one, like humans do. However, we can recall Paul’s declaration in Eph 4.4 that there is one Spirit, and affirm that while a plurality of persons exists within the Godhead (more on this in connection with the seventh unity below), this plurality does not involve a multiplicity of Holy Spirits.

Thus, the second theological unity compels us to seek a better interpretation of “the seven spirits of God” than the one that says God has an inherent plurality of Holy Spirits. As we look again at the phrase in question, we realize that the preposition *of* has other possible meanings besides *intrinsic to*. The word *of* in this construction can also mean *under the special authority of*. The phrase *spirits of God* can refer to “spirits under God’s command,” as it does in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The War Scroll (1QM, 4Q491-496), 12.8-9, mentions:

...a host of angels are with our commissioned forces.

...and the host of His spirits is with our steps.<sup>17</sup>

God’s “spirits,” in the context of the scrolls, are something other than God’s essential and eternal Holy Spirit; they are instead angelic forces under God’s command. This Dead Sea usage inclines us toward the idea supported in apocalyptic literature that the phrase, “seven spirits of God,” refers to seven archangels,<sup>18</sup> or cherubim, commissioned by God to gather intelligence and carry out His edicts upon the earth (compare Zec 1.8-11).<sup>19</sup> Thus the second of The Seven Unities has helped us see our way toward a better interpretation of another passage.

### 3. There Is One Hope

Let us keep polishing our hermeneutical glasses with the third unity: **there is one hope** (Eph 4.4). In his epistles and in his preaching ministry, Paul loved to talk about the believers’ great hope. For Paul, that hope is the hope of eternal life (Tit 1.2; 3.7), but for him this did not mean floating about forever as disembodied spirits! The hope involves the redemption of our physical

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16 The seven spirits are mentioned also in Rev 1.4, 3.1 and 5.6.

17 Wise, Abegg and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (HaperSanFrancisco), 1996.

18 Named Suru’el, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa’el, Gabriel, and Remiel. See 1 Enoch 20.1-7 and notes in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1 (Doubleday, 1983).

19 Some interpreters prefer to understand the seven spirits of God in Revelation as “another way of speaking of the [one] Holy Spirit,” noting that “the number seven suggests completeness, ‘the Holy Spirit in his fullness of life and blessing.’” The problem with this interpretation is the lack of biblical precedent for speaking of the fullness or completeness of a thing by referring to it as *seven things*. Others have suggested that the references in the Revelation to “the seven spirits of God” refer to the one Holy Spirit as having seven aspects of His character (often referring to Isa 11.2), and that we should translate the Revelation references as “the sevenfold Spirit of God.” However, the biblical writers had a way to say “sevenfold” had they intended to do so (and Isa 11.2 mentions six, not seven, aspects of the Spirit of YHVH). Nevertheless, based on the second unity, the idea of a “sevenfold Holy Spirit” is still superior to interpreting the Revelation passages as referring to seven eternal Holy Spirits.

bodies (Rom. 8.23), that is, physical resurrection (Act 23.6; 24.15; 26.6-8), enabling us to enter the next life as whole persons at the soon appearing of Jesus Christ (Tit 2.13). The redemptive work of Christ is the basis of the hope and Jesus is Himself the personification of that hope (1Ti 1.1).

With this “one hope” in mind, let’s look at Rev 21.9-10, which speaks of the Bride of Christ. The New Testament often alludes to Christ as a “bridegroom,” but not until these verses does it give us a good look at the “bride...of the Lamb”:

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

Clearly, the Lamb in the book of Revelation represents Christ, but who or what is His bride? These verses identify the bride as a heavenly city, but no one marries a city, do they? Who or what is this bride-city?

Someone once suggested to me that the bride of Christ spoken of in Revelation represents a future, *elite group* of Christians. While all Christians will go to heaven, this person said, the members of this elite group will be rewarded by the gift of special heavenly intimacy with Christ, because of the superior holiness they maintained while they were still mortals on earth.

Should we accept this interpretation of Rev 21.9-10 as viable? No. We can immediately reject an elitist interpretation of “the bride” based on the third unity. Any interpretation of Scripture that posits essentially different destinies for distinct subsets of God’s people violates the third theological unity: **there is one hope**. We err if we think or teach that some of God’s people can hope for special intimacy with Christ as His bride, while others can only hope for proximity to Christ in heaven. It’s true that Christ’s parables teach distinct rewards for different individuals on judgment day (e.g., Luk 19.12-27). It’s also true that believers will have differing roles and responsibilities after the resurrection. Nevertheless, the one ultimate destiny and hope for all believers is Christ Himself (1Tim 1.1; Tit 2.13; consider also Luk 23.40-43; Joh 14.3; 17.3,25; Phil 1.21-23; 3.8; Rev 22.3-4). We find no hint whatsoever in the teaching of the apostles that believers will be assigned differing levels of access to Christ or to any of heaven’s essential glories.

So who or what is the Bride of Christ? Well, the first unity points us to the answer. Since there is only one body of the redeemed, and this bride of Revelation is a corporate body, i.e., a city, we have good reason to believe that this bride is another representation of the one body of Christ, the Church. Sure enough, the context tells us (Rev 19.7-8) that the bride is dressed in fine

linen that “stands for the righteous acts of the saints.” Unless she’s wearing someone else’s dress, the bride is the corporate body of the saints, the Church. Once again, applying the theological unities to our interpretive glasses has helped us see a false interpretation and arrive at a better one. The inspired declarations that there is only one hope and one body have helped us read the Bible with a sense of the underlying unity of the church and its destiny, and have kept us from an interpretation that would exclude some of the saints from the celestial wedding.

#### 4. There Is One Lord

The fourth unity cost the early Christians dearly: **there is one Lord** (Eph 4.5). As we read in The New Bible Dictionary:

The Roman emperor too was acclaimed as lord (*dominus*) by his subjects, and successive emperors increasingly claimed their total allegiance; this was to lead to keen conflicts of conscience for Christians at a later stage.<sup>20</sup>

“Keen conflicts of conscience” indeed! If God’s economy had allowed the possibility of multiple Lord’s, the Christians of the Roman Empire could have acknowledged Caesar’s lordship in good conscience and not been thrown to the lions. Instead they boldly confessed, as the apostles had, that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was their “only Sovereign and Lord” (Jud 1.4). They often sealed their confession with blood. This history reminds us that The Seven Unities answered practical questions, not just exegetical ones. The unities supported the edifice of Christian orthodoxy, answering the heresies and competing truth-claims that emerged alongside the New Testament Scriptures.

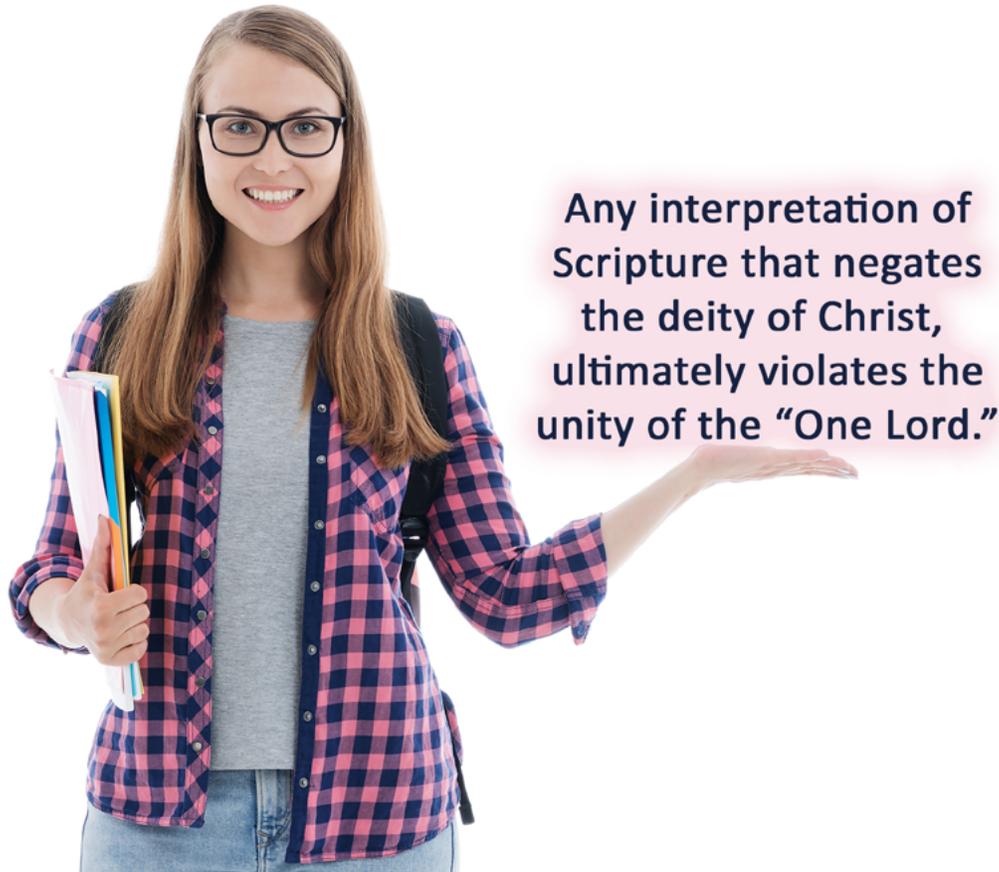


However, in this little book we explore the important hermeneutical application of [The Seven Unities](#). Applying the fourth unity will help us see the falsity of any interpretation of Scripture that makes Christ less than God, because the doctrine of Christ’s deity follows logically from the apostles insistence that there is no more than one Lord. Let’s think it through. Paul repeated and clarified this fourth theological unity in 1Co 8.5-6, where he wrote:

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<sup>20</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1962.

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and **there is but one Lord**, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.



Notice that the explicit declaration that Jesus Christ is the one Lord does not negate the lordship of the Father. Passages like this one just quoted, while mentioning both God the Father and Jesus Christ, do not emphasize the distinction but rather the unity of these two members of the Trinity. If Christ is Lord and God is Lord, Christ and God are one in essence. If Jesus Christ is the one Lord, He must be of the very same nature as the Father.

Paul taught exactly this in passages like Phil 2.6-11, where referring to Christ he wrote: Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.

We see that the lordship of Jesus Christ does not detract from the glory of the Father, but rather, the lordship of the Father is made manifest through Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> Christ's lordship and the Father's lordship is one and the same divine lordship.

Therefore, any interpretation of Scripture that negates the deity of Christ, ultimately violates the unity of the "One Lord," because proposing a less-than-divine nature for Christ would create an essential distinction between Christ and God. This would make Christ one Lord and God another Lord, and this cannot be. The fourth theological unity assures us that Christ and God the Father are in essence the same, one divine Lord, and we dare not interpret any scripture in a manner that detracts from the divine lordship of either person.

Polishing our hermeneutical glasses with the fourth unity will help us repeatedly as we answer the attempts of society to cast doubt upon the deity of Christ. The fourth unity will help us see clearly whenever we need to interpret a "proof text" proffered as evidence that Jesus is less than our one divine Lord.

## 5. There Is One Faith

Let's continue refining our lenses with the fifth theological unity: **there is one faith** (Eph 4.5). The "one faith" Paul spoke of is the one set of redemptive beliefs through which God extends salvation to mankind (see 1Ti 4.6; 1Co 16.13; 2Co 13.5; Phil 1.27; Tit 1.13; 2.2). We must keep this unity in mind when interpreting passages that emphasize the newness of the era that dawned at Christ's first advent. For example, consider two passages, Joh 1.17 and Luk 16.16:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Some Christians would interpret these two passages as support for the idea that, until Jesus came, people obtained salvation by keeping the law. I hope this alarms you. It grieves me that many American Christians believe that people in the Old Testament era were saved by offering sacrifices or by keeping the ten commandments, and that only since Christ's first advent have people been saved by grace. With these kinds of ideas floating about in our Bible studies, we must be prepared to remind our peers of the fifth theological unity: **there is one faith**. Abraham had this one faith in 1800 BC (Joh 8.56; Rom 4.1-3). Job had this one faith also, back in

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21 Interestingly, in the New Testament, the title *Lord* is very rarely conferred upon "God" or the "Father" but almost always upon the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In those passages where the word *Lord* does refer to "God" or "the Father," it is usually a translation from the Old Testament of God's personal covenant name, YHVH. In those passages where the New Testament uses the word *Lord* as a title, with its full biblical connotations of ultimate and universal sovereign, it is as the title of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Act 2.36).

the time of the patriarchs (Job 19.25-27). David had it in 1,000 BC (Psa 51), and Isaiah had this same faith in 750 BC (Isa 53).

We cannot give a full exegesis of John 1.17 and Luke 16.16 in this study, but suffice it to say that the fifth unity will help us understand that law and grace (in Joh 1.17), and law and gospel (in Luk 16.16) are two sides of the same coin, not two contrasting “faiths.” The law of Moses pointed people in faith to the coming grace to be poured out through Messiah’s redemptive work, and in like manner, the law and the prophets pointed people in faith to the Good News that would be fully revealed in Messiah’s death and resurrection. In every case, redemption came by grace through faith in Messiah’s atoning sacrifice. Polishing our glasses with the fifth unity helps us see the continuity between the covenants, rather than imagining an enmity between them, as we interpret.

## 6. There Is One Baptism

Two more theological unities will help us polish up our hermeneutical glasses. Let us continue with the sixth: **there is one baptism** (Eph 4.5). Like the others, this theological unity was intended to unify the church — the countless doctrinal controversies over baptism notwithstanding! Whatever else we believe about Christian baptism, we must agree that there is *only one*; that is the **conventional meaning** of Paul’s statement, but what is the **intentional meaning**?

Paul’s affirmation of *one baptism* could conceivably mean that there is:

1. Absolutely one baptism (no other religions have baptism).
2. Only one *kind* of Christian baptism (not one kind of baptism for adults and another for infants, nor one kind for Jews and another for Gentiles).
3. Only one *mode* of Christian baptism.
4. Only one *medium* of Christian baptism.
5. Only one *true* baptism (Christian vs. pagan and Jewish).
6. Only one *combined significance* of water and Spirit baptism.
7. Only one baptism *for which we are responsible* (baptism in the Spirit is God’s concern).
8. Only one *non-repeatable* baptism for the Christian (no re-baptism).
9. Only one *object* of baptism, namely, Christ (not also Peter, nor Paul, etc.).

The context of Paul’s statement, however, clarifies his meaning. The historical context eliminates the first four alternatives: both Judaism and paganism practiced baptism, and history provides no evidence of debate arising in the apostolic era about different kinds of Christian baptism for different kinds of people, or about different modes (e.g., immersion vs. sprinkling), or different mediums (only water was used). The textual context eliminates alternatives 5 through 8 because

Paul was not writing a polemic against false baptisms, nor making any direct reference to being baptized in the Spirit (as in 1Co 12.13), nor did he ever have any occasion to argue against being re-baptized.<sup>22</sup> Many of these alternatives are eliminated also by the simple fact that they do not pertain to issues that united or divided the apostolic congregations. Hence, we are constrained to understand Paul as affirming the one *object* of Christian baptism, namely Jesus. Just as Israel was “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1Co 10.2), that is, just as they were consecrated to Moses and Moses’ divinely revealed agenda for them to become a kingdom of priests (Ex 19.3-6), so Christians are baptized into Christ (Rom 6.3; Gal 3.27) and thereby consecrated to Christ’s divine, kingdom agenda. **There is only one Christian baptism and it consecrates us to only one person, Jesus Christ.** The larger context of the New Testament with its mandate to be baptized (Mat 28.19-20) and the immediate context of Paul’s argument for maintaining unity (Eph 4.1-3), together imply that this one Christian baptism of consecration to Jesus is mandatory for the believer who has been saved by faith in Him.

With this in mind, let’s look at the baptismal event of Act 19.1-6:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

This narrative records at least two baptisms experienced by the same “disciples”: John’s baptism of repentance, and baptism into the name of Jesus.

Does this contradict the sixth unity, “there is one baptism,” since these Ephesian fellows were baptized twice? On the contrary, this narrative confirms the sixth unity, and conversely the sixth unity helps us understand what occurred on this occasion in Ephesus. Many baptismal rites of the Jews — including John’s national baptism of repentance — led up, in various ways, to Christian baptism. The Levitical baptism of priestly consecration, along with John’s baptism which echoed it, particularly foreshadowed baptismal consecration to the great High Priest who would come. Once Christ did come and accomplish His atoning sacrifice (as confirmed by His resurrection), it became appropriate for His followers to be baptized in His name. So, when Paul found these godly men in Ephesus, who probably awaited the One whom John the Baptist had

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<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, as described below, Paul re-baptized the Ephesian “disciples” who had only been baptized “into John’s baptism” (Act 19.1-6).

announced as arriving imminently, the apostle could not leave them disjointed from the rest of the Christian body. Instead, he baptized them with the one baptism that unifies all believers.

Let us note that this passage implies the appropriateness of re-baptism for those who were baptized before, but not explicitly consecrated to Jesus in their previous baptism. The Scriptures do not explicitly command re-baptism, so we cannot require it. Nevertheless, the Christian (like me) who was baptized at an early age, with no understanding whatsoever of the ritual's biblical meaning, should be permitted to be baptized "into the name of the Lord Jesus," should they so desire.

Returning to the Act 19 passage, we observe that it is primarily about the Holy Spirit, and only secondarily about Christian baptism. Regarding its primary topic, many would see a *baptism in the Spirit* occurring in verse 6. Assuming, for now, that we can correctly refer to this event as a baptism in the Spirit, one might ask: would *this* (like other cases in Acts of water baptism and Spirit baptism occurring before or after one another) contradict Paul's principle of the one baptism? I answer, Certainly not! However, **the sixth unity does challenge us to formulate a doctrine of Spirit baptism that does not violate its principle of one baptism.** Can we explain the relationship between water baptism in Christ and baptism in the Spirit in such a way as to show that together they constitute the one baptism? Alternatively, must we relegate baptism in the Spirit to a doctrinal sphere entirely removed from Christian water baptism, so as to maintain the unity of the one (water) baptism in Christ? We cannot adequately answer these questions in this brief hermeneutical treatise, but we can appreciate that applying hermeneutical and theological guidelines in our study of the Scriptures will help us identify exegetical and doctrinal questions that need answering!

So, the sixth unity has helped us clarify why Paul re-baptized the Ephesian disciples, and has also brought to light a doctrinal question for further study.

## 7. There Is One God

Let's continue polishing our hermeneutical glasses with the seventh and final unity: **there is one God** (Eph 4.6). No theological principle is more central to the Holy Bible than the truth that there is only one God. Starting with Moses and ending with the apostles, all the prophets declare it:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deu 6.4)

There is no one like you, O LORD, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. (1Ch 17.20)

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the

world and that there is no God but one. (1Co 8.4)

Not only does the whole Bible teach that there is only one God, but it consistently condemns as impostors any other beings who pretend to deity. As we saw above, the apostle Paul noted that the world was full of “so-called gods” (1Co 8.5), but Jews and Christians understood that the pagan deities who energized idol worship and even gave supernatural signs at times, were only demons in disguise, deceiving their worshipers:

They sacrificed to demons, which are not God — gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear. (Deu 32.17)

They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. (Psa 106.37)

...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God... (1Co 10.20)

How ironic then, that the so-called Jehovah’s Witnesses attempt to circumvent the clear testimony to Christ’s deity in John 1.1 by saying in their New World Translation that “the Word was a god.”<sup>23</sup> They plunge headlong into heresy with this forced translation, for it makes Christ a second God! This of course violates the wide theological context of Scripture and flies in the face of the seventh theological unity.<sup>24</sup>

Much more could be said (and has been written!) about the translation of John 1.1,<sup>25</sup> but the point here is that as we study Scripture, the seventh unity will guard us from interpretations that involve any kind of polytheism including:

23 The JW’s appeal to Greek grammar to make their case for this translation. A woodenly literal rendering of John 1.1 would look like this: “In beginning was the word, and the word was with the God, and God was the word.” Notice that the definite article, *the*, appears before the first occurrence of the word *God* in the Greek original, but not before the second occurrence of *God*. When there is no *definite* article, *the*, before a noun, Greek grammar allows the translator to supply the *indefinite* article, *a or an*, **should syntax and context allow it**. In this case, however, the immediate context of John 1.1-4 indicates that the (1) the “God” in view in Joh 1.1c is “the God” of Joh 1.1b, and (2) the Word is the Creator of Genesis 1.1, i.e., the One God. Furthermore, the syntax of Joh 1.1c demands dropping the article before *God* in order to make *the Word* the subject of a predicate nominative construction in which *the Word* is the subject which belongs to *God* as a class. Had John use the article both before *Word* and before *God* in Joh 1.1c, he would have made God and the Word identical in every sense, contradicting what he had just said about the Word being *with God*. In other words, dropping the article before *God* in Joh 1.1c was necessary to express that the Word had all the attributes of God, while at the same time being distinct from the Father (or from the Godhead as a whole).

24 To be sure, the JWs endeavor to explain away this violation of the One God principle. They propose that John’s reference to Christ as “a god” (Joh 1.1) and Thomas’ exclamation, “My Lord and my God!” (Joh 20.28) just refer to Christ’s exalted *position* without speaking of his essential *nature*. However, such an idea betrays their shallow understanding of first-century Jewish culture, and of John’s writing style and purpose. Either Christ is the one God or he is no God. He cannot be *a god* who already existed in the beginning (John 1.1), who created all things (Joh 1.3) and who has life inherently in himself just like the Father (Joh 1.4; 5.26) and yet isn’t THE God!

25 I can recommend Leon Morris’s treatment of John 1.1 in his *New International Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995), including his footnote on translating the Greek on pp. 68 and 69.

- The Gnostic and JW idea of a demiurge, that is, of a secondary god through whom the world was created;
- Dualism that attempts to explain the problem of evil by proposing two Gods, one good and one evil;
- Henotheism, the belief in one supreme god among other gods, and
- Tritheism, the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three separate and distinct deities.

The last of the seven unities constrains us to only two possible understandings of God’s nature: either God exists as an absolute monad, as in the Muslim conception of Allah, or He has a multiplicity of persons within one infinite essence, as in the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Bible teaches the latter, and does so with increasing clarity from Genesis to Revelation.

Why then do people have such difficulty with the idea of the Trinity, i.e., the idea of three divine persons in one Godhead? For the simple reason that God is Spirit and we do not understand the “physics” of the spiritual realm. I once spoke to a Jehovah’s Witness who held up three fingers before my face and challenged me with the question, “How can you make these three into one?” The answer is that no one can make three fingers into one finger, but also that no one should think of God as flesh and bone (like fingers)! God is spirit and not constrained to the laws of material physics. For God to have a plurality of persons within His one spiritual being poses nor more of a problem than does the church having a plurality of persons within its one spiritual body.

God being one, however, implies a unity within Himself — not only of essence but also of character and purpose. This provides us with one of the most important hermeneutical principles of all: the principle that the Bible does not contradict itself.<sup>26</sup> I will describe this [Rule of Internal Consistency](#) in Part 2.

## Reflection

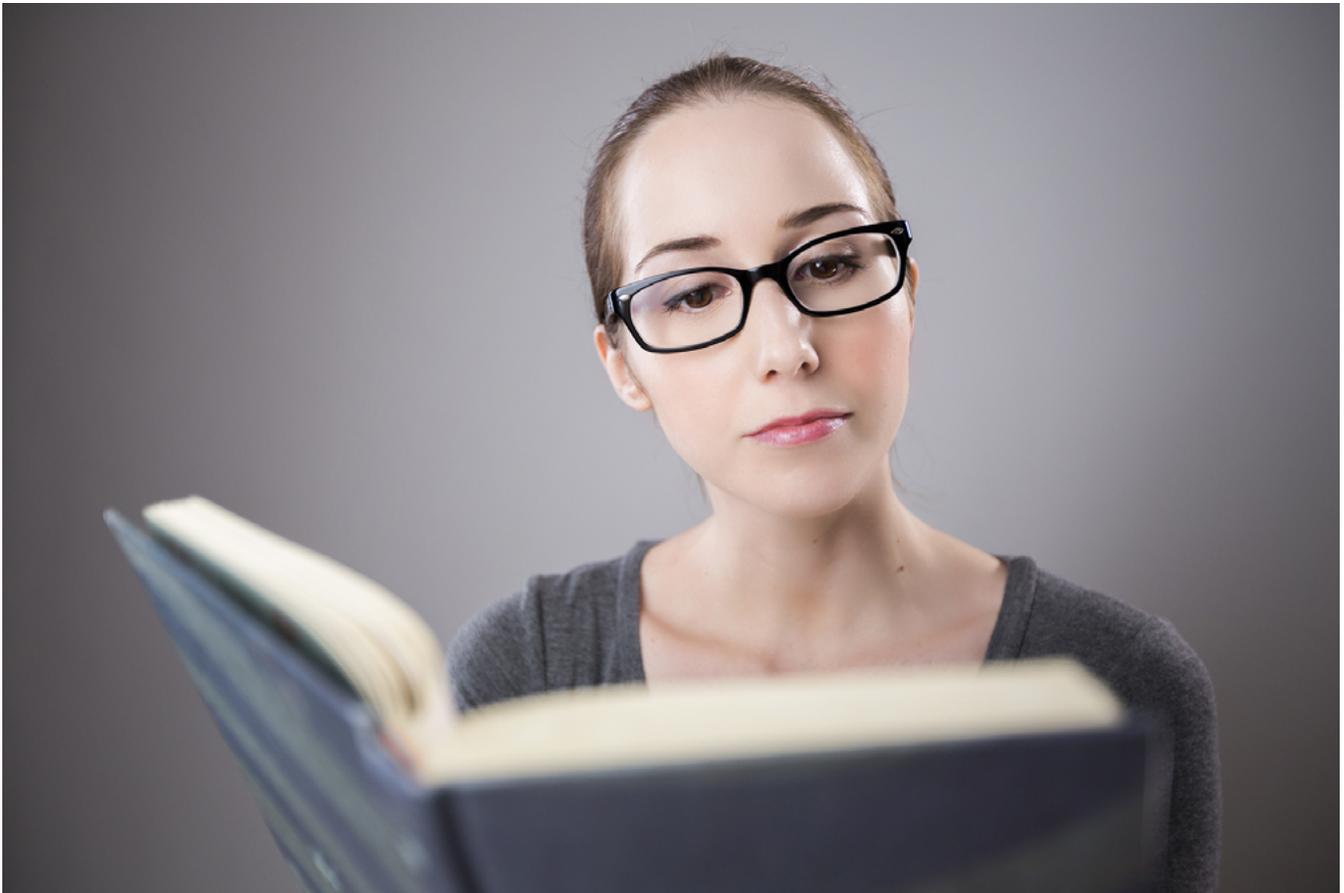
I have a dear relative in Mexico. As the family breadwinner, she used to work six days a week in a tourist hotel to earn \$600 a month. She wore glasses that tourists left behind in their hotel rooms after checkout time. When she would find yet another forgotten pair of glasses, she would try them on to see if they felt any better than her current pair, and if so, she would trade. On one of my visits to her, it became apparent that her most recent free glasses were not good ones for her. The text still looked fuzzy to her when she read the Bible. She needed better lenses but couldn’t afford to buy them.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, this principle is also implied by the second and fourth Unities, and assumes a belief that the Bible is God’s inspired revelation.

The biblical text has been looking a little fuzzy to some of us too, but unlike my relative, it's not new optical lenses that we need. We just need to polish the interpretive lenses we have in our minds. Yes, polishing those lenses will cost us a little study and disciplined thought, but we can easily afford this price.

# The Seven Inferences

Rules Implied By Our Theology That Help Us Interpret Scripture Well



**T**he central theology of the New Testament provides our hermeneutical starting point. Once we have polished our interpretive lenses by embracing that core of theological truth, we can infer other rules for interpreting Scripture. The additional rules follow logically from our belief in the unity of the Godhead and from our understanding of other attributes of the one God. The first of these rules is:

## 8. The Rule Of Heart Preparation

### *Part 1: Embrace The Great Commandments*

The seventh unity of Eph 4.6, tells us there is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” This *should* tell us that if we hope to understand the Bible at all, our approach to the Bible must be theocentric. I regret, however, that I did not at first study the Bible in pursuit of Him, even though I studied it avidly.

God met me with the gifts of repentance and forgiveness when I read the New Testament through for the first time, and thanks to my excitement about this experience of salvation by faith in Christ, the Bible became my life. I browsed through it on the bus to work, and read it on my lunch breaks while fellow workers snickered. I studied it in my attic bedroom after work. At the end of the next academic year, I left the University of Washington in order to pursue a ministry in teaching it. My love for the Bible continued unabated for 18 years. I never had any trouble making time for the Scriptures. I puzzled over why my friends struggled to read the Word on a daily basis.

Then suddenly my interest in the Bible evaporated. I continued to read and study the scriptures because my responsibilities demanded it, but the internal motivation was gone. Needless to say, as a pastor and missionary, this caused me no little consternation and a great deal of reflection. The more I analyzed what had sustained my interest for 18 years and why it “didn’t work anymore,” the more I became dismayed over the selfishness of my own heart. I was a senior in high school when I had begun reading the Bible, and I read it then out of fear. I was afraid for the future. I was afraid of the draft and going to Viet Nam. I was afraid of moving away from home and working my way through college. I was afraid of choices I would have to make about relationships and careers. I was afraid of having my dreams of a wonderful life cut short by a nuclear holocaust. And beneath it all, I was afraid of burning in hell for my sins. My heart cried out in desperation for some answers to my problems. An inner voice told me, “the answers are in the Bible,” and that’s why I first read God’s book.

After I received Christ and finished reading the New Testament, I felt like I had discovered El Dorado. I had read the New Testament and it had changed my life. “What treasures still await me in the Old Testament?” I wondered. So I plowed into reading Genesis and kept going to Malachi. As healthy as it was for my nascent spiritual life, I read the Bible from cover to cover essentially to see what I could get out of it. What I got out of it was a sense of the Bible’s magnificence as a fountain of enlightenment. In high school, my closest friends and I had fancied ourselves “intellectuals,” and I remember saying to myself, “Man, there couldn’t be any book more intellectually satisfying than this Bible!” *I had so many questions.* When I was introduced to the world of doctrinal debates, my list of questions lengthened and I waded into the exegetical arguments with delight. What an exercise for the mind! I searched the Bible for wisdom and understanding—and for intellectual stimulation—for the next 17 years.

Then what happened? I finally realized, as I contemplated my malaise, that regardless of how far I was from a total knowledge of the Bible, I was familiar enough with its contents that it took a lot of wading through Greek and Hebrew reference books to get the same intellectual

euphoria I used to get before. I'd picked all of the Bible's low-hanging fruit, and I didn't want to do the work of reaching higher. I still craved cognitive growth and challenge, but I was weary of the Bible and ready to go on to something else.

That wasn't right! After so many years, my very identity was tied up with God's book; I couldn't just "go on to something else." I had to stay with the Bible, but it was becoming a drudgery, a duty. **At last I could empathize with the struggle of so many of my friends.** But what was I to do? I worried over this before the Lord for some time, and finally my eyes opened to the selfishness that had been at the root of my relationship with the Bible for so long. From the beginning I had been reading the Bible for me. Even when I studied it in order to minister to others, I was reading the Bible so *I* could do *my* job. *But if this was wrong*, what was the right motive for studying the scriptures?

The answer came slowly, but it came with deep conviction. I got to thinking about eternity and what I would be doing for that long while. I got to thinking about Rom 8.28 and what kind of good could come out of all the struggles and tragedies of life. I thought of Joh 17.3, where Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." I thought of Jer 9.24, where God says, "let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD." What would I be doing for eternity? Getting to know the Infinite One. What good comes out of life's trials for the elect? The opportunity to watch Him demonstrate His faithfulness and the other wonders of His character. What is the right motive for studying the Bible? The answer is: *to know and love God.*

My heart broke over my sinfulness as I came to this realization. I am so ashamed of ever having read the Bible out of duty. I thought about how absurd it would have been for me to have visited my wife Kaaren "out of duty" during our engagement—how rejected she would have felt as I checked my watch to see if I'd spent an adequate "quiet time" with her. What sorry immaturity it is to plateau at a level where we read the Bible out of duty or habit, and what an affront to the One who sacrificed His Son in order to enter into relationship with us. God has revealed Himself in other ways besides the Bible, but not currently in any that are more certain. How foolish I had been to mine the scriptures and miss the greatest treasure of all, God Himself.

Suddenly my hunger for the Word resurrected. Now I study the Bible more than ever, but with a different orientation. I still study the Bible for various reasons, but now I study the Bible for one reason ahead of all others: to know God and to have fellowship with both our heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ (1Jo 1.3). Whatever else I pick up along the way is extra.

Augustine of Hippo figured this out long ago. He wrote that "the fulfillment and end of

scripture is the love of God and our neighbor.”<sup>27</sup> He reminded his readers that “the end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned.”<sup>28</sup> He went so far as to write, “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”<sup>29</sup> Augustine even excused the person who missed the author’s intended meaning for a passage so long as the person interpreted the passage in a manner “for the building up of love.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, if we believe what Jesus said, then the first and greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mar 12.28-30), and the second most important is to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mar 12.31). If these two commandments declare our deepest obligations as subjects of our Creator, then we must surely study the Scriptures daily for help and guidance in how to fulfill them. **The first step in our heart preparation for the task of interpreting Scripture is to embrace the two greatest commandments as our overarching motive.**

### ***Part 2: Pre-Commit To Obedience***

Bill Round, whom I mentioned above, told me that before he had received Christ he had studied the Bible fruitlessly for 15 years, struggling to grasp its meaning. Only after he bowed to the lordship of Christ and believed the gospel was he able to make sense of the Scriptures. His experience illustrates the fact that while the intellect is essential in the work of exegesis, the intellect alone cannot discern the essential truths of Scripture, because these truths are spiritually discerned (1Cor 2.14). In other words, God’s Spirit teaches biblical truths to our spirit, and as a rule, He chooses to teach the humble and obedient, rather than the proud and independent. “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way,” according to Psalm 25.9. As we apply this most important rule of humble obedience, the Author Himself helps us interpret the Scriptures (1Jo 2.27).

### ***Part 3: Resist “The Law Of First Mention”***

Christians who lack an attitude of humble obedience toward God’s Word, are often tripped up by a psychological law known as “The Law of First Mention.” According to this law, “A student will resist any truth that contradicts what he was first taught on a given subject.” In other words, we

27 *De Doc* 1.35.

28 *De Doc* 1.40.44; 1Ti 1.5.

29 *De Doc* 1.36.40.

30 *De Doc* 1.36.40-41. Augustine followed up with the statement, “Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray,” and instructed that even the person who misinterpreted for the sake of building up love “is to be corrected.”

all resist repudiating what our beloved parents, teachers and mentors first taught us about God, the Bible and the Christian life. Hopefully, they taught us well and we won't have to reject what they said. However, we can all recognize the fallacy of the Muslim who cries, "I know Muhammad is the true prophet because my father declared it to me, and his father declared it to him!" Truth must be established and confirmed by evidence, not simply assumed on the basis of an appeal to authority. Nevertheless, we hate to let go of what we were first taught, even if it may not be right. Therefore, we must consciously humble ourselves before God, and commit ourselves by His grace to receive whatever He reveals to us in His Word, even if it contradicts what we were taught earlier.

Committing ourselves to overcome "The Law of First Mention" does not imply that we will forever be learning and unlearning in order to learn again. As God Himself continues to teach us by His Holy Spirit, the things we learn will increasingly knit themselves into a coherent fabric of truth that will withstand the challenges of opposing ideas. We have this assurance of arriving at "settled convictions" because God has placed us in a rational cosmos. Paul's declaration that the One God "is over all and through all and in all" assures us that there is a unity and coherence to God's universe, and therefore that we can arrive at a true understanding of our place in it.

Furthermore, the statement that God is "over all" speaks of His rule, His sovereignty over both the existence and the actions of created things, whether living or inanimate. God is working His plan in the universe, and everything in creation works together for the accomplishment of that plan (cf. Rom 8.28-29). These truths confirm our presupposition that the universe is not absurd but can be rationally understood, and that we can apply rules of logic as we study its components and phenomena (see [Introduction](#) above). God's universal sovereignty obviously encompasses the biblical text. God has sent forth His word to accomplish His eternal purposes and it will not fail to do so (Isa 55.11). Therefore, we can expect a coherent unity in the canon of Scripture and reasonably adopt the next rule:

## 9. The Rule Of Internal Consistency

Since we can expect God's word to be consistent, **we should never accept a new teaching or interpretation of Scripture that violates the clear truths of the Bible.** Like the Bereans in the first century, we must check unfamiliar propositions for consistency with the well-established truths of Scripture (Act 17.11). Since the theophany on Mount Sinai,<sup>31</sup> the Israelites had practiced this principle of validating new prophecy or preaching by the touchstone of recognized Scripture. By the time of the prophets, the principle was so well ingrained that Isaiah

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31 For the hermeneutical and apologetic importance of the Sinai theophany, see my article, *Mountains of Evidence*, at [www.tmin.org/pdfs/mountains.pdf](http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/mountains.pdf).

could appeal to it in Isa 8.20, saying,

To the law and to the testimony!  
If they do not speak according to this word,  
they have no light of dawn.

Today we can confidently adopt this **Rule of Internal Consistency** as part of our own hermeneutics, knowing that even the prophets of old were committed to it. When a new doctrine or novel interpretation of Scripture comes our way, we can test it for consistency with the rest of the biblical revelation. When we ourselves feel we have discovered a new interpretation of a passage, we can check it for consistency with established biblical truths like [The Seven Unities](#), explained above. Furthermore, when we read two passages that seem to contradict one another, the **Rule of Internal Consistency** will alert us that we need to dig deeper to correctly understand the passages in question.

Skeptics love to point out apparent contradictions in the Bible, but most of their examples reveal an inclination to read the text in an overly literal manner, without taking into account cultural idiom and figures of speech. For example, everyone knows Jesus taught that we should love our neighbor, and honor our parents. Therefore, when skeptics read in Luk 14.26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple,” they gleefully shout, “contradiction!”<sup>32</sup> We ourselves might be puzzled at first by such a strong statement from Jesus, but, we can apply the **Rule of Internal Consistency** to understand what Jesus *did not* mean, and then apply the [Rule of Literary Genres](#) and the [Rule of Context](#) (both explained below) to help us understand what He *did mean*. **The Rule of Internal Consistency** alerts us that since Jesus clearly taught us to honor our parents (Mat 19.19), He does *not* contradict Himself in the Luke passage by teaching people to hate their own families. We then go to the [Rule of Literary Genres](#) and recognize that Jesus, just like other public speakers, used figures of speech and rhetorical language to make important points. We realize that His jarring call to “hate” was a hyperbolic way to make a strong statement about something important. Finally, we go to the [Rule of Context](#) and discover that in Luk 14, Jesus was indeed responding to a specific problem, namely, the problem of hangers-on. Crowds were beginning to follow Him, but they were expecting the road of discipleship to be easy, with lots of healings and free loaves and fishes along the way. Jesus, however, foreknew that whoever truly committed themselves to him would very likely pay a steep price with regard to their homes and families. Therefore, He used the strongest possible rhetorical language to warn them that if they were not willing to hate their families *ostensibly*,

32 J. Sidlow Baxter handles this passage nicely in his little book, *Studies In Problem Texts* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1960).

that is, if they were not willing to *appear to hate* their families in the course of following Him, they should count the cost now and turn back.

It makes me think of the martyrdom of the young mother, Vibia Perpetua, who died for the testimony of Jesus in North Africa in A. D. 202.<sup>33</sup> Perpetua's father, beside himself with grief over the imminent loss of his beautiful daughter, tried to persuade her to renounce her faith, but she refused. Then, when Perpetua was put on trial, the Roman procurator, seeing her distraught father, urged her, "Spare your father's white hairs...offer a sacrifice for the safety of the Emperors." Perpetua remained steadfast in her faith however, and when her desperate father kept trying to intervene, the procurator had him thrown down and struck with a rod. Perpetua afterward wrote in her diary that she was grieved for her father's plight, "as if I had been struck myself." She loved her father dearly, but because of her love for Christ, and refusal to deny her Lord, she was forced to *appear to hate her father in the public eye*. This was precisely the personal and relational cost of discipleship that Jesus was warning people about in Luk 14.26. Far from encouraging hatred, Jesus was warning that out of love for Him (and for our families!), we might one day have to appear to hate the very people we love. Thus, the [Rule of Internal Consistency](#) helps us study a little further when faced with an alleged contradiction in Scripture, and ultimately helps us find a satisfying interpretation.

The Bible's internal consistency is stunning, considering that its corpus was composed over the course of thousands of years, and written by 40 or more human authors. Nevertheless, since God is eternal, it makes sense that we find coherence and consistency throughout the books of the Bible, even though the human authors were separated from one another by generations. However, consistency does not imply repetitiveness or sameness to all the books. Even our first reading of the Bible alerts us that we should adopt:

## 10. The Rule Of Progressive Revelation

We can best observe the progressive nature of God's revelation by studying the time of Christ and the apostles. In that epoch, new revelation came hard and fast to God's people. Act 18.24-26 relates the incident of Apollos, a gifted evangelist, preaching the message of John the Baptist, but without having gotten the news that the Messiah — whom John had preached — had already come and accomplished His work. Better-informed believers had to take Apollos aside and bring Him up to speed on what God had done. Note, however, that more recent revelation does not invalidate the earlier body of truth, but only reveals it as incomplete.

We can observe the greatest progression in God's revelation by tracing the message about

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<sup>33</sup> The full and wonderfully instructive account can be read among Tertullian's works in an edition of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

Christ, the Messiah, the coming Redeemer from the book of Genesis onward. The prophets of old announced a great deal of truth about the coming Messiah. Today, however, we cannot consider any teaching on the prophets' revelations about Messiah as complete, unless the teacher supplements the words of the prophets with the words and actions subsequently spoken and accomplished by Christ Himself. As we read in Heb 1.1-3:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, **but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. [Emphasis added.]

Though we yet have much to learn about Christ, we understand Him much better now than we could have before His first advent. He revealed Himself and His redemptive work spectacularly, according to the gospel records, and the apostles further illuminated His person and work in their preaching and epistles, as the Spirit enabled them. The Bible unveils Messiah to us more and more, right up to its final book. Someone has well said, "God saves the best for last!"

In view of such progressive revelation, **we must recognize that an early passage of Scripture may not exhaust the Bible's teaching on a given topic.** God's progressive revelation, developing through all 66 books of the Bible, requires that we check the epistles on a topic before finalizing a doctrine rooted in the earlier books. For example, we wouldn't want to establish a doctrine of circumcision in our church, based on Gen 17.10 without first studying Gal 5.2!

For another example, consider Mal 3.10. Preachers have often favored this text, for teaching their congregations to tithe:

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

It's a great passage that teaches important principles for us today, but it had direct application only for Israelites and their agrarian culture during the time when a temple stood in Jerusalem. We really must answer a handful of questions before trying to apply this passage to a contemporary Christian congregation. First of all, are Christians still obligated to keep the Mosaic law, including the laws of tithing? Secondly, since God commands that people bring the whole tithe, which for the Israelite amounted to somewhere between 19% and 27% of all his increase, should

we teach only a 10% tithe from this passage?<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, since under Mosaic legislation no tithes were collected during the sabbatical (seventh) year, should we take every seventh year off from tithing?<sup>35</sup> Finally, and most importantly, whether we tithe 10% or more, should we feel that with regard to giving we have done our whole Christian duty once we have dropped our check in the offering plate? All of these questions are addressed in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament, and the [Rule of Progressive Revelation](#) urges us to study these relevant later passages before teaching tithing from the Old Testament. Taking the time to do so will bring greater depth and power to our exposition of Mal 3.10.

Since the Bible's progressive revelation includes the phenomenon of typology, we must make some observations about this feature of Scripture before continuing with more of our hermeneutical rules.

## Excursus: Types And Allegories

### *Types Defined & Explained*

Because we can easily confuse typological passages with allegorical ones, we must make a careful distinction between type and allegory. Biblical types have to do with God's redemptive plan. They fit with God's agenda of preparing His people for epoch-making events and then providing verification for those events (cf. Amo 3.7). A biblical type (τύπος, *tē-pōs*) is a **historical** person, event, thing or institution in the biblical narrative that foreshadows something similar but greater in the biblical redemptive story. We speak of the thing foreshadowed or commemorated by a type as the thing *typified*. The thing typified *fulfills* the type, and is more important than the type that pointed to it. We call the phenomenon of biblical types, as well as the study and analysis of them, *typology*.

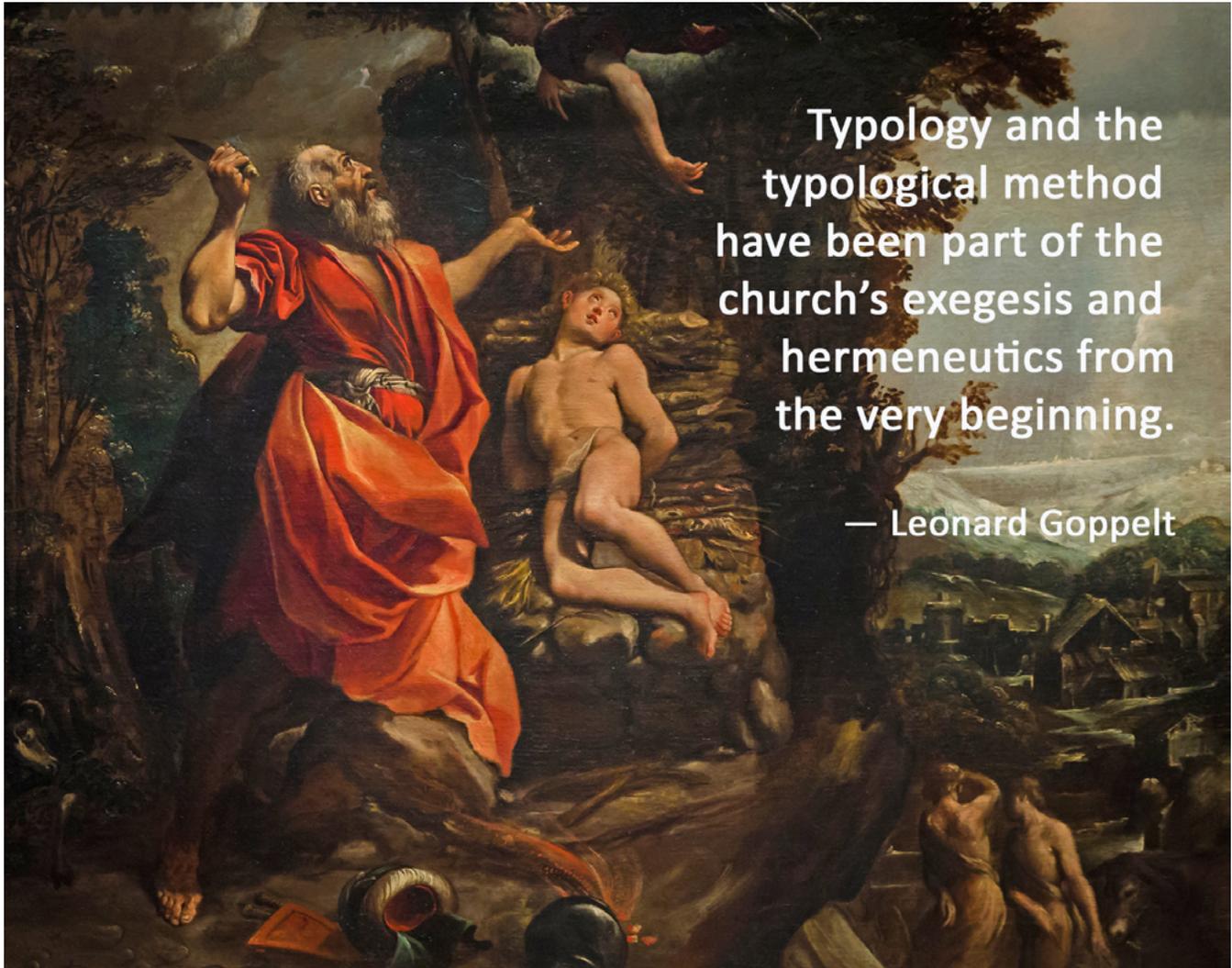
We may think of biblical types as real-life pictures that, in the providence of God, foreshadow something greater, without diminishing their own reality and importance. The biblical author of historical narrative intended to faithfully record historical events of importance in God's redemptive plan, without, so far as we know, realizing that the records of those events might also serve as typological foreshadowings. When typological foreshadowings occur, it is

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34 The explanation of the Mosaic tithing legislation provided to us by Josephus, based on Deu 14.28-29; 26.12, etc., is that the Jews were bound to pay two tithes every year, one to the Levites, and one for the festival sacrifices at Jerusalem, and then on the third year to add a *third* tithe to the first two, which would provide for the indigents, the widows, and the orphans. Tobit 1.6-8 illustrates this practice of paying a *triple* tithe. The CSB makes a serious error by translating "the full tenth" in Mal 3.10.

35 The rabbinical understanding was and remains that no tithe could be collected on the seventh year, based on passages like Ex 23.10-11; Lev 25.2-7; Deu 14.22; 26.12.

because of God's providential intent.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in our commitment to the [intentional meaning](#) of Scripture, we must prioritize the human author's intent to faithfully record history, while also recognizing the Holy Spirit's intent to foreshadow.



### *Typological Sequences*

It's easy to see a type and its simple fulfillment in examples like that of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his back (Gen 22.6 = type), and Jesus carrying his own cross for the ultimate sacrifice (Joh 19.17 = fulfillment). Simple types have the pattern: **type** ⇔ **fulfilment**. However, there are more complex biblical types, like the flood waters (1Pe 3.20) which *begin to be fulfilled* by a subsequent, corresponding type (= *antitype*, Greek: ἀντίτυπον, äñ-dē-tē-pōn), in this case

36 A typological understanding of history and a typological interpretation of certain scriptures depends upon the same presuppositions as does a belief in predictive prophecy:

- A. God exists, is almighty, and sovereignly directs human history.
- B. God inspired the authors of the Bible.
- C. God intended both to reveal important realities in advance, and to provide confirmation of them after the fact (cf. Amo 3.7).
- D. At some level there is a unity between OT and NT faith.

baptism (1Pe 3.21), but which together with their *antitype(s)* still point to an ultimate fulfillment, in this case the judgment that fell upon Christ (1Pe 3.21). The writer of Hebrews uses this same pattern:

**type ⇒ antitype ⇒ fulfillment**

He uses it to describe the blueprint for the tabernacle (Greek = *τύπον*, Heb 8.5), the man-made sanctuary (Greek = *ἀντίτυπα*, Heb 9.24), and finally the real sanctuary of heaven itself (Heb 9.24).<sup>37</sup>

Types have great value as illustrations of divine design in the progression of history and as prophetic pictures of redemptive realities. Typological passages also have apologetic value in arguing for divine design and prophetic fulfillment in God’s redemptive plan. However, the Bible student must exercise great caution in identifying what person, event, thing or institution in the biblical narrative he can fruitfully expound as a biblical type.

### *Identifying Biblical Types*

How can one identify what is typological in the biblical narrative and what isn’t? Roy Zuck<sup>38</sup> lists six characteristics for what he would accept as an “official type”:

1. Resemblance, similarity or correspondence between the type and its fulfillment.
- 2. Historical reality in both the type and its fulfillment.** (This would exclude poetic or apocalyptic imagery as typological.)
3. A prefiguring or predictive foreshadowing of the fulfillment by the type.
4. A heightening in which the fulfillment is greater than the type.
5. Divine design (presumably suggested by the unlikelihood of the degree of correspondence having occurred by chance).
6. Designation as a type in the New Testament.

As we consider guidelines like these for identifying a biblical type, we must bear in mind that the Bible does not present us with an explicit doctrine of typology. Scripture nowhere defines for us

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37 Many authors have erred in assuming that the word *antitype* (*ἀντίτυπος*) must mean *fulfillment of a type*. While the word may rarely have what is tantamount to that sense in some classical work, its primary meaning has to do with *correspondence*, and in its two biblical instances speak not of the ultimate reality, but of a *corresponding* type or pattern.

Patzia and Petrota, are among those who have stumbled over the term antitype. They write that “Paul portrays Christ as the antitype of Adam in Romans 5:12–21: ‘Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come’ (Rom 5:14).” This is not a precise use of biblical language. Paul does refer to Adam as the type, but he never referred to Christ as an antitype. Christ is the fulfillment of the Adamic type rather than a corresponding type (antitype). See “Typology” in Arthur G. Patzia and Anthony J. Petrota, *Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

38 Ch. 8 in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*.

what a biblical type is. Therefore, we must assemble our own common-sense guidelines, taking our cues from how the prophets and apostles spoke about things that foreshadowed a greater reality.

I subscribe to Zuck's first five characteristics of a biblical type, only adding to the third one that a type can commemorate as well as foreshadow. However, Zuck's final characteristic of a biblical type, namely that it must be designated as a type in the New Testament, is untenable. Since the Bible does not delineate the characteristics of biblical types, it obviously does not say that an "official type" has to be identified by a New Testament author. On the contrary, since the apostolic writers never set out to identify every type in the Old Testament, but only made use of those types that served to make a point in their occasional assertions, we have no reason for thinking that the New Testament authors exhausted the list of Old Testament types in their brief references to a few of them. After all, if we trace the New Testament identification of types using only the direct terms for such a thing, namely, the term *τύπος* and its word family, along with the terms *παραβολή* (pä-rə-bō-lē, comparison, illustration, analogy), *σημεῖον* (sē-mē-ōn, sign, figure, portent), *σκιά* (skē-ə, shadow), and *ὑπόδειγμα* (ē-pō-dēg-mə, sign, example, pattern model), we can only propose the following modest list of types:

1. Adam, Rom 5.14.
2. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, 2Pe 2.6.
3. Restoration of Isaac, Heb 11.19.
4. The tabernacle, Act 7.44; Heb 8.5; 9.20.
5. Tabernacle/temple utensils, Heb 9.20.
6. Levitical priests, Heb 8.3-5
7. The sacrifices, Heb 8.3-5; 10.1
8. Food laws, Col 2.17.
9. Festivals, Col 2.17.
10. Sabbaths, Col 2.17.
11. Jonah, Luk 11.30.
12. The submersion of Jonah, Mat 12.39.

Yet, the apostles and Jesus Himself implied that other things served as types also. As examples of *a few* of those other probable types, we can look at the list that Benjamin Keach assembled of individuals whom he deemed types of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Besides Adam, Isaac and Jonah, whom I've listed above, Keach added:

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<sup>39</sup> *Tropologia*, p. 972 ff.

13. Noah
14. Melchizedek
15. Abraham
16. Jacob
17. Joseph
18. Moses
19. Joshua
20. Sampson
21. David
22. Solomon
23. Elisha
24. Zerubbabel

Though the New Testament does not explicitly identify any of these as a type, we will find it difficult to deny their typological value. Still, we must join Zuck and others in setting boundaries around what can serve as a biblical type, and his first five characteristics of a biblical type provide a good inner perimeter. Boundaries are necessary because many authors (past and present) have abused the principles of typology by interpreting typological passages allegorically. To avoid this problem, let us define allegory and explain what makes it distinct from typological writing.

### *Allegory And How To Distinguish It From Typological Passages*

Before we consider allegories as a genre of story-telling, we must recognize that allegorical *content* can appear in different kinds of stories. Just as a story may be more character-driven or more plot-driven, just as it may be more or less humorous, so it may be more or less allegorical. A story is more or less allegorical, depending upon how many allegorical symbols it employs.<sup>40</sup> The more allegorical a story is, the more the primary characters and objects in the story represent something other than their lexical referent.

As a genre of literature, an allegory is a **fictional** story that intentionally uses the main characters and/or objects in a story to symbolize or represent other things. Often, but not always, an allegory uses more concrete things in the story to represent or illustrate more abstract realities. For example, in John Bunyan's allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, many of the individual characters in the story, including the main one, Christian himself, simply represent the many people in society who share their occupation, moral character, attitude or personal crisis. Others, however, like Obstinate, Pliable, Worldly Wiseman and Formalist, provide a concrete mental

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<sup>40</sup> One of more than a dozen ways to categorize the parables of Jesus is on the basis of whether a parable is strongly allegorical or weakly allegorical.

picture of an attitude, character flaw, or philosophical or religious fallacy. The realities represented in an allegory — particularly in a biblical allegory — may be historical, but the allegory itself is not. We should also note that allegorical story-telling is always intentional by the author, and this differentiates it from typological narrative: the author of history may not have been aware (or fully aware) of the typological value of elements in his narrative, but the author of an allegory intended the elements of his story to serve as symbols.

The Bible uses allegory in some of the parables of Jesus, in the prophet Nathan's story of the ewe lamb (2Sa 12.1-4), Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa 5), etc. We recognize biblical allegories by their fable-like qualities, and sometimes by the explanation of their symbolism by the author. Notice, for example, the fable-like qualities in the first part of Nathan's allegory of the ewe-lamb (2Sa 12.1-4):

“There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.”

Notice the generalized descriptions, typical of fables:

- A certain town.
- Two men, one rich, one poor.
- Large number of sheep and cattle.

Notice also the unrealistic description of keeping a grown ewe as a pet:

- It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms.

In addition to these kinds of clues that a biblical story is allegorical, the story-teller sometimes confirms his use of allegory by identifying the symbolism of the main components of the story. Nathan did this, explaining,

You [David] are the [rich] man.

Uriah the Hittite = the poor man.

The wife of Uriah = the ewe lamb.

Isaiah also identified the symbols in his allegory of the vineyard (Isa 5.1-7), explaining that:

My loved one = the LORD Almighty.

The vineyard = the house of Israel.

The garden of God's delight (the vineyard) = the men of Judah.

Good grapes = justice and righteousness.

Bad fruit = bloodshed and cries of distress.

Jesus also explained the symbols He used in the parable of “the tares of the field” (Mat 13.36-42). He said,

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.

The field is the world.

The good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom.

The weeds are the sons of the evil one.

The enemy who sows them is the devil.

The harvest is the end of the age.

The harvesters are angels.

With such clear indicators of allegory, we should not have any difficulty recognizing the allegorical passages in the Bible. Nevertheless, the great hermeneutical error of medieval and later interpreters was failure to recognize the boundary between allegory and other [biblical genres](#). Once they began to interpret historical narratives and other non-symbolic passages *allegorically*, all true connection between text and meaning was lost. This violation was prompted, in part, by the recognition of typological content in historical narrative: if a historical story can foreshadow a later redemptive reality, why can't the elements of the story symbolize esoteric spiritual realities as well? The answer to this question lies in the definitions of historical narrative and types. Historical narrative, by definition, is intended to be understood literally. Historical narrative may, of course, include figures of speech and idiomatic expressions, and may even recount the telling of an allegorical story (as in the recounting of Nathan's story in 2Sa 12.1-4), but the narrative as a whole is intended to be understood as a faithful report of what happened, not as a mystical teaching of spiritual secrets.

So, we will escape the error of the mystical interpreters if we remember these simple distinctions:

- Historical narrative tells what happened; it does not use symbols to reveal a hidden reality.
- A typological passage is first of all historical, and its fulfilment is (or will be) also historical.
- An allegory is fictional, even if its elements symbolize historical realities.
- Allegories are recognizable by their fable-like qualities: generalized description and unrealistic situations.
- If the storyteller explains the symbolism of the elements in his story, he confirms his story as having allegorical content.

Furthermore, we must not confuse figurative language or poetic imagery with allegorical symbolism. This caution is particularly important with regard to the Song of Songs. The whole of the Song of Songs is figurative poetry packed with vivid imagery and allusions. Besides that, the relationships it describes *may be typological*. Nevertheless, the author gave no textual sign that he intended his great song as allegory. The figurative significance of all the poetic images in the poem carry enough meaning in and of themselves; we do not have to make them allegorical to understand the intended message of the Song.

## 11. The Rule Of Context

**We must interpret a biblical text in a manner consistent with its historical, cultural and literary context.** In other words, we must interpret a biblical passage (of any length) according to the meaning and intent of its authors, insofar as that meaning and intent can be discerned from the passage's historical, cultural and literary context.

At the lexical level, **context is king**, because most verbs and nouns have a semantic range (or field) of meanings,<sup>41</sup> and the precise meaning of a word in a speech or written passage can only be ascertained by its grammatical context. Then at the clausal or sentence level, context still holds sway because complete statements are also apt to have more than one possible meaning, particularly if they employ figures of speech or idiomatic expressions. Finally, at the discourse level (having to do with a segment of speech or writing longer than a sentence), the rule of context still applies, but at this level the historical and cultural milieu takes on greater importance for orienting the reader to the whole of a passage.

We must take into account the historical and cultural context of a passage in order to begin discerning the author's intended meaning for his original audience. Because the Bible records how God revealed himself in and through history to a historical people, it's reasonable to assume that a biblical text cannot be made to mean something, to a present-day American audience, that is contrary or unrelated to what it meant to its original eastern or Mediterranean audience. This does not preclude making a new *application* of the original meaning of a text, nor does it preclude a typological (foreshadowing) meaning in the text that may not have been realized by the original human author or audience. Neither of these possibilities negate the fact that the primary meaning of the text, **the intentional meaning**, is that which was consciously intended by the authors and understood by its first audience. We must not invent a new meaning for a biblical text that is divorced from its historical setting and cultural context. To presume such a

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41 A word's semantic field is established by the history of its **usage** in a given body of literature or in the spoken communication of a given culture. Thus, while **context is king**, in biblical hermeneutics **usage is queen**.

freedom would undermine our ability to ever determine the correct interpretation of the text, for then, as Bruce Corley, et al, write, “every reading becomes idiosyncratic.”<sup>42</sup>

If we wish to take the historical and cultural contexts of biblical passages into account, then we must remember that the people of the Bible were predominantly Hebrew. Even the writers of the New Testament were all Hebrews.<sup>43</sup> Because the Hebraic way of thinking differs in some respects from that of Westerners, many passages in the Bible cannot be understood apart from an awareness of Hebraic thought modes. In other words, understanding a biblical passage’s cultural context includes understanding the thinking patterns of the human author and his first audience. For help with that, please see my article, “Making The Invisible Visible: An Introduction to The Distinguishing Characteristics of Hebraic Thought and Their Implications For Interpreting The Bible.”<sup>44</sup>

Many hermeneutical mistakes arise today from Christians reading the Bible as though it were written in their own time and place. Since we have all experienced the rapid change of language and lexical meanings in our own generation, we must stop to realize that the connotations of many biblical words and phrases have changed significantly during the course of the last 2,000 years. To properly understand the biblical message, we must take the time to understand what those biblical words and phrases meant to people in biblical times, and particularly to the people to whom any passage under consideration was originally directed.<sup>45</sup>

Before moving on from the rule of context, we must consider two special cases in which the importance of *historical* context has been questioned. The first special case is predictive prophecy, and it is primarily problematic for us futurists who believe there are still Bible prophecies to be fulfilled in or after our time. Let’s look at a case in point. We read in Rev 13.3 that,

The whole world was astonished and followed the beast.

Students of the Revelation will accept that the “beast” mentioned here refers to the Antichrist, whether as an individual or a federation. Prophecy students who have adopted a preterist view of

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42 Corley, Bruce, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy. *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*. 2nd ed. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002.

43 The evidence indicates that even Luke was a Jew, or at least a Jewish proselyte long before he wrote Luke-Acts. The reference to those “who are from the circumcision” which seems to exclude Luke, probably refers to “conservative” Jews, rather than to Jews as a whole (Col 4.11,14).

44 Available without charge on the Timothy Ministries website, <http://www.tmin.org>.

45 Many of us have observed the most blatant violation of the rule of context. It’s the violation that occurs when a person closes their eyes and sticks their finger on a random verse, hoping to get a personal “word from the Lord.” God *could* sovereignly speak to one of His children in this manner if He chose to, but unless He provides corroboration for such “a word,” we follow this kind of “guidance” at our peril. What if a person’s finger landed on a verse like Mat 25.30? I would hate to have plucked that verse out of its context and assumed it applied to me!

the Revelation will assume that *the beast* (Antichrist) symbolized Nero Caesar (or another person or entity from history) and will not be overly concerned about this verse since it refers to “old news.” However, it disturbs us futurists to read that, “the whole world ... [will follow] the beast.” Does that mean that Antichrist will head a one-world government enveloping planet earth, and that Christians will have to be raptured to safety, while all those left behind will have sell their souls to Antichrist or lose their heads (Rev 20.4)? This question touches on a handful of interpretive and doctrinal questions, of course, but the question before us at the moment is: What did John mean in Rev 13.3 when he said, “the whole world”? Did he mean, “the entire planet,” as we visualize it from photos taken during the Apollo space missions? On the contrary, literary context dictates that we interpret most New Testament mentions of “the world” which use the Greek word γῆ (γῆ, as in Rev 13.3) as referring to the land of Israel or “the holy land,” and those using the word οἰκουμένη (ē-kū-mē-nē, as in Luk 2.1 and Rev 16.14) as referring to the Mediterranean or Roman world. Only the term κόσμος (kōs-mōs, as in Joh 3.16 and Rev 11.15) regularly stretches to include the entire planet, and even this word often has a more limited geographical scope (Mat 6.26; Joh 7.4; 12.19; Rom 1.8). So according to biblical usage, i.e., the *literary context* of the Revelation, it appears that Rev 13.3 only teaches that people in the holy land, or — at most — in the Mediterranean world, will fall under the thrall of the beast.

However, if the Revelation speaks of things that will occur long after John’s lifetime, is it not possible that his words will mean something different when the time of their fulfilment finally arrives? Since the ultimate author of the Revelation, the Holy Spirit, foresaw a much bigger world than the one that John knew, isn’t it possible that God intended us to understand the “whole world” of Rev 13.3 as meaning the whole planet? To put the question another way, when it comes to future prophecy must our interpretation still be constrained by the *historical context* or its original author and audience? Didn’t the prophets prophesy beyond their understanding?

While the Holy Spirit certainly foresaw the modern world with its global economy and communications, and while the prophets certainly spoke of things in the future that they did not entirely understand, neither the Holy Spirit nor the prophets perverted language. The Spirit did not speak of the Roman world when what He really meant was the western hemisphere or the entire globe. To do so would have been entirely unnecessary, since there were adequate ways to express the ideas of “the entire planet” or “nations outside of the known world.” Had God revealed to the prophets something about the New World, they would have spoken about “regions *beyond* the distant coastlands.” Since the Holy Spirit has always been capable of expressing exactly what He means, we disrespect Him to think that He spoke ambiguously because it was about things beyond the prophet’s ken. Isaiah didn’t know anything about Cyrus the Persian,

nor about Jerusalem needing to be built (Isa 44.28; 45.1), but when the Holy Spirit said *Cyrus* He meant *Cyrus*, and when He said that Jerusalem and the temple (which stood tall at the time) would be built, He meant exactly that. Therefore, even with regard to future prophecy, we best constrain ourselves to the contextual meaning (literary *and* historical) of biblical words and phrases, and not try to adjust them to fit a modern worldview.

This does not negate the importance of extending *the application* of biblical imperatives and commandments to modern situations. To admit this, though, is to recognize a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive passages. While we have no prerogative to change the meanings of words and phrases in descriptive passages, we must think carefully about how to apply prescriptive passages in our time. For example, when Jesus said to make disciples of “all nations” (Mat 28.19-20), the United States and Canada did not exist, but the application of the command obviously extends to all peoples, known and unknown in the first century. Observe, though, that extending the *application* of the Great Commission does not involve changing the *meaning* of the word “nations.” Likewise, we should carefully study the command in Rev 18.4 to come out of [Mystery] Babylon the Great, and consider what the application of it may be for us. Whether we think of this wicked city as past or future, whether the call in context is to Israel or to Christian believers, it behooves us to understand the essence of her sins, and how we may separate ourselves from such things. We must again observe, though, that to apply the warning about this ancient or future city to ourselves does not require changing anything in the text to mean something it did not mean to the Revelation’s first hearers.

The second special case for which the [rule of context](#) has been questioned has to do with wisdom sayings like proverbs and parables. The first-time reader of the book of Proverbs is struck by the seeming lack of context for the proverbial sayings in Proverbs chapters 10 through 30. The reason for the *seeming* lack of context for the individual proverbs has to do with the fact that wisdom sayings are by nature of a gnomic or omnitemporal character, that is, they express a timeless truth by themselves without need of further immediate context. An ancient proverb could stand alone and still have meaning, even as a modern proverb can, like our saying, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Such a proverb has meaning for us, even when we see it in a list of other proverbs and with no context of its own, because we can imagine many possible applications for its encapsulated principle. However, the modern proverb, “Two wrongs don’t make a right,” has even more meaning for us when we hear it quoted to a man who just told his friend that his wife committed adultery, and therefore he feels justified in having an affair also. In fact, the new context for the proverb makes its meaning definite, whereas without context its meaning remained somewhat ambiguous. A similar dynamic exists for the biblical proverbs: each proverb

has stand-alone meaning, but when we study a biblical proverb in the context of its chapter's *theme(s)* and of its background in the Mosaic law, its meaning becomes more definite and less ambiguous.

We must understand this dynamic in connection with the wisdom sayings of Jesus. Jesus sometimes incorporated known proverbs of His day into His teaching. For example, in Luk 4.23, Jesus said, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.'" That proverb had stand-alone meaning before Jesus used it. Generally, it meant something along the lines of, "If you have power to help others, why don't you help yourself?" or "If you want to prove that you have power to help others, let us see you help yourself." In spite of the proverb's stand-alone-meaning, however, our primary interest in it is to understand what it meant in the particular circumstances in which Jesus used it. This interest is even stronger in connection with proverbs and parables that Jesus originated Himself. Jesus undoubtedly authored the parable of The Sower and the Soils, Mat 13.1-23. As a wisdom saying, the parable has many possible applications, but the meaning that we want to understand is the meaning Jesus intended when He shared the parable with a crowd at the seashore. Thus, even with timeless and widely applicable wisdom sayings, **context is king** for the biblical interpreter who wants to understand what the sayings meant when listed by Solomon or shared by Jesus.

Having observed above that the Holy Spirit (via human authors) communicates unambiguously in the Scriptures, even in prophetic passages, we can reasonably adopt:

## 12. The Rule Of The Literal Sense

**We should interpret a scripture passage according to its literal sense unless it is figurative or idiomatic.** The archaeological discoveries that corroborate biblical texts, as well as the literal fulfillments of numerous Bible prophecies (like the origin of Messiah from Bethlehem, Mic 5.2), establish this rule. Preachers and teachers have always been tempted to produce a novel, perhaps allegorical, interpretation of a biblical text,<sup>46</sup> but instead they should apply Ockham's Razor as they study. The Razor, also called the principle of parsimony, states that "entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity." That's philosophy-speak for "don't seek a complex explanation if a simple or obvious one will do." When it comes to interpreting Scripture, some have put it this way: when the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.

While the unity of God implies the coherence of His revelation, and God's supremacy implies the clarity of that revelation, neither imply a woodenness to His word. God's inherent creativity and other attributes lead us to expect aesthetic expression in the transmission of His

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<sup>46</sup> As Fee and Stuart affirm, "Unique interpretations are usually wrong." Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 18.

revelation. Indeed, God delights to use the whole range of human modes of communication to convey His message to man. Therefore, we should also learn:

### 13. The Rule Of Literary Genres

**While we expect God’s word to communicate literally, we must take into account the literary genre of the biblical passage we’re interpreting.** A literary genre is simply *a category of literary form or style*. Here are the Bible’s primary literary genres and sub-genres:

Historical Narrative

Gospels

Law

Psalms (songs for sacred purpose)

Wisdom

Prophecy

Apocalypse

Epistles

**Among other hermeneutical concerns, genre will dictate the degree of figurative speech or symbolism employed by a passage.** We can expect to read historical narrative, law and epistles with a high degree of literalness. At the other end of the spectrum, poetic scriptures, including the psalms, prophets and wisdom books, overflow with metaphors (e.g. Psa 91.4), and apocalyptic books abound with symbols (e.g. Rev 1.20).<sup>47</sup> Of course, historical narratives can contain poetic or apocalyptic sections, for which we must temporarily adjust our hermeneutical approach.

Furthermore, though we may generally read historical narratives with a high degree of literalness, we must also take into account the use of paraphrase and indirect quotation in the narrative texts. For example, a comparison of Mat 26.18 with its parallel passages in Mark and Luke make it apparent that Matthew summarized Christ’s instructions about the venue for the Passover, rather than quoting the Lord’s words exactly. Jesus obviously did not say verbatim, “Go into the city to a certain man...” The disciples could not have followed such an instruction. They would have had to ask, “Well, who is the ‘certain man?’” Jesus had to have identified the man somehow, which Mark (14.13-15) and Luke (22.10-12) assure us He did. Matthew’s “quotation”

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<sup>47</sup> Poetic books also utilize repetitive and symmetrical sentence structures. We once had a guest speaker at our church who made much of the five “I wills” of Lucifer in Isaiah 14. He went on to build his message on the correlation of these five “I wills” with the five giants of Num 13.22. Whether or not there are actually five giants referred to in Num 13.22, the fact that Isaiah 14 is written in poetry should caution us to not read too much into the repetitions in the passage.

is a summary or paraphrase, but the presentation of it in our translations as direct discourse enclosed in commas makes it look as though Matthew is quoting Christ verbatim. Realizing that the evangelists sometimes summarized and paraphrased will help us harmonize passages and clear up some seeming discrepancies. This realization will also warn us that discourses, like the Olivet Discourse (Mat 24; Mar 13; Luk 21), probably did not come down to us in their absolute entirety but in a form shortened by inspired summary and paraphrase.

We will observe more about poetic and prophetic writings below, but before leaving the topic of literary genres, note a couple things about the epistles. The epistles are the twenty-one books of the New Testament which have some or all of the elements of **ancient letters** (missives). Scholars have identified the six formal elements of ancient letters as:

1. Author's name
2. Recipient's name
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving
5. Body of the message
6. Final greeting and farewell

Again, the New Testament epistles vary in how many of these elements they each employ. The little book of 1 John, for example, has none of these formal elements except number 5; it has the character of the body of a letter, without its opening and closing elements. However, all the epistles share an important aspect summarized by Fee and Stuart:

... there is one thing that all of the epistles have in common, and this is *the* crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them: They are all what are technically called *occasional documents* (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are *all* from the *first century*. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that make their interpretation difficult at times.<sup>48</sup>

The special hermeneutical challenge of the epistles, therefore, is discerning which of their instructions have universal application (for all people at all times) and which no longer have the *same* application today. This does not mean that portions of the epistles have no application for our time and place. It does mean that the application may have moved from a first-century outward expression to a present-day application of the underlying principle. For example, whatever we believe about the appropriateness of women wearing head coverings in church meetings or

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48 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 58.

about the proper length of men's hair, we should nevertheless discern the underlying principles that Paul teaches in 1Co 11.3-16 and seek to live out those principles in a God-honoring manner. As Fee and Stuart acknowledge, we will find the task of interpreting the epistles difficult at times. Nevertheless, we do a disservice to those whom we teach if we succumb to the temptation to interpret the epistles naively and with a wooden literalness when it comes to making applications for today.

To conclude these brief comments on literary genres, consider that the historical books of the New Testament, together with the Apocalypse, are a form of *indirect* communication: they speak to their audience through the accounts of what other people did and experienced. In comparison, the epistles are a form of *direct* communication: they spoke directly to the needs and concerns of their original audiences, and they speak directly to us, to the extent that the original needs and concerns remain relevant in our own time and culture. In a similar fashion, the historical books of the Old Testament spoke, and still speak to us, *indirectly* through the actions and experiences of the people of antiquity. However, instead of epistles, the poetry books of the Old Testament function as a *direct* form of communication to the reader. The prophetic books are foremost in addressing their audiences directly, but to a greater or lesser degree, the other poetry books also appeal directly to the hearts and minds of their readers.



## Excursus: The Glory And Challenge Of Biblical Poetry

Besides the five poetry books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), the prophetic books also present the majority of their content in poetic parallelism. Like English poetry, biblical poetry uses figurative language. Biblical poetry speaks of historical and theological realities, but does so with the use of metaphors and other literary devices to engage the heart and emotions of the reader/hearer. This does not make the propositions affirmed in the psalms or in Isaiah any less true, nor any less authoritative. It only means that we must work a little harder at understanding the truth affirmations in biblical poetry than we must when reading a historical narrative, a list of commandments or a doctrinal epistle.

Besides poetry's figurative language, the very flexibility of poetry adds to its hermeneutical challenge. By *flexibility* I mean that poetic passages often overlap with other literary genres. For example, Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa 5.1-7) has allegorical content, and the poetry we find in the book of Psalms will sometimes move into the genre of prophecy (as in Psa 2, 22 and 110), and at other times describe historical events which have some typological value.<sup>49</sup> This ability to utilize different literary genres and devices makes poetical writing very useful in conveying the divine revelation. However, in view of biblical poetry's "flexibility," we must not skip

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<sup>49</sup> For example, Psa 78 describes many details of the exodus under Moses, a historical event that typifies a greater exodus yet to come.

the necessary step of discerning underlying genre when interpreting a poetic passage.

Since biblical poetry is both highly figurative and also capable of conveying history, prophecy, theology and wisdom, as well as commentary on the law, to adequately interpret a poetic passage we must:

1. Discern its underlying genre (history, prophecy, etc.);
2. Carefully observe its imagery;
3. Recognize its figures of speech (metaphors, hyperbole, etc.);
4. Analyze its essential message;
5. Analyze its poetic structure (kinds of parallelism), and observe how the poetic structure informs and enhances its message.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding biblical imagery, whether it appears in poetic passages or in any of [the Bible's literary genres](#), the *Dictionary Of Biblical Imagery* provides this helpful definition and guideline in its Introduction:

Any object or action that we can picture is an image.

Images require two activities from us as readers of the Bible. The first is to experience the image as literally and in as fully a sensory way as possible. The second is to be sensitive to the connotations or overtones of the image. When we stop to reflect on the image of water, for example, we find that it connotes such qualities as refreshment, sustenance and life. The most elementary form of connotation is simply whether an image is positive or negative in association in the context in which it appears.

When we encounter an image in the Bible, therefore, we need to learn to ask two questions: (1) What is the literal picture? (2) What does this image evoke? Answering the first question will insure that we have allowed the Bible to speak to our “right brain”—that part of us that responds to the concrete realities that the Bible records. Answering the second question will lead to an awareness of connotations, associations and significance.

**If either of these levels of response is missing, our experience of the Bible is impoverished.**<sup>51</sup>

With this important information in mind, let us also note the difference between an image and a symbol: an image *alludes* or *connotes*, while a symbol *represents*. This does not mean that a symbol cannot connote or allude, as one of its secondary functions, but we must take care not to

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50 For help with step 2, Bible students will find IVP's *Dictionary Of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, et al, invaluable. For help with step 3, the classic resource is *Figures Of Speech Used In The Bible Explained And Illustrated* by E. W. Bullinger. For help with step 5, I recommend the “Introduction to the Poetical Books,” in Arnold and Beyer's *Encountering The Old Testament*. A more thorough treatment of Hebrew parallelism appears in Tremper Longman III's chapter on “Understanding Parallelism” in his *How To Read The Psalms*, as well as in his and Peter Enns' *Dictionary Of The Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*. Hebrew students can find a more technical discussion in Wilfred G. D. Watson's *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide To Its Techniques*.

51 Leland Ryken, et al, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), bold emphasis mine.

force a non-symbolic image into representing something outside of its lexical referent. Now, let us move on to the poetic phenomenon of *parallelism*.

The reader not already familiar with the Bible's poetic parallelism is in for a wonderful treat. God, in His infinite wisdom, knew that the Hebrew scriptures would be translated into all the languages of the world. Therefore, He providentially taught the Hebrew people to "rhyme" in *thought* rather than in *sound*.<sup>52</sup> If the Hebrews had rhymed the sounds of their poetic lines, that sound-rhyme would not have translated into other languages, but because Hebrew poetry "rhymes" thoughts, every language can transmit its brilliance.

The Hebrew "thought rhyme" generally appears in couplets. A couplet, of course, is a sentence composed of two thoughts (phrases or clauses), as in Psa 23.1:

A. The LORD is my shepherd,

B. I shall not be in want.

In technical terms, this one complete, parallelistic expression of thought is called a "verse," "sentence," "line," or "stich" of poetry.<sup>53</sup> Each of the two halves of this "stich" is called a "colon" or a "hemistich." Two or more "hemistichs" are referred to in the plural as "cola." Hence, we refer to a verse like Psa 23.1 as a "bicolon"; a verse with three cola is a "tricolon." The cola in a verse of Hebrew poetry are parallelistic, meaning that they express two or more thoughts that are parallel to one another, and this is what I call "thought rhyme." However, there are many different kinds of Hebrew parallelism.

One of the most common types of Hebrew parallelism is **synonymous parallelism**, and Psa 23.1 presents us with a great example of it. In **synonymous parallelism** a verse's cola express *the same thought in different words*. Recognizing synonymous parallelism helps us greatly in interpreting poetic metaphors. What does it mean when David says, "The LORD is my shepherd?" Were this verse part of a *narrative* rather than a *poem* we might take it as blasphemous! Is David saying that the God of the universe is just someone to whom he has assigned the job of tending his livestock? Of course not. The parallel colon, "I shall not want," helps us understand that *Shepherd* in the first colon is a metaphor meaning *Provider*, and that David visualizes himself as the sheep for whom the LORD provides.

The other most common type of parallelism in Scripture is **antithetical parallelism**.<sup>54</sup> This is the kind of parallelism used in all the proverbs that contrast one person, thing or idea with its antithesis. Consider Pro 10.1:

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52 Biblical Hebrew poetry does use alliteration, but its primary "echoes" are in thought rather than in sound.

53 Different modern authors prefer one or another of these terms.

54 Antithetical parallelism is sometimes called more generally *contrastive parallelism*.

- A. A wise son brings joy to his father,
- B. But a foolish son grief to his mother.

In this example, the parallel idea is the effect of a son on his parents, but the proverb *contrasts* a wise son with the antithesis of a wise son, namely a foolish one. This kind of antithetical parallelism is a mainstay of wisdom literature, whose fundamental purpose is to mark the Y in the road where a wise choice diverges from its less felicitous alternative (more on wisdom literature below).

Other kinds of parallelisms in the Bible include:

- **Amplification or Elaboration** (also called *progressive* or *developmental*) in which the second colon adds *detail to* or *rationale for* the thought of the first;
- **Petition And Argument**, a particular kind of amplification parallelism in which the second colon expresses why the petition of the first colon should be granted.
- **Logical Sequence** in which the thought in the second colon follows logically from the first;
- **Temporal Sequence** in which the second colon expresses something occurring subsequently or previously to what is described in the first.
- **Word Order** in which the same words are used in the same or reverse order in the two cola.
- **Parts Of Speech** in which verbs, nouns and adjectives are used in the same or reverse order in the two cola (this kind of parallelism is difficult to see in translation).

Observing the different kinds of parallelism in the poetry passages of the Bible will not only increase our enjoyment of the text, but will aid us in grasping its meaning.

Before concluding this excursus on the poetry genre, let us return briefly to the book of Psalms. When we exegete the book of Psalms, we should bear in mind that this book provides us with a worshipful and meditative response to God's revelation in the Torah, i.e., the five books of Moses and the instruction they contain.<sup>55</sup> As Nahum M. Sarna puts it,

The Torah and the Psalms are, in a very real sense, complementary. The former, revelation, is anthropotropic; it represents the divine outreach to humankind. The latter, worship, is theotropic; it epitomizes the human striving for contact with God.<sup>56</sup>

Add to this Mark D. Futato's understanding of the first psalm:

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<sup>55</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the book of Psalms is divided into five sections: Psa 1-41; Psa 42-72; Psa 73-89; Psa 90-106; Psa 107-150. See Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, p. 146.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in T. A. Perry's *Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible: Exploring God's Twilight Zone*, ch. 7.

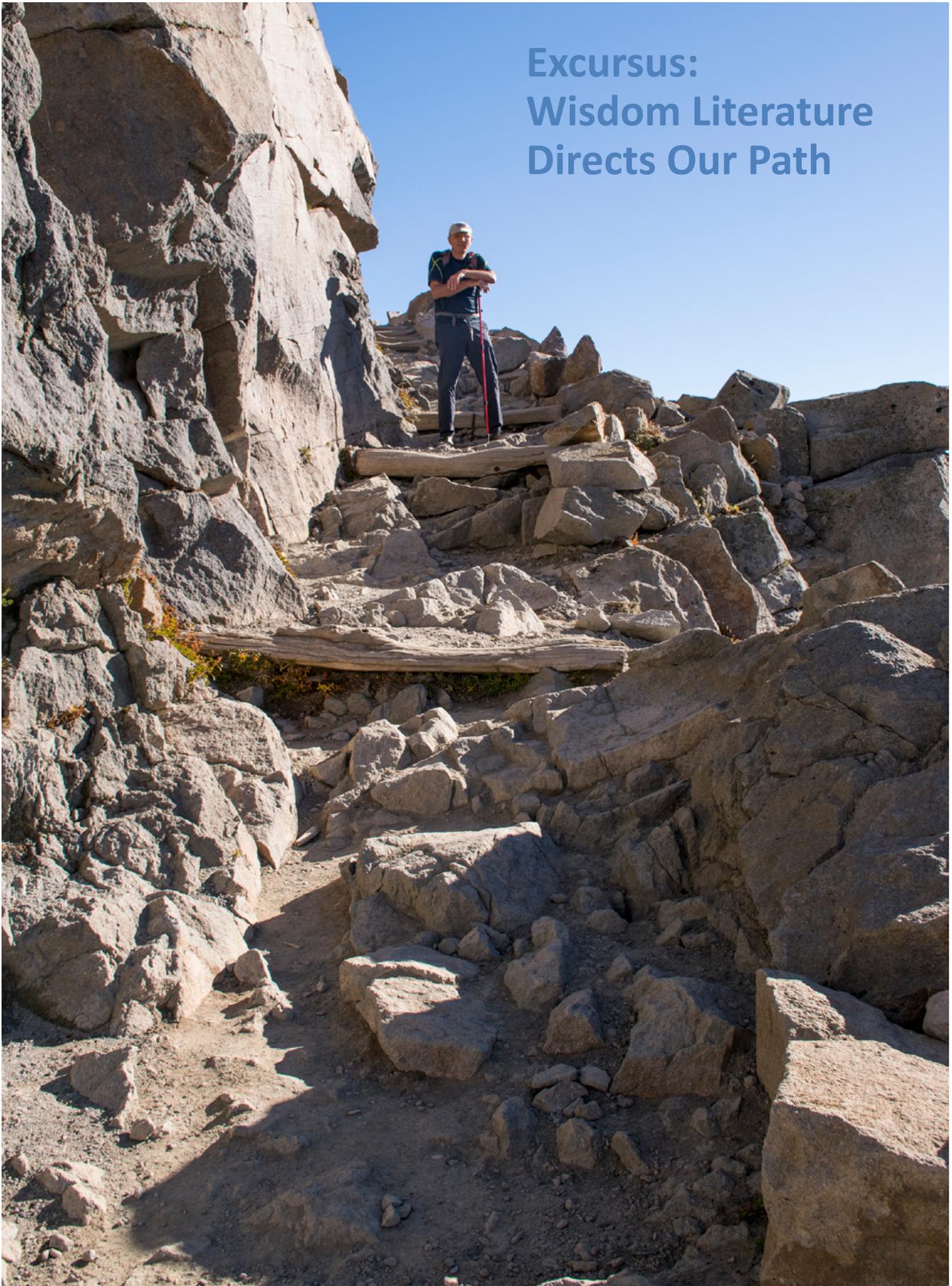
... we conclude that the book of Psalms invites believers to meditate on the Five Books of Moses as a source of instruction for experiencing the joy/blessings (v. 1) and prosperity/success (v. 3) held out in Psalm 1.<sup>57</sup>

The relationship of the book of Psalms to the books of Moses implies that, if we seek to understand a theological idea that we find in a psalm or group of psalms, we should look for the foundation of that idea in the Pentateuch. Likewise, when teaching theology from the OT, and while recognizing that the theological content of the psalms is every bit as inspired and authoritative as the theological content of the Pentateuch, we should nevertheless use the books of Moses, rather than a psalm or group of psalms as our starting point. Once establishing the foundation for a theological idea in the books of Moses, we can support it and amplify its meaning from the psalms.

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57 Mark D. Futato's *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, pp. 61-62.

Excursus:  
Wisdom Literature  
Directs Our Path



## *Ten Kinds Of Wisdom Literature And Their Common Purpose*

The wisdom writings of the Bible include the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, as well as passages in the Psalms and prophets, along with a variety of sayings scattered throughout the Bible's historical books (OT and NT), and in the NT epistles. The Bible's wisdom literature includes ten subgenres listed by Charles Foster Kent<sup>58</sup>:

1. Similitude
2. Riddle
3. Fable
4. Parable
5. Simple Proverb
6. Paradox
7. Gnostic Essay<sup>59</sup>
8. Didactic Drama<sup>60</sup>
9. Philosophical Drama<sup>61</sup>
10. Philosophical Homily

Even though these subgenres represent a wonderful variety of literary approaches, they all have one common purpose, namely, to present the reader or hearer with guidance by which to choose the wise path over the foolish alternative, sometimes with regard to life in general and often with regard to a specific situation. Just as Moses set before the people of Israel the paths of life and death (Deu 30.15,19), and Joshua called them to choose between the pagan gods and Yaveh (Jos 24.15), now the Bible's wisdom passages stand at the forks in our road of life, urging us to take the way leading to success rather than the way leading to destruction. These signposts of wisdom are vital for us because we are members of a fallen race, all of us born with a distorted sense of what is right and smart (Pro 12.15; 14.12; 16.25). They are a gift from God Who is the only One who sees around the corners of life, and anticipates the short- and long-term results of human actions.

## *The Danger And Delight Of Proverbs*

In the realm of wisdom literature, the proverbial saying presents one of the greatest stumbling blocks for Christians who don't understand the [Rule of Literary Genres](#). The proverb is an

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58 Kent, Charles Foster. *The Wise Men Of Ancient Israel And Their Proverbs*, (New York: Silver, Burdett & Company, 1899).

59 A thematic grouping of maxims as in Pro 26.3-12 and Pro 26.13-16.

60 Kent mentions the Song of Solomon as the only biblical instance of this subgenre.

61 Kent mentions the book of Job as the only biblical instance of this subgenre.

ancient linguistic vehicle for conveying a wisdom principle, i.e., a principle for living life. It's a pithy saying that we can compare to a quality chocolate truffle or bon-bon. The clever words of the proverb contain a principle of life, even as a chocolate shell contains a candy filling; both layers taste delicious! The important thing to understand is that a proverb and its wisdom principle express probabilities based on alternatives. In other words, a proverb tells us *what is apt to happen as a result of choices in a certain circumstance*, not what will definitely happen. **A proverb is not a promise.** Unfortunately, many biblical proverbs have been claimed as promises from God. As a result, grieving parents have come into the pastor's office, angry at God, because they had claimed the "promise" of Proverbs 22.6, but their grown child turned his back on Christianity and shows no sign of returning to the faith. "Doesn't God keep His promises?" Yes, He does, but Proverbs 22.6 does not give us a promise from God that our children will not depart from the Way. Instead, it teaches us the wisdom of training our children, as opposed to the foolishness of leaving our children to their own devices.

We must learn to interpret proverbial sayings, not only because of the extensive treasury of wisdom contained within the proverbs of the Old Testament,<sup>62</sup> but also because Jesus used proverbial sayings throughout His teaching. Consider the following dozen proverbs:

1. Do not judge, that you not be judged, and do not condemn, that you not be condemned.<sup>63</sup>
2. With what judgment you judge you will be judged, and by what measure you measure it will be measured to you.<sup>64</sup>
3. Pardon and you will be pardoned.<sup>65</sup>
4. Give and it will be given to you.<sup>66</sup>
5. Freely you received, freely give.<sup>67</sup>
6. Little does he love to whom little is forgiven.<sup>68</sup>
7. By their fruits you will recognize them.<sup>69</sup>
8. From its fruit the tree is known.<sup>70</sup>

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62 For technical help in interpreting proverbial sayings of the Hebrew Scriptures, please see my written guide, "How To Unwrap A Biblical Proverb," available without charge from our Timothy Ministries web site, [www.tmin.org](http://www.tmin.org).

63 Mat 7.1; Luk 6.37.

64 Mat 7.2.

65 Luk 6.37.

66 Luk 6.38.

67 Mat 10.8.

68 Luk 7.47.

69 Mat 7.16,20.

70 Mat 12.33; Luk 6.44.

9. Every tree not *habitually* producing beautiful fruit is cut down, and into the fire is thrown.<sup>71</sup>
10. Either make the tree beautiful and its fruit beautiful, or make the tree rotten and its fruit rotten.<sup>72</sup>
11. Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.<sup>73</sup>
12. If the salt becomes insipid, by what will it be salted?<sup>74</sup>

Did you recognize them as proverbs of Jesus, the “greater than Solomon” (Mat 12.42; Luk 11.31)? Of the kinds of wisdom sayings [identified above](#) by Charles Foster Kent, Jesus used the following six:

1. Similitude
2. Riddle
3. Parable
4. Simple Proverb
5. Paradox
6. Gnostic Essay

These categories often overlap, but the canonical sayings of Jesus that can be classified as proverbs number about 150. If we do not recognize these proverbial sayings of Jesus as wisdom sayings, we may misinterpret them as promises or legal directives. A physician friend of mine knew a woman who had misunderstood the wisdom teaching of Jesus in Mat 18.8, and over time had cut off both her hands and feet. Granted, that poor lady had other problems besides bad hermeneutics, but we never want ignorance of the wisdom genre to perpetuate legalistic and dangerous interpretations.

The first step to rightly interpreting a wisdom saying is to *recognize it as a wisdom saying!* So, here are some hints about how to recognize a wisdom saying of Jesus in the gospels (two of His aphorisms are in Act 20.35 and 26.14):

1. If the biblical text identifies a teaching of Jesus as a parable (Greek *παραβολή*), then the saying or story so identified is a wisdom teaching (for examples, see Mat 24.32 and Luk 20.18-19).
2. When Jesus uses a short pithy saying to summarize a teaching or to drive home a main point, the saying is probably an original aphorism of Jesus or a proverb known in His culture. Jesus often introduced these sayings with the conjunctions *for* or *because* (for examples, see Mat 6.21 and 12.37).

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71 Mat 7.19.

72 Mat 12.33.

73 Luk 6.45.

74 Mat 5.13; Mar 9.50; Luk 14.34.

3. If a short pithy saying of Jesus migrates, i.e., it appears in more than one teaching context, it is probably an aphorism of Jesus or a known proverb. In the teaching of the sages, a given proverb could be used to make a point in a variety of different circumstances; that's why some of the sayings of Jesus appear in different teaching contexts and make a slightly different point. A good example of this is the "Disciple/servant is not above/greater ..." sayings that appear in Mat 10.24-25; Luk 6.40; Joh 13.15-16; 15.20.
4. If a short saying of Jesus is stated in a parallelistic form, i.e., in the form of a couplet of two complementary statements, then it is an aphorism of Jesus or a known proverb of His time. The parallelism of such sayings can take any of the following forms:
  - a. Antithetical (contrastive) as in Mat 9.12;
  - b. Synonymous as in Mat 10.26;
  - c. Amplification (the second statement gives the reason or explanation for the first) as in Mat 5.3;
  - d. Paradox as in Mat 16.25;
  - e. If-Then as in Mat 6.14-15;
  - f. Better-Than as in Mat 5.29;
  - g. Where-There as in Mat 6.21 and 24.28;
  - h. Either-Or as in Mat 12.33.

### *The Treasure Of The Parables*

A parable, in New Testament usage, is a brief story, sometimes so brief as to be no more than the description of a momentary event. The shortest parables of Jesus are indistinguishable from proverbial sayings (Mat 9.16; 12.25; 15.11,14). In fact, the meaning of the Greek word *parable* (*παραβολή*) in the New Testament encompasses proverbs as well as the more familiar stories of Jesus. This helps us understand that the parables of Jesus, like His proverbs, teach a wisdom principle and confront the hearer with a choice between the wise and foolish path. The parables generally do this by describing a familiar scenario of daily life from which an analogy can be made to important spiritual realities.

Though parables present analogies, a parable rarely takes the form of a full allegory.<sup>75</sup> This means that, generally, we should not look for symbolic meaning in every character or item of a parable's story. However, some parables do have allegorical, i.e., symbolic, elements. In fact,

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<sup>75</sup> As Craig L. Blomberg reminds us, twentieth century scholarship eschewed the early church emphasis on allegory, and favored interpreting the parables as making only one main point. That a parable has one main point, however, does not preclude the story from having some symbolic/allegorical elements. See Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 19-20, 33 ff.

from parable to parable, the symbolic/allegorical value may be nil, low or high.<sup>76</sup> For example, the parable of “The Children In The Marketplace” (Mat 11.16-19) is a straightforward similitude (extended simile): This generation (to which Jesus referred) **is like** children who are impossible to please. The allegorical value of this parable is nil; we shouldn’t try to find deeper allegorical/symbolic meaning in the flute, the dance and the dirge. On the other hand, “The Parable Of The Sower” (Mat 13.3-9,18-23) has high allegorical value, and Jesus interpreted what all the important elements of the story represented. In between are parables, like that of “The Man Away On A Journey” (Mar 13.32-37), which have a low allegorical value in that only one or two elements in the extended simile point to a real-life person or event, but the elements of the story over all are not symbolic. What we must never do is allow any symbolic *parts* of a parable to obscure the primary wisdom teaching of the *whole*. We must interpret a parable in such a way as to draw out its main wisdom principle and discern the important choice that it calls the hearer/reader to make.

To interpret a parable is not always easy. Jesus used parables to teach principles that usually only God-seekers would invest the effort to understand, and that the truth-resistant and complacently curious would dismiss as too obscure (Mat 13.10-17).<sup>77</sup> The difficulty for Jesus’ original hearers often had to do with what the parables taught about His own identity and the nature of His kingdom. Thankfully, we now have the benefit of retrospect; we can look back on all that Jesus accomplished and see the confirmation of His divine identity in His resurrection and ascension. Thus, with regard to the parable of The Two Builders (Mat 7.24-27), we don’t have to wonder, “Who is Jesus claiming to be, that *his* words should have such importance?” Likewise, with regard to the parable of The Minas (Luk 19.11-27), we don’t have to wonder, “What kingdom is Jesus talking about that involves the king-to-be having to depart to a far country before taking his throne?” Now, with the whole New Testament at our disposal, the parables are not only a gift of Jesus’ wisdom to us, but also continue to provide important teaching regarding His kingdom, as well evidence of Christ’s own Self-understanding enunciated before His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

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76 Cf. Graham Hough’s “allegorical circle,” with figure 2.1, in Blomberg’s *Interpreting the Parables*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 43-44.

77 Here we see again the importance of the first of the Seven Inferences above, The Rule Of Heart Preparation.

## 14. The Rule Of Using Clear Passages To Interpret Obscure Ones

### *Part 1: Interpret Scripture With Scripture*

Act 2.38 contains a grammatical ambiguity. Peter meant one of three things regarding the prerequisites for the forgiveness of sin:

- “repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins,” or
- “be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins,” or
- “repent... for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Did Peter mean that both repentance and baptism are required for the forgiveness of sin, or did he mean that only baptism or only repentance are required? The responsible exegete will recognize that ambiguity in the Greek text and will decide Peter’s meaning on the basis of evidence external to the verse itself. The temptation will be to interpret this verse according to one’s own doctrinal bias, but that’s exactly what the persuasive expositor must not do. The moment an interpreter says, “Peter’s wording is ambiguous, but as we all know, our church teaches that baptism is what washes away sin,” that interpreter has begun to undermine his own credibility as a teacher of the Scriptures.

When confronted by ambiguity in a passage, instead of falling back on church doctrine, or our own “reason” (which Augustine cautioned against),<sup>78</sup> we must diligently search the Bible for passages that clarify the relationships between baptism and forgiveness on the one hand, and repentance and forgiveness on the other. When we do that, we will be able to show from passage after passage that the Israelite people always understood forgiveness as flowing from repentance rather than from ritual (1Ki 8.33-50; 2Ch 7.12-14; Psa 32.1-5; Psa 51; Luk 24.46-47; Act 3.19; 1Jo 1.9; cf. Jub 41.23-25; Pss 9.7[vv. 14-15 in Ryle]). The clear passages about forgiveness flowing from repentance clear up the ambiguity in Acts 2.38 and allow us to expound that verse confidently and authoritatively.<sup>79</sup>

This principle, of using clear scriptures to interpret more obscure or ambiguous ones, appears often in discussions of hermeneutics, but it begs the question: what qualifies a passage as being “clear”? In general, we can say that the fewer possible interpretations a passage has, the more clear it is. This guideline may suffice when we’re looking for “clear” passages to help us understand a scripture that is obscure but not doctrinally weighty. However, identifying “clear” passages as those with fewer possible interpretations is too subjective to help us clarify doctrinally weighty passages. If we are studying or developing a doctrine that shapes (or will shape) the

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<sup>78</sup> *De Doc* 3.28.

<sup>79</sup> For a full treatment of Acts 2.38, please see my book *Magic Baptism And The Invention Of Original Sin*, (Timothy Ministries, 2014), available for free at [www.tmin.org](http://www.tmin.org).

life of the church, then instead of beginning with a passage that seems more clear to ourselves, we must apply that second part of this important rule:

## ***Part 2: When Developing A Doctrine, Begin With An Explicit Text***

If you were to ask me what American state I was born in, I could answer you explicitly and say, “California.” The great thing about an explicit statement is that it leaves no ambiguity; it can only be interpreted one way. However, we often communicate implicitly, and implicit statements only imply their information. I could have answered the question by saying, “I was born in the city of San Jose.” For Californians, that answer would imply that I had been born in their state, which is true, but for others it could imply that I had been born in Texas or New Mexico, or even Illinois. Half a dozen states have a city called San Jose, and so my implicit answer would leave a some ambiguity — as every implicit statement does. Therefore, to avoid ambiguity and confusion when interpreting Scripture, **always use explicit statements to interpret implicit ones, and clear statements to explain the obscure ones** — not vice versa!

1Co 13.8-10 requires the application of this rule. In this passage, Paul declares that charismatic gifts like prophecy, tongues, and [the word of] knowledge will pass away when “that which is **perfect**” has come. Some interpreters decided that the “perfect” thing of which Paul spoke in this passage is the completed canon of the New Testament. From this interpretation, they argue that charismatic gifts, at least the troublesome ones, passed away when John completed the New Testament by writing the book of Revelation. This interpretation commends itself to all of us who admire the perfection of the New Testament and of the Bible as a whole. However, it is an interpretation utterly foreign to the context (indeed foreign to the entire NT) and that has no explicit foundation.<sup>80</sup> Interpreters must admit that the identification of Paul’s “perfect” thing with the completed New Testament is only implied *at best*.

Now let us apply the rule of using explicit or clear statements to explain the implicit or obscure ones. As our first step, we find other passages that use the term in question, Paul’s adj., *perfect* (Grk adj. τέλειος, α, ον; tē-lē-ōs). Does a passage exist in which Paul used this word unequivocally? Yes; there are several passages in which he used τέλειος unambiguously, *and* to communicate parallel ideas to those he expressed in 1Co 13.10. Let’s look at one, Eph 4.11-13 (NAU):

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80 As Fee and Stuart write, the idea that this verse refers to the New Testament “*is one thing the text cannot mean* because good exegesis quite disallows it. There is no way Paul could have meant this; after all, the Corinthians did not know there was going to be a New Testament, and the Holy Spirit would not likely have inspired Paul to write something to them that would be totally incomprehensible.” Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 74.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a **mature** [τέλειον] man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Note that just as in 1Co 13, the context has to do with the exercise of spiritual gifts until a certain time when some “perfection” arrives. In this passage, however, Paul left no doubt as to the nature of the perfection; it is perfect *maturity*, i.e., the full maturation of the body of Christ. Paul declared plainly that the Lord gave spiritual gifts by which to equip believers until they all corporately attain to a fully “mature man” in Christ.

When we look again at 1Cor 13.10-11, we see that this is exactly what Paul spoke of in that passage as well:

But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Spiritual gifts are to be used until Christian believers are no longer childish but have attained perfect maturity in Christ.

Consider two other passages where Paul used τέλειος:

All of us who are mature [τέλειοι] should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. (Phil 3.15)

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone [every man] perfect [τέλειον] in Christ. (Col 1.28)

When we begin with these unambiguous occurrences of the adj. *perfect* (τέλειος, α, ον), and then return to its more obscure use in 1Co 13.10, we are able to interpret the verse with confidence.<sup>81</sup> When we interpret the “perfect” in this passage as maturity in Christ, we see that our interpretation not only makes perfect sense in its context, but that it also echoes and complements Paul’s teaching in his other epistles.

We would spare the church a great deal of controversy by consistently adopting this rule of beginning with the explicit and the clear. The most enduring doctrinal disputes in Christianity

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81 Students of the Grk text will note that the adj. τέλειος is neuter nominative singular in 1Co 13.10, and masculine accusative singular in Eph 4.13 and Col 1.28, and masculine nominative plural in Phil 3.15. These differences have only to do with Paul’s specific phrasing in each instance. In all but the 1Co 13 passage, the adj. is attached *directly* to nouns (*man, men* or *many*), while in 1Co 13.10 Paul used the neuter nominative to speak of maturity as a thing in itself, attaching it *indirectly* to a person (himself) in the following verse.

involve propositions based on implicit rather than explicit texts. The controversy over the time of the rapture,<sup>82</sup> relative to the time of Great Tribulation (Mat 24.21), is a case in point. The “pre-tribulation rapture” doctrine, though popular, has left scholars unconvinced precisely because it must first be assumed and then supported with passages that have only an implicit connection at best with the catching up of the saints.<sup>83</sup>

We must make an important observation at this juncture. The lack of an explicit passage in support of a doctrinal proposition *does not prove that the proposition is false*. However, it does prove that the proposition is neither a teaching that the Bible emphasizes, nor a cardinal doctrine of the faith. We may choose to believe in a pre-tribulation rapture if we like, but if we excommunicate someone for not believing in it, we have become distinctly unbiblical.

In fact, if we wish to remain truly biblical in our teaching and preaching, we will give attention not only to biblical truth, but also to biblical emphasis. [The Rule Of Using Clear Passages To Interpret Obscure Ones](#), together with noting the number of times the canon repeats an idea, will help us recognize what the Bible emphasizes and what it does not. To avoid wasting the church’s time with inconsequential teachings, we should always be able to support the main propositions in our sermons and lessons with at least one explicit text of Scripture (see no. 1 in the “Biblical Doctrine” illustration below). Once we have an explicit passage as the main pillar to support our message, we may use implicit passages (no. 2) along with complementary truths (no. 3) to bolster our argument. We may add further depth to our proposition by illustrating it with types or historical precedents (no. 4). All of these elements help build a doctrinal proposition and establish its emphasis in the Bible, but they all collapse into imbalance and unimportance if the explicit pillar is not first in place.

On another doctrinal front, Charismatics (and others) question the importance of the classic Pentecostal doctrine of “tongues as *the* initial evidence” of the baptism in the Holy Spirit precisely because it lacks explicit biblical support. British Pentecostal leader and adherent of the doctrine, Donald Gee, succinctly summarized his basis for the proposition in his article “Speaking in Tongues: the Initial Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit”:

Now the doctrine that speaking with other tongues is the initial evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit rests upon the accumulated evidence of the recorded cases in the book of Acts where this experience is received. Any doctrine on this point must necessarily be confined within these limits for its basis, for the New Testament contains no plain, categorical

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82 The catching up of the saints, 1Th 4.17.

83 Rev 3.10, for example, often offered in support of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, promised the first-century church of Philadelphia a deliverance from a time of testing that would come upon the Mediterranean world. There is no explicit connection to the end-time tribulation or rapture of the saints.

statement anywhere as to what must be regarded as THE sign. Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidence is quite sufficient to clearly reveal God's mind and will in the matter.<sup>84</sup>

While the Assembly of God still officially subscribes to this distinctive doctrine,<sup>85</sup> Gee and other Pentecostal teachers overestimated the willingness of subsequent generations of Pentecostals and Charismatics to promote an idea based solely upon "circumstantial evidence."<sup>86</sup> When other evangelicals criticized Pentecostals for using suspect exegesis to support the "tongues is the evidence" doctrine, an editorial in the May/June 1976 issue of the Charismatic Logos Journal replied:

Most Southern Baptist scholars admit true exegesis of the Scripture forces them to conclude that the gifts of the Spirit — including tongues — are just as valid today as they were at Pentecost, or in the house of Cornelius. They quickly add, however, that tongues should not be considered the initial evidence — or even *the* evidence — of the filling of the Spirit. **We agree, and so do most charismatic scholars. Denominational leaders who criticize the charismatic move on these points are to be pitied for their ignorance.** (Bold emphasis mine.)

Clearly the Logos editors did not wish to be pigeonholed as adherents of the "tongues is the evidence" doctrine, and I can understand why: defending the doctrine to one's friends can become embarrassing. I'll never forget the time a young Pentecostal friend tried to explain the biblical basis for the "tongues is the evidence" doctrine to me. When I asked him how he knew that tongues was the evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he replied, "On every occasion in the book of Acts when people were baptized in the Spirit they spoke in tongues."

"What about the Samaritan converts in Acts 8.17," I asked. "They received the Spirit but there is no mention of tongues in the passage."

"True," my friend said, "but Simon the sorcerer saw a manifestation of the Spirit's coming, and that had to be tongues."

"But that manifestation could have been a different spiritual gift," I objected. "How do you know it was tongues?"

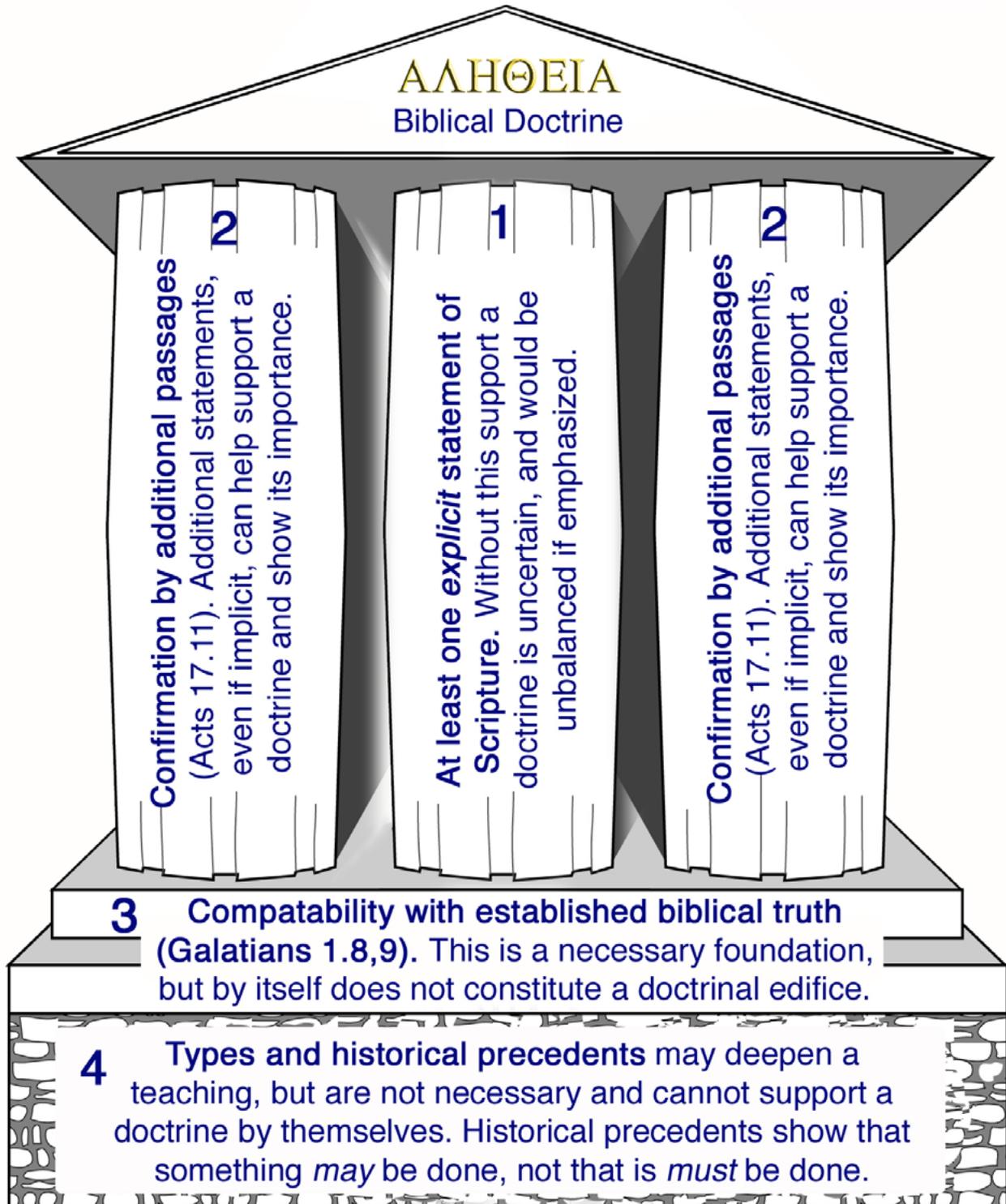
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84 December 12, 1925, issue of the Pentecostal Evangel.

85 <https://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Issues/2000/Fall-2000>. See the article, "The Full Consummation of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit."

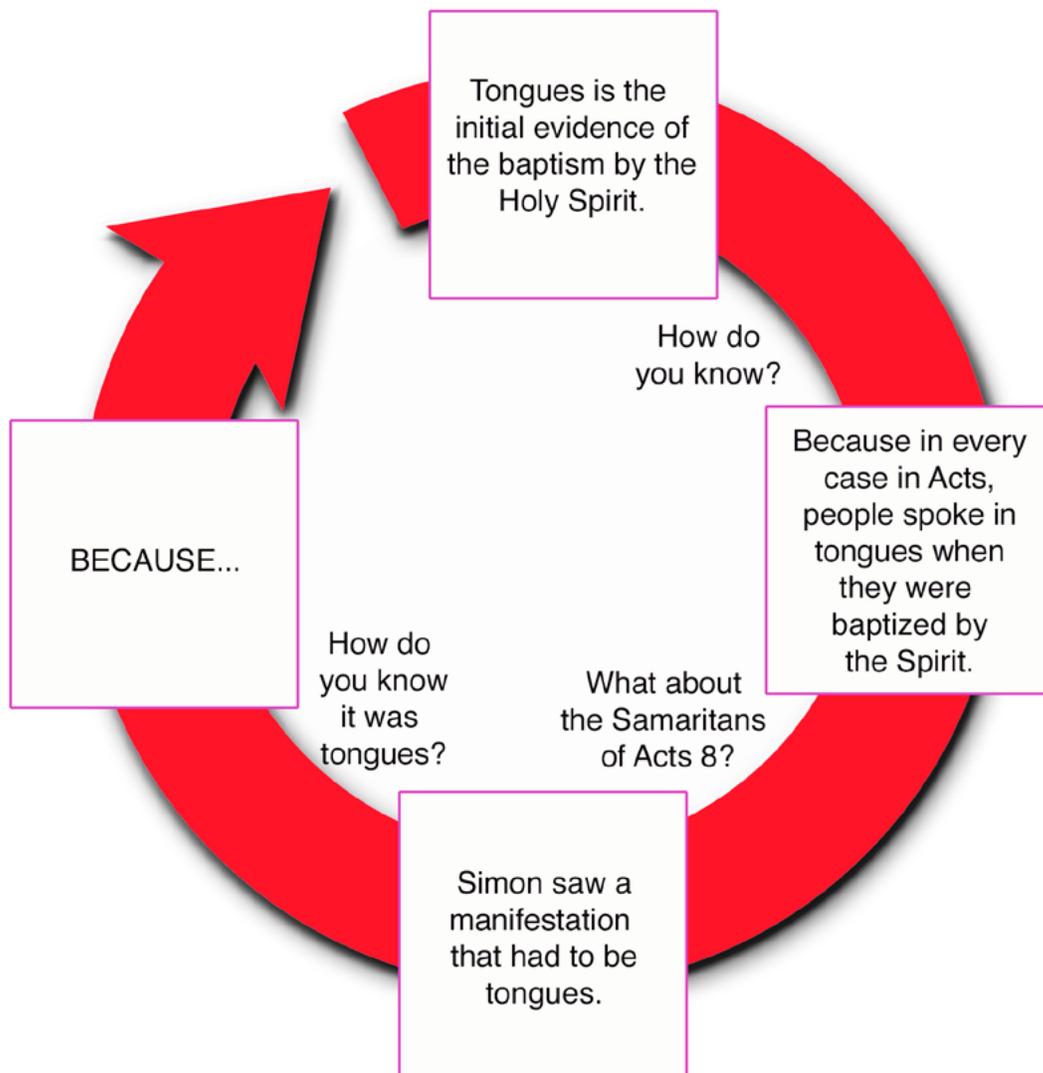
86 There is a place for circumstantial evidence, but in the "tongues are the evidence" debate, other concerns about Luke's **intentional meaning** come into play. James Wallace has provided a helpful explanation of the value of circumstantial evidence in a criminal trial: "The nature of circumstantial evidence is such that any one piece may be interpreted in more than one way. For this reason, jurors have to be careful not to infer something from a single piece of evidence. Circumstantial evidence usually accumulates into a powerful collection, however, and each additional piece corroborates those that came before until, together, they strongly support one inference over another." James Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2013).

# The Elements For Building A Biblical Doctrine



“Because,” said my friend, “in every case when people were baptized by the Spirit in the book of Acts, they spoke in tongues.” And thus he brought his argument for “tongues as the evidence” to a full circle. He did the same with regard to Saul of Tarsus. When I pointed out that Luke makes no mention of Saul speaking in tongues when he was filled with the Spirit (Act 9.17-18), my friend replied that Paul told the Corinthians that he did speak in tongues (1Co 14.18). “Yes,” I said, “but how do you know he spoke in tongues at the time he was initially filled with the Spirit?” He replied, “Because in every case when people were baptized by the Spirit in the book of Acts, they spoke in tongues.”

This kind of circular reasoning and circumstantial evidence, used in lieu of explicit biblical statements, unnecessarily stirs up doctrinal controversy. I believe that Christians are still baptized in the Holy Spirit, and I believe in the present-day exercise of the gift of tongues, but I also believe that there is a sound way to formulate the principles of our pneumatology so that those principles challenge, rather than alienate, non-charismatic evangelicals.



Pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit) has always stirred controversy in the church, and eschatology (the study of last things) has divided evangelicals almost as much. Therefore, before we finish our hermeneutical polishing, it behooves us to give attention to how we interpret Bible Prophecy. Let us consider seven more principles that pertain specifically to the prophetic Scriptures.

# The Seven Corollaries

## Principles For Interpreting Bible Prophecy

### Checking Our Frames Again

**A**s we focus upon the eschatological Scriptures, we must pause once again to examine the frames of our interpretive glasses. Until we become consciously aware of our presuppositions about Bible prophecy, we will tend to apply hermeneutical rules inconsistently. In order to help you, dear reader, become aware of your presuppositions about Bible prophecy, let me share mine. As you read these propositions, you can decide whether or not to keep them on your personal list of beliefs.

#### *A. The Bible Is A True Record of God's Dealings With Man*

If the Bible is true it means that God has really spoken through His prophets and we can expect their reports and their predictions to be accurate and consistent with one another. This means that the Bible stands as its own final authority for interpreting the prophecies within its pages; no non-canonical book or prophet can interpret one biblical passage in a way that conflicts with the teaching of other biblical passages.

#### *B. God Intervenes In Human Affairs*

The belief that God does not stand aloof from His creation, but intervenes in human affairs, follows directly upon belief in the truth of the Bible. Among other things, this means that phenomena which we call supernatural (because they involve an introduction of spiritual power into the natural order) are a real and plausible aspect of human existence. Therefore, we need not relegate the supernatural events of the eschatological scriptures to allegory or metaphor. The cosmic signs and wonders, as well as the battles of angels and demons, can actually happen and we must not interpret them as allegorical without a compelling reason to do so.

### ***C. Creation Is The Battleground For A Cosmic War***

As part of His holy and eternal plan, God sovereignly permitted both the rebellion of Lucifer and the fall of man. He has also permitted the ensuing battle for the souls of men that will conclude at the end of the Millennium (the thousand-year reign of Christ described in Rev 20). The release of Satan, after he has once been bound (Rev 20.7), underscores the fact that God is accomplishing deep purposes through the outworking of the cosmic battle between His kingdom and the kingdom of darkness. Therefore, we should not dismiss descriptions of apocalyptic battles as purely metaphorical or as apocryphal and unworthy of a loving God.

### ***D. The Church Includes All Believers Of All Time***

As Paul reminds us in the Seven Unities of Eph 4.4-6, there is only one body of believers. The Scriptures refer to this body as the Church, the elect, the saints, the bride of the Lamb, the body of Christ, etc., but it is one flock made up of Jew and Gentile, with one Shepherd (Joh 10.16). [The unity of the one body](#) does not negate the cultural distinctions of its members nor the diverse historical contexts of their redemption, but it underscores the one and only basis of their redemption, namely, the atoning sacrifice of Messiah (cf. Act 20.28).

### ***E. God Has Never Renounced His Promises To National Israel***

The fact that Jews who do not receive Jesus as Messiah are “broken off” from Messianic blessing (Rom 11.19-20), does not imply that God has renounced His love or His intentions for the Jewish nation, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11.29). In fact, Israel is the test case for God’s promises. God said in Jer 31.35-36 (NAU):

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name:

“If this fixed order departs From before Me,” declares the LORD, “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease From being a nation before Me forever.”

If God were to renounce the nation of Israel before changing the fixed order of the cosmos, we would all question whether any of His promises were secure. Thankfully, the fixed order of the cosmos has not changed, nor has God cast off the Israelites as a people. This fact was powerfully demonstrated in the 20th century by the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. God’s faithfulness to His promises to Israel stands today as one of the most powerful apologetics for the truth of the Bible.

The modern nation of Israel is not only a living testimony to God’s faithfulness, but

remains a chosen vessel for the outworking of God's redemptive plan for planet earth. As such, Israel has an important role to play alongside the church in the spectacular upheaval of the End Time (a short period of time at the very end of our present age, Dan 8.17; 11.35,40; 12.4).

### ***F. Jerusalem Is The Geographical Center Of The Eschatological Scriptures***

Not only does Israel retain her calling and special role in God's eschatological plans, but Jerusalem also retains her status as the city of the Coming King. As Benjamin Newton wrote, "The facts of prophetic history are made by Scripture to revolve around Jerusalem as their centre — and therefore any system of interpretation which violates this cardinal principle will soon find itself lost in inconsistency."<sup>87</sup> The final battle of the apocalypse will be fought at Jerusalem, and Messiah's feet will touch down on her Mount of Olives when He descends from heaven (Zec 14.4).

Because Jerusalem is the geographical focal point of the eschatological scriptures, we should recognize that prophetic references to "the earth" or "the land" may refer only to the land of Israel, and that references to "the world" probably refer to the "prophetic world," that is, the known world of the prophets. Unless we have clear indication in the text that the *earth* or *the world* refers to a greater region, we should probably take it as referring to *ha-eretz yisrael*, the land of Israel, or at most the greater Mediterranean world.<sup>88</sup>

### ***G. "The End Of All Things Is At Hand..."***

It seems sensational to declare that the end is near, but the apostle Peter said it explicitly in 1Pet 4.7. John, believed to have been the longest-lived of the apostles, also spoke strongly of the near end of the age (1Jo 2.18): "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour."

<sup>87</sup> Newton, Benjamin, *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry*, p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> For a thorough demonstration of the Bible's "limited" geography, please see my treatise entitled, "The Beast At The Center Of The World," available without charge at the Timothy Ministries website, [www.tmin.org](http://www.tmin.org).



Indeed, when John recorded his vision of the apocalypse, he was told (Rev 22.10), “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” Were the apostles mistaken, just like modern-day date-setters? After all, nearly two thousand years have passed since they wrote their declarations of impending cataclysm. Were they wrong?

Well first of all, they did not set a date for the end, they only wrote that the end was coming soon. Secondly, they defined what they meant by soon. In 2Pe 3.8, the apostle exhorted, “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” To understand his meaning, let’s read the fourth verse of Psa 90 to which Peter alluded:

For a thousand years in Thy sight  
Are like yesterday when it passes by,  
Or as a watch in the night.

The context of 2Pe 3, together with the allusion to Psa 90, clarify Peter’s point: soon for God can mean a long time for us. Time is relative and we who dwell on earth experience it differently from God who dwells in eternity. Nevertheless, as God considered the entire scope of world history from beginning to end, and the long ages already past compared to the relatively short period that remained in His program for the world, He appropriately declared through His apostle that the end would come soon.

Peter understood this prophetic time scale well. On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted the prophet Joel to the effect that the pouring out of the Spirit, which they experienced in Jerusalem that day, marked the epoch of “the last days,” a period of time which would close with the darkening of the sun and the moon and the arrival of the “great and glorious day of the Lord” (Act 2.16-21; cf. Heb 1.1-2).<sup>89</sup> Peter realized that he had lived to enter that very last era before God’s judgment of the world and the restoration of all things (Act 3.19-20). However long the “last days” might continue, they constituted the final epoch of human history, and, unlike the saints of all previous generations, Christians could now say, “the end of all things is near!” A global remaking was at hand that was more radical than that accomplished by the flood of Noah which only destroyed “all flesh.”

If it was true that the end of all things was near in Peter’s day, it rings truer in ours. As Paul wrote, “...now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand” (Rom 13.11-12). Since these things are true, we should heed Christ’s words when He tells us in Joh 9.4, “We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work.” Part of accomplishing that work is to rightly

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<sup>89</sup> The “end time,” mentioned above, is the final part of The Last Days.

interpret the prophetic Scriptures to our churches and to our world.

Now, having identified some important presuppositions, let us proceed with polishing our interpretive lenses using these last seven principles:

## 15. The Spirit of Prophecy Rule

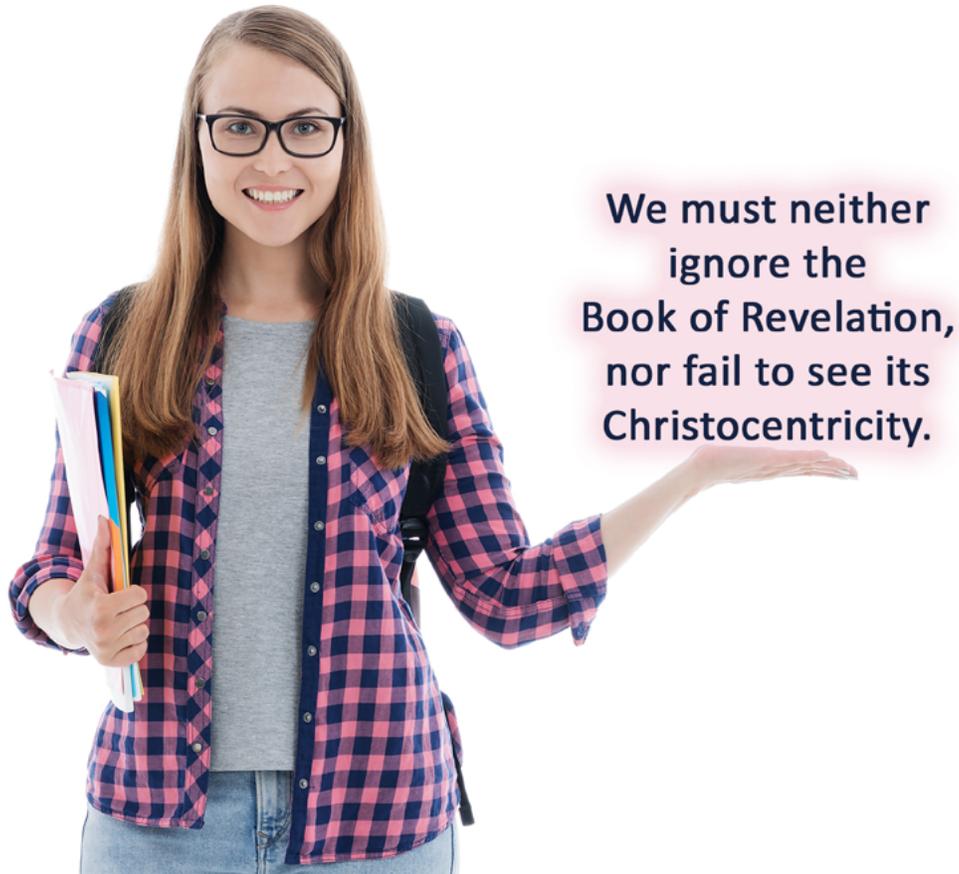
In Revelation 19.10, an angel states a vital principle: “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” In other words, “the testimony of Jesus” is what gives life and meaning to prophecy. But what is “the testimony of Jesus”? Other passages in the Revelation clarify that “the testimony of Jesus” is simply the public proclamation of Jesus and His redeeming work. Therefore, we can substitute terms and say that “the disclosure of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” If we then compare this idea with James’ parallel formula about faith, “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (Jam 2.26), we realize that prophecy without the disclosure of Jesus is dead! This means that **we have missed the whole point of biblical eschatology if we fail to study it for what it reveals to us about Jesus Christ**. As American Christians we have probably broken *this rule* of interpreting eschatology more than any other. We tend to study Bible prophecy to satisfy our curiosity about the future prospects of our own personal peace and prosperity, and for the entertainment value of contemplating a sensational spin on world events.

Symptomatic of this smudge on our hermeneutical glasses is our common error of referring to the final book of the Bible as The Book of Revelations (plural). This book is not a collection of disparate visions, however. It is The Revelation (singular) of Jesus Christ. This title is lifted from the beginning of verse 1, “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ,” and the Greek word *apocalypse* simply means *an unveiling*, i.e., *a revelation*. When I teach The Revelation, I ask my students if they would like to experience an apocalypse now. With some hesitation they usually say Yes. I then briefly remove the veil from a picture or statue I’ve brought along as a visual aid. I replace the veil quickly and ask the students if they missed the apocalypse. The point sinks in: an apocalypse, by definition, is an unveiling,<sup>90</sup> and the final book of the Bible, according to its own title draws back the veil from Jesus Christ.<sup>91</sup>

As an unveiling of Jesus, the Revelation answered one of the Apostle Paul’s prayers. Around AD 61, Paul had prayed for the Christians in Ephesus, saying “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Eph 1.17). The ultimate answer to that prayer came nearly

90 The term *apocalypse* has of course taken on more sensational connotations because of its association with end-time catastrophes. Also, as the adjective, *apocalyptic*, it identifies a whole style or genre of literature, both biblical and apocryphal, that focuses upon the final judgment and its associated upheavals.

91 The veil was Christ’s mortal flesh, and it was drawn back briefly once before on the Mount of Transfiguration.



40 years later through the ministry of the Apostle John who sent The Revelation from the island of Patmos to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesian Christians were struggling at that time with maintaining a proper spiritual focus in spite of their hard work for the gospel and steadfast witness. Paul's prayer that they would experience a deeper glimpse of Christ through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation was answered at a crucial time in their history with a book that revealed more about Jesus than the church at large had theretofore understood. Now that we understand its purpose, we must not squander this treasure so cherished by the first-century Christians. We must neither ignore the Book of Revelation nor fail to see its Christocentricity.

Its Christ-centeredness does not negate the fact that The Revelation does disclose future events. Bible prophecy does reveal the future, but first and foremost it reveals Christ. Bearing this in mind will make our study of eschatology much more fruitful, and it will also help us avoid all kinds of wasteful debates over secondary issues.

With regard to the disclosure of future events, it is vital that we come to understand the next rule:

## 16. The Rule of Cumulative Fulfillment

**Biblical prophecy is often fulfilled by a series of cumulative events.** Not infrequently, multiple events will combine, over a long stretch of time, to fulfill a biblical prophecy. This does not mean that biblical prophecies have double or hidden meanings. Willis J. Beecher<sup>92</sup> attempted to express this principle by speaking of a generic prophecy “which regards an event as occurring in a series of parts separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language that may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole — in other words a prediction which, in applying to the whole of a complex ... event, also applies to some of the parts.”

A. Berkeley Mickelsen speaks of “typological predictions” that “refer to something prior to New Testament times although it finds its highest application of meaning in the events, people, or message of the New Testament. The betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver is an example of this kind of prediction (Mat 27.9-10; Zec 11.12-13). In Zechariah it was the prophet himself, acting as a shepherd for his people in [God]’s place, who was evaluated for thirty pieces of silver.”<sup>93</sup>

Perhaps a better way to understand prophetic fulfillment is to see it as a process like the painting of a picture. One event may supply the background of the painting, another some of the foreground setting, but the picture is not finished, i.e., the canvas is not fulfilled as intended, until the primary subject of the picture is finally painted into the foreground. Zechariah’s prophecy of the thirty pieces of silver provides a good example of this process; the prophecy of the virgin-birth of Isaiah 7.14 supplies another. The virgin-birth prediction began to be fulfilled by the birth of the prophetess’ son in Isa 8.3. It was not finally fulfilled, however, until the virgin birth of Jesus (Mat 1.23). Thus, we find the same “process” at work in the fulfillment of a prophecy as we [described above](#) in connection with the fulfillment of a type:

**type ⇔ antitype ⇔ fulfillment**

Let’s state it this way:

**prophecy ⇔ *pf*<sup>n1</sup> ⇔ *pf*<sup>n2</sup> ... ⇔ fulfillment<sup>Ω</sup>**

In this formulation, ***pf*** stands for a preliminary fulfillment leading up to the completion of the process with the omega fulfillment.

The typological and prophetic patterns of fulfillment have direct application in interpreting the apocalyptic predictions concerning the antichrist and the abomination of desolation. Daniel predicted both the antichrist (implicitly) and the abomination of desolation (explicitly). Many commentators see a fulfillment of these predictions in the profanation of the temple by

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<sup>92</sup> From *The Prophets And The Promise*, quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1970), p.252.

<sup>93</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting The Bible*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963), p. 300.

Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” in 167 B.C. 1Ma 1.54 supports their interpretation: “On the fifteenth day of Chisleu, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering.” However, Jesus Christ, in AD 30 spoke of the “abomination of desolation” as yet future (Mat 24.15). We solve this puzzle by recognizing that Antiochus IV did fulfill Daniel’s prophecy, but as an ἀντίτυπος, i.e., a corresponding type, that yet looked ahead to an ultimate fulfillment in the one whom Paul called “the man of lawlessness” (2Th 2.3-4), i.e., the final Antichrist.

Remembering that the fulfillment of biblical prophecy can occur as a process will keep us from discarding end-time prophecy as something that has already been fulfilled by events in history and has no relevance for the future. Likewise, as we learn how future events mirror past and present realities, eschatology will help us understand what we already possess as believers in Christ.

## 17. The Rule of the Already/Not Yet Tension (The Ladd Rule)

In his book *The Presence of the Future*, as well as in his outstanding *A Theology of the New Testament*, George Eldon Ladd developed the idea, now widely embraced by evangelical theologians, that an “already/not yet” tension attaches to many of the Bible’s eschatological truths. For example, the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet come in its fullest manifestation (Luk 22.18), but it is already a present reality (Mat 11.12; 12.28). Likewise, we are not yet enthroned with Christ in glory (Rev 3.21), but we are already, in a very real sense, seated with Christ in heaven (Eph 2.6). The greater future realization does not negate or diminish the important present reality.

We Americans are familiar with this “already/not yet” tension in our presidential election years. We elect a new president in November, and we begin to speak of him as our president, but he does not officially take office until January. He is technically only the “president elect,” but he begins to attend White House meetings and soon becomes “the president” in every respect except the final authority that comes with inauguration. He is “already” the president by mandate of the people, but has “not yet” assumed the full authority of office. This is exactly the status of our Lord Jesus. By His death and resurrection he has already legally won the Lordship of planet earth, but He has not yet returned to assume the full honor of reigning directly over the human race.

**Recognizing the “already/not yet” aspect of prophecy will help us learn its present lessons and applications, while not losing sight of its future fulfillments.** Of course, any lessons and applications we derive from Bible prophecies will be arbitrary at best, if we do not adopt:

## 18. The Rule of Literal Fulfillment

Paralleling the [Rule of the Literal Sense](#), **we should expect a literal fulfillment of biblical predictions.** Jesus was literally born of a virgin (Isa 7.14), he was literally born in Bethlehem (Mic 5.2), and he was literally pierced (Zec 12.10). The scores of Old Testament prophecies that have been precisely fulfilled, even when one might have expected the laws of nature to preclude their fulfillments, teach us to expect a literal unfolding of those biblical predictions that have not yet come to pass.

This does not imply that we should expect a literal fulfillment of prophetic metaphors and symbols. For example, we should not expect a literal seven-headed monster to crawl out of the Mediterranean Sea (Rev 13 and 17). That would be like expecting the literal arrival of a ship when a friend describes his imminent inheritance, saying, “my ship’s coming in!” It is the *essential meaning* of a prediction that will be literally fulfilled, not its symbolic or metaphorical packaging (see [The Rule of Apocalyptic Symbols](#) below).

The prophetic Scriptures *will be* literally fulfilled, but some Bible students have become skeptical about this because they expected prophetic predictions to be fulfilled at a certain time and they weren’t. The problem, however, is with the date-setter, not with the prophecy. In order to avoid chronological errors while interpreting Bible prophecy, we must keep in mind:

## 19. The Rule of Eternal Perspective

### A. Recognize the Use of the Prophetic Perfective Verb

Many biblical predictions are given or described using a perfective verb (often an aorist verb in Greek passages, and a perfect consecutive verb in Hebrew passages). The use of these verbs does not express that the events had already happened when the prophecy was written, but only that the events had already been seen as completed in the prophetic vision (and by the eternal eyes of God).

### B. Expect A Telescoped Chronology

Because God, living above time, sees the total history of the universe in one eternally present glance, He often gives visions in a compressed or telescoped form. God declares multiple future events to a prophet as though all those events happen at once, because that’s the way God sees them. It falls to the prophet and to subsequent interpreters to stretch out the chronology of a prediction so it can be properly understood from an earthly point of view.

Failure to correctly extend the chronology of a vision “packet” leads to serious errors. Perhaps the greatest failure to unpack prophetic chronology was committed by the first-century

religious leaders who expected the Messiah to come both in humility *and* glory all at the same time. It was easy to misinterpret the messianic prophecies that way. However, Jesus Himself sets a better example for us. When he read aloud the prophecy about Himself in Isaiah 61, he stopped at exactly the right spot, mid-verse and mid-prophecy, before announcing, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luk 4.16-21). Jesus understood that Isaiah had received a revelation that was telescoped together, but only the first part of the prophecy applied to that present moment in Christ’s ministry.

### **C. Don’t Assume A Consecutive Chronology.**

When we watch a movie, we see one frame at a time. From God’s eternal perspective, He sees the whole “movie” of history at once. Therefore, we must not assume that a series of visions coming from God, or a series of events in a prophecy, necessarily follow a consecutive chronological order. We may be looking at snapshots, i.e., single frames taken from different points in the movie. A prophecy may describe two separate frames from the movie without describing the intervening frames; one scene may follow the other, yet without the two being consecutive.

In many cases the content of Bible prophecies is narrated in a chronologically reciprocating manner, moving back and forth in the time setting. One vision may provide a sweeping panorama of the future as did Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of the image (Dan 2), and then subsequent visions may return to different chronological settings to provide detail about specific events within the greater panorama (Dan 8). Similarly, a prophecy may look to the distant future and then return to describe events that will occur much sooner (see Luk 21.12).

### **D. Look for Definite Chronological Markers**

Where the chronology or order of events is important in Bible prophecy, the Holy Spirit makes it unmistakable with clear language (e.g., Mat 24.29: “immediately after the tribulation of those days”).

### **E. Recognize the Multiple Meanings of Then**

At least nine different Greek words translate as *then* in our English New Testaments. Most of these Greek words have no chronological meaning but simply indicate an inference or the continuation of a thought. Of the three terms with chronological meaning, two of them (εἶτα, 1Ti 3.10; ἔπειτα, Jam 3.17) indicate succession and mean *thereafter*, while the third (τότε, Mat 24.9-10) means *at that time*.

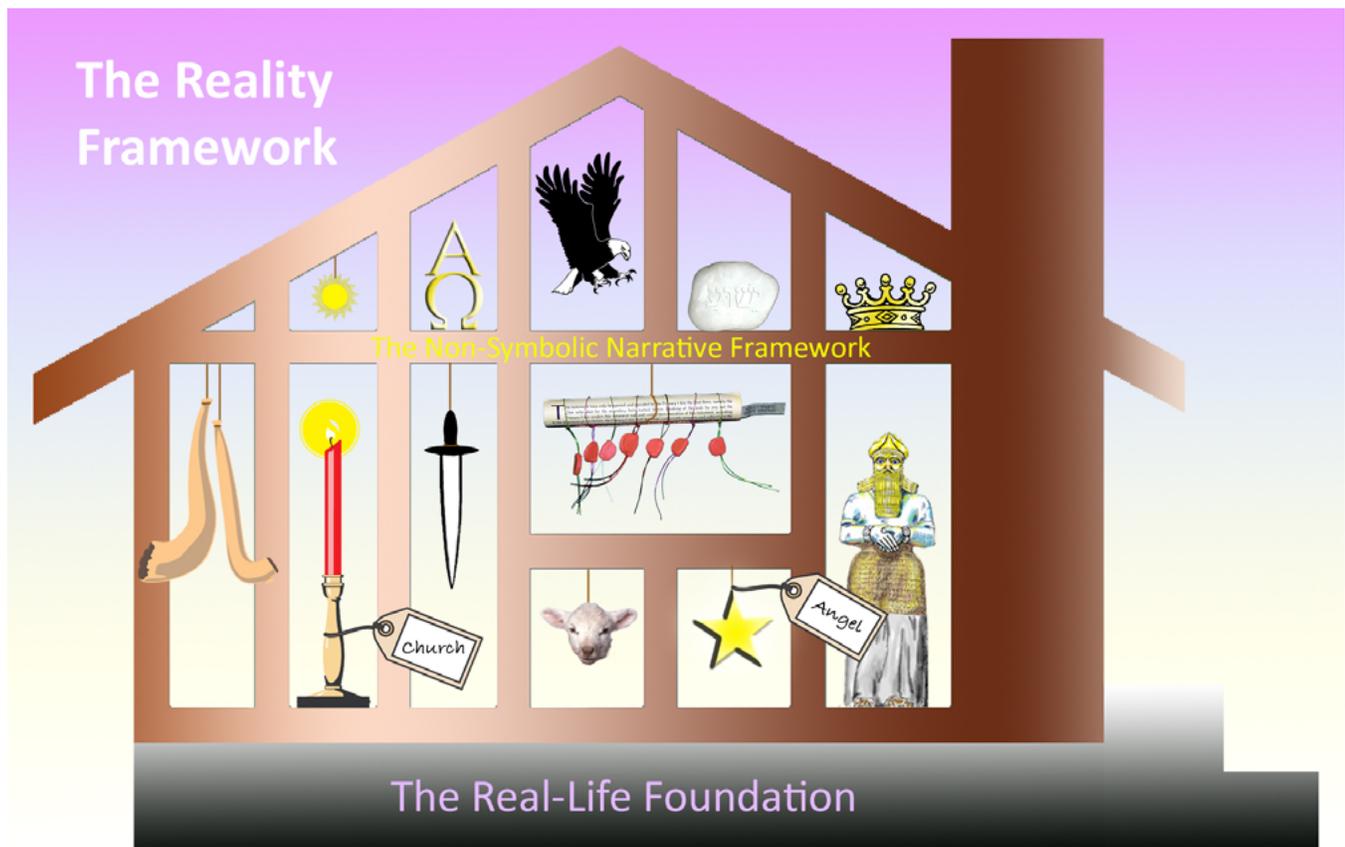
Once we have taken into account the complexity of eschatological chronology, we must learn:

## 20. The Rule of Apocalyptic Symbols

To understand the rich use of symbolism in apocalyptic literature, we must keep four principles in mind:

### *A. Symbolic entities attach to and depend upon a framework of reality.*

In any apocalyptic passage, the author may well describe a mixture of his real-life setting, together with both symbolic and non-symbolic entities from his dream or vision. The real-life setting provides the foundation, and the non-symbolic entities provide the framework that gives structure and meaning to the symbolic ones (see illustration below).



For example, Daniel chapter 7 opens with Daniel’s description of the time and circumstances of a dream-vision. This introduction (Dan 7.1-2a) provides the real-life setting (foundation) for what follows. We recognize that the date (“first year of Belshazzar”), king Belshazzar, Babylon, Daniel himself, and Daniel’s bed are not symbols in the text, but intended to be read literally. So far so good. Then Daniel describes four bizarre beasts (Dan 7.4-8). Since Daniel describes these four beasts as elements of his vision, and as strangely different from any real-world animals, the literary cues make it pretty obvious that the beasts are symbolic entities that require

interpretation (a fact confirmed by the interpretation given in Dan 7.17 — the symbolic animals represent entities other than animals). Now, in this passage we have a literal, real-world setting plus symbolic entities from Daniel's vision. However, as Daniel keeps watching his vision unfold, he sees the Ancient of Days, His throne, a river of fire, and books being opened (Dan 7.9-10). Is the Ancient of Days a symbol for something else? No. His appearance at this point in the vision has important meaning, but the meaning is not conveyed by symbolism. The Ancient of Days is the Ancient of Days, God, even if there may be some anthropomorphism involved in His depiction. He is a non-symbolic entity in the vision that provides meaningful context for the symbolic ones. So, at this point we have all three ingredients of an apocalyptic vision: (1) the real-life setting, (2) symbolic entities of the vision proper, and (3) a non-symbolic entity that provides part of the vision's meaningful framework.

We have no difficulty thus far, but now things may get tricky. In these same verses in which we meet the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.9-10), is His throne symbolic? Is the river of fire symbolic? Are the books symbolic? The question is not whether these elements connote additional meaning; thrones, fire and books all direct our thoughts to judgment. The question, however, is whether the throne symbolizes an object other than a throne, or the books objects other than books. Does the throne represent the heavenly realm? Do the books symbolize angelic witnesses of human history? Probably not. The throne and the books are very meaningful elements of the vision, but probably not symbolic entities like the four beasts.

The point is that we must not over-interpret an apocalyptic vision as though every element symbolizes something else, but recognize that non-symbolic entities will be mixed in with the symbolic ones. If we fail to recognize the non-symbolic entities of a vision as elements to be taken at face value, our exegetical framework collapses and we leave the meaning of the vision completely up for grabs.

### ***B. We must not interpret interpretations.***

The second principle to bear in mind with regard to apocalyptic symbols is closely related to the first. It's a principle that should be obvious but even great scholars have overlooked it to the enduring confusion of their readers. Like the book of Daniel, the Revelation abounds with symbols, many of which are interpreted in the text. Where the symbols are not explicitly interpreted for us, we appropriately interpret them ourselves on the basis of biblical clues. However, where the text *does* supply an interpretation, *we must not interpret the interpretation*, as though it were itself a new symbol.

For example, the first chapter of Revelation presents us with a great deal of symbolism, including the symbols of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The text interprets these two sym-

bols in Rev 1.20 as the “angels (or *messengers*) of the seven churches” and “the seven churches” respectively. While it is appropriate to ask whether the individual identities of the angels and churches can be discovered, it is not appropriate to try to interpret the angels and churches as symbols for something else. The churches, for example, do not represent the seven heavens. The angels are angels, whether human messengers or celestial ones, and the churches are churches, the latter identified specifically in the following chapters as real congregations of first-century Asia Minor. As a further example, we do well to note that “the seven spirits” in the Revelation are not a symbol, but the interpretation of symbols in Rev 4.5 and 5.6. The seven spirits do not represent something else, like the one Holy Spirit; they are seven spirits. We can discuss the specific identities of these seven spirits, but we cannot turn them into an altogether different entity any more than we can turn “the seven churches” into the one Church of Jerusalem, or the like.

A 19th century eschatology scholar whom I admire, Benjamin Wills Newton, stumbled over this principle in his interpretation of Rev 17. Newton, erroneously took the seven hills of Mystery Babylon in that passage as symbolic and requiring interpretation. In his justified eagerness to disabuse his contemporaries of the idea that Mystery Babylon is the Roman Catholic religion or the papacy, he fastened his mind too hastily on the idea that Mystery Babylon was none other than Mesopotamian Babylon. He therefore had to interpret the seven hills as non-literal, because Iraqi Babylon has no hills. Mr. Newton reasoned this way:

... the woman is said to be seated on (1) many waters, which are explained to mean many peoples and multitudes, (2) on a beast, [and] (3) on seven mountains. Now, inasmuch as no one has ever thought of inferring from the first two of these statements that Babylon physically was builded either on waters, or on a Beast, so it should never have been inferred that Babylon physically was builded on seven mountains.<sup>94</sup>

The logic of Newton’s argument is sound, but he failed to take one very important thing into account, and that is the distinction between vision and interpretation. Mystery Babylon is seated upon many waters and on the beast *in the vision*. That the waters represent “many peoples and multitudes,” and that the seven heads of the beast represent “seven hills” are part of the angel’s interpretation of the vision. If we interpret “the seven hills” as representing something else, we have turned the interpretation into a new symbol! If we do that, consistency would demand that we interpret the “many peoples and multitudes” as symbolizing something else as well. However, such a reinterpretation of the angel’s interpretations would be absurd. The “seven hills” are just that, the famous seven hills, not of Mesopotamian Babylon, but of Rome, Italy.

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94 Newton, Benjamin Wills; *Babylon: Its Future History and Doom*, (The Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, London, 1890), pp. 118-119.

***C. We must understand the fantastic symbols of apocalyptic literature as revealing the spiritual and relational character of the entities they represent, not as expressions of physical appearance.***

The seven-headed beast of Revelation 13 and 17 will have a physical manifestation, for the Spirit tells us explicitly that its seven heads represent seven kings (Rev 17.10). Nevertheless, the beast symbolism does not describe the physical appearance of these kings, but rather emphasizes their spiritual and relational character. The beast symbol reveals the federation of these kings (since the heads attach to the same body), the savage character of their political alliance, and their common geographical setting, namely, the Mediterranean Sea.

Likewise, John's description of the locust monsters of Rev 9.3-11 does not reveal their physical appearance. We must not interpret their attributes as material and try to correlate them with present-day attack helicopters and such. John did not see human troops and military machinery in this part of the vision, but saw — in the spiritual realm — the character of the demonic powers that would energize whatever human or material forces would inflict torment upon mankind at the time of the fifth trumpet blast. These demonic powers will be as overwhelming as a swarm of locusts, as powerful as battle horses, vicious as lions, etc. The demonic reality is more frightening than our feeble attempts at interpreting these monsters as modern weaponry!

While recognizing this use of material symbols (with their similes and metaphors) to emphasize spiritual and relational character, we must not thereby conclude that all material elements in apocalyptic passages are symbolic. If we remember the first principle of apocalyptic symbols, namely, that they depend upon a contextual framework of reality, then the Revelation will lead us to expect that, in the end time, real demonic manifestations will attach to real-world objects (e.g., the breathing, speaking image, Rev 13.15), and real miracles will be performed by and upon real human beings (e.g., the resurrection of the two witnesses, Rev 11.11).

***D. As we study apocalyptic passages we must remember that one symbol may represent multiple distinct objects, and one object may be represented by multiple distinct symbols.***

In our study of apocalyptic passages, we note that one symbol can represent both a king, and his kingdom (as do the parts of the image in Dan 2.39-44). We also find that one symbol can represent both hills and kings (Rev 17.9-10). Similarly, one entity can be represented by two or more different symbols. The one and only Jesus Christ is represented in the Revelation by manna, a white stone, a lamb, the crystal sea, the golden altar, etc.

Because multiple prophetic symbols and names can point to the same object, we must be careful to practice our final rule:

## 21. The Rule of Documenting Distinctions

**We must avoid making a distinction between similar names or objects unless we can document the distinction in the Biblical text.** Observing accurate distinctions is essential to understanding the scriptures. However, we often find distinctions where they don't really exist, and fail to see distinctions where we should.

For example, many contemporary expositors have made an eschatological distinction between what the New Testament calls the "Kingdom of Heaven" and the "Kingdom of God." The gospels clearly use these two phrases interchangeably, however (cf. Mat 13.31 and Mar 4.30), and it's easy to understand why: the gospel writers used *heaven* as a euphemism for the sacred title or name of God. Since the two terms were synonymous in the minds of the evangelists, we would be foolish to emphasize a distinction between them.

In another example of this problem, B. W. Newton (mentioned above) distinguishes the 144,000 of Rev 14 from the 144,000 of Rev 7, making the two passages speak of different groups. The distinction seems arbitrary, however, since both passages describe groups who are redeemed from the earth, and who are of the same number, and who have the same seal on the same part of their bodies. There is no compelling reason in the text to decide that the two passages describe different entities.

Nor is there a compelling reason to interpret the 144,000 of Revelation as representing someone other than what they are called: members of the tribes of the "sons of Israel" (Rev 7.4). Much has been made of the fact that the listing of the Israelite tribes in Revelation 7 differs from traditional tribal listings: the Revelation listing includes Levi and Joseph, and excludes Ephraim and Dan. This, however, is not enough reason to declare that the persons in view are not Israelites at all. On the contrary, the same phrase, "sons of Israel," used in Rev 2.14, makes it clear that literal Israelites are in view. When an entity in one passage of prophecy looks just like the entity in another related passage, it is safest to accept them as indeed identical.

Therefore, as another important example of the interpretive distinctions problem, I must urge that we *not* make a distinction between the "Gog and Magog" invasions of Ezekiel and Revelation. That the "Gog and Magog" invasion of Ezekiel is identical with that of Rev 20 should be obvious. Both invasions:

- Involve Gog and Magog (Eze 38.2-3; Rev 20.8).
- "Assemble" or "gather ... together" many peoples (Eze 38.6-7; Rev 20.8), constituting a "great company" (Eze 38.4), "like the sand on the seashore" (Rev 20.8), that "go up" (Eze 38.9) or "came up" (Rev 20.9) to the "mountains of Israel" (Eze 38.8; 39.2), i.e., against Jerusalem, "the beloved city" (Rev 20.9), "covering the land" (Eze 38.9), "upon the breadth of the land" (Rev 20.9 <sup>GNT</sup>).

- Occur in “the end of years” (Eze 38.8), “the last years” (Eze 38.8<sup>LXX</sup>), when the thousand years come to their conclusion (Rev 20.7).
- End when God pours fire upon the invaders (Eze 39.6; Rev 20.9).
- Pertain to the Day of the Lord (the *Yom Yaveh* which is roughly equivalent to what we call the Millennium (Eze 38.10,14,18-19; **39.8,11,13**; Rev 20.7)

Thus, Ralph H. Alexander writes:

The majority of expositors (e.g., Ellison, p. 133; Davidson p. 301) see these events of Ezekiel 38-39 taking place after the Millennium as described in Revelation 20:7-10. The strong argument for this position is the explicit reference to Gog and Magog in Revelation 20:8. The use of these terms must be explained. The context of the Millennium would surely satisfy Israel’s peaceful, prosperous, and safe dwelling. Restoration would have already been accomplished. Nations would be present to observe “Gog’s” rebellion. Time would surely be available for the burial of bodies and the burning of weapons.<sup>95</sup>

Alexander continues, “Objections, however, have been raised against this view.” Indeed, objections have been raised against the identity of the Ezekiel and Revelation invasions, such that many Evangelicals still expect an imminent Gog and Magog invasion before Christ’s coming. I cannot address those objections fully here, but for our present purposes I can point out that current commentators have been hermeneutically misled by their failure to observe the chiasmic structure of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Ezekiel’s Gog and Magog prophecy, Eze 38-39, can be outlined like this:

- A - “**I will bring** you [Gog and Magog] out” (38.1-6)
- B - Against the mountains of Israel (38.7-9)
- C - Against unwallled villages and a regathered people (38.10-13)
- D - So the nations may know Yaveh (38.14-16)
- E - Fiery wrath against Gog (38.17-23)
- E’ - Fiery judgment upon Magog (39.1-6)
- D’ - So the nations may know Yaveh (39.7-8)
- C’ - Inhabitants of cities will go out and cleanse the land (39.9-16)
- B’ - Great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel (39.17-20)
- A’ - “**I will bring** [Israel] back from the peoples” (39.21-29)

While we eagerly study this prophecy out of interest in where we might be on the eschatological calendar, the prophet’s main purpose, as implied by the central declarations of the chiasm, was

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<sup>95</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, Vol. 6, Frank E. Gaebelin, Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 940.

to warn Israel's enemies (including the Antichrist and Satan himself) that God will stop their attacks upon Jerusalem, and will do so by raining down fiery judgment upon His enemies. Recognizing this chiasmic structure of the prophecy is not only important for underscoring the prophecy's main point — it is also important for grasping the prophecy's non-linear chronology. The prophecy does not **culminate** in the regathering of Israel to the land, it **begins** with describing Israel as restored and dwelling securely in the land (Eze 38.8), and then **chiastically concludes** with a reiteration of the promise of the regathering and restoration already mentioned (Eze 39.25-29). This means that Ezekiel's Gog-and-Magog war *does not lead up to Israel's final restoration, but occurs after it*, and therefore cannot be a pre-millennial event (except as it is foreshadowed in part by the war of Armageddon).

We must not make distinctions between biblical things or events that are presented in Scripture as identical, but sometimes Bible prophecy seems to use the same name for different things. In Rev 17, John describes "Mystery Babylon the Great." Our initial assumption, based on rules we have already learned, should be that John referred to the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, the ruins of which lie in present-day Iraq. However, we must take two things into account. First, apocalyptic authors used the word *mystery* precisely to distinguish a symbolic or spiritual item from the literal one of the same name. Second, the context of Rev 17 goes on to make explicit that the city in view is the "great city which [reigned] over the kings of the earth" *at the time of the prophecy* (Rev 17.18), and this can be none other than Rome. Therefore, while we must not make a distinction between Ezekiel and John's Gog-and-Magog wars, we must make a distinction between Daniel's literal Babylon and John's *Mystery* Babylon, since this latter distinction is one we can document in the text.

# Conclusion

Speaking of making distinctions, the essential idea in the Hebrew word for *discernment* (verb **בִּיַן**, bēn, noun **בִּינָה**, bē-nä) is separation. The discernment so commended in the book of Proverbs (Pro 1.2; 2.3,5,9; 3.21) has to do with the ability to separate or distinguish between alternatives and choose the best one. In other words, a discerning person knows how to make distinctions between holy and unholy, good and bad, wise and foolish, proper and improper. Because we live in the information age, when new ideas about anything and everything — including new ideas about the Bible and its teachings — are bombarding our society at the speed of light, it is more important today than ever before that we have a discerning heart and mind when we read and interpret Scripture. I hope this study will have helped the reader polish his hermeneutical glasses and move forward toward that goal.

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