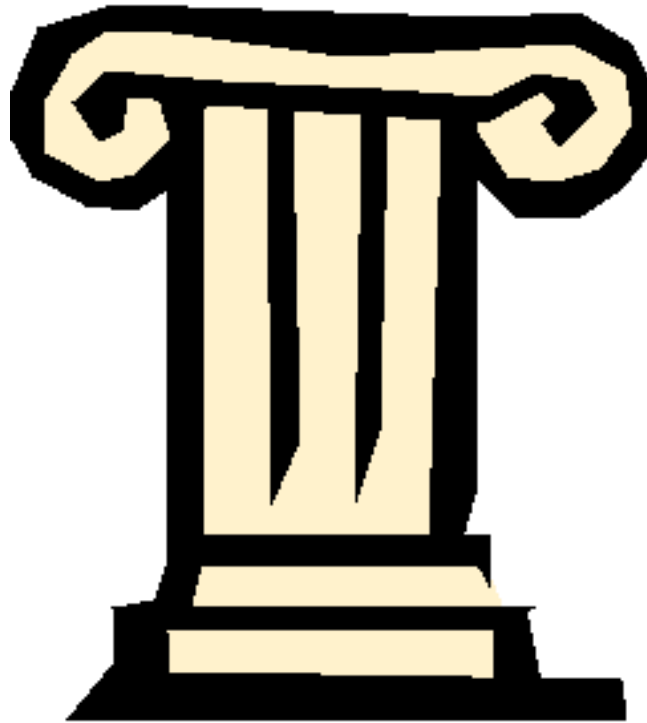


HERMENEUTICS



A GUIDE TO BASIC BIBLE INTERPRETATION

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I. Introduction

1. This study is a basic survey of Biblical interpretation and is not intended to be exhaustive. It has been designed for the average or beginning Bible student and, therefore, some matters of a more advanced nature have not been included.
2. As evangelicals, it is not enough to merely affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. We must also implement its authority in practical ways by being careful to interpret it properly. Unfortunately, many evangelicals who would die for the doctrine of inerrancy, deny its authority in practice when they are careless in biblical interpretation.

We must never forget that we have, within our hands, the infallible Word of the Living God and, therefore, it is imperative that we treat it as such when seeking to understand its contents. Such godly men as William Tyndale, John Wycliffe, and a host of others labored diligently – often in face of great persecution and the threat of death – in order to bring us God’s Word in the common language. Why, then, would we treat it flippantly when others paid so dearly to bring its message to us?

3. Although it is true that each of us has prior assumptions when approaching the Bible and, thus, no person is completely neutral. Nevertheless, we must try to be as objective as is humanly possible and not allow our preconceived opinions to blind us from the clear meaning of Scripture.
4. While it is true that the Bible was not written for the scholar per se, neither was it written for the lazy or undisciplined person who is unwilling to apply the time and effort needed to better understand Scripture. The Bible urges us to “Study to show yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

The Bible is not designed for lazy people. Truth has to be bought (Proverbs 23:23), but the slothful and worldly minded are not willing to pay the price required. That ‘price’ is intimated in Proverbs 2:1-5: there must be a diligent

applying of the heart, a crying after knowledge, a seeking for an apprehension of spiritual things with the ardour and determination that men employ when seeking for silver; and a searching for a deeper and fuller knowledge of the truth such as men put forth when searching for hid treasures – if we would really understand the things of God. Those who complain that these articles are ‘too difficult’ or ‘too deep’ for them, do but betray the sad state of their souls and reveal how little they really value the truth; otherwise they would ask God to enable them to concentrate, and reread these pages perseveringly until they made their contents their own. People are willing to work and study hard and long to master one of the arts or sciences, but where spiritual and eternal things are concerned it is usually otherwise (A.W. Pink; cited in Iain H. Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink*, p.235).

II. What is ‘Hermeneutics’ & Why is it Important?

1. The word “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek word *hermeneuo* which means “to interpret” and is derived from Hermes, the Greek god who brought the messages of the gods to humans as well as interpreted it for them. Thus, the word *hermeneuo* came to refer to bringing someone to an understanding of something in his language.

“Hermeneutics,” therefore, is the science and art of interpreting the Bible. By means of various recognized and established principles, it seeks to discover the precise meaning of the original authors of Scripture. Although the Bible is not a textbook on hermeneutics, there are several passages within it that suggest the importance of proper interpretation in order to arrive at a true understanding:

“And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8).

“And He said to them, ‘O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter His glory?’ And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25-27).

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11; see also Acts 8:27-35).

“ . . . as also in all his [Paul] letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16).

As a theological discipline hermeneutics is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible. It is a special application of the general science of linguistics and meaning. It seeks to formulate those particular rules which pertain to the special factors connected with the Bible. It stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game. The rule-book is written in terms of reflection, analysis, and experience. The game is played by concrete actualization of the rules. The rules are not the game, and the game is meaningless without the rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a science in that it can determine certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document, and in that these principles are not a mere list of rules but bear organic connection to each other. It is also an art as we previously indicated because principles or rules can never be applied mechanically but involve the skill of the interpreter (Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p.11).

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. The word is usually applied to the explanation of written documents, and may therefore be more specifically defined as the science of interpreting an author’s language. The science assumes that there are diverse modes of thought and ambiguities of expression among men, and, accordingly, it aims to remove the supposable differences between a writer and his readers, so that the meaning of the one may be truly and accurately apprehended by the others (Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p.17).

2. Another term that will be used throughout this study is “exegesis.” Exegesis is the application of hermeneutics which seeks to extract from the Scriptural text that meaning which is already present. The exegetical student examines closely the words of Scripture, and by the means of hermeneutical principles, defines their meaning, elucidates the scope and plan of each writer, and brings forth the historical-grammatical sense of what each book or chapter contains. “Hermeneutics is like a cookbook. Exegesis is the preparing

and baking of the cake, and Exposition is serving the cake” (Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p.22).

The opposite of exegesis is the error of eisegesis, which is not concerned with extracting the meaning of the original text, but with reading into Scripture one’s own ideas or preconceived theology. Such an approach to Scripture, however, leads us to replace God’s truth and wisdom with human inventions, in addition to robbing us of the blessing which comes when we obey what the Bible actually teaches. As the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, once said: “The best teacher is the one who does not bring his meaning into the Scripture, but gets his meaning from the Scripture.”

3. How important is hermeneutics compared to other theological disciplines or studies? Its importance is immense since a proper understanding of Scripture is the basis of a sound systematic theology or any other study connected to God’s Word. In fact, our Christian sanctification would be greatly hindered if we could not decipher the meaning of Scriptural passages – particularly since a major part of our obedience is predicated upon a sound understanding of God’s truth.

The rank and importance of Biblical Hermeneutics among the various studies embraced in *Theological Encyclopedia and Methodology* is apparent from the fundamental relation which it sustains to them all. For the Scripture revelation is itself essentially the center and substance of all theological science. It contains the clearest and fullest exhibition of the person and character of God, and of the spiritual needs and possibilities of man. A sound and trustworthy interpretation of the Scripture records, therefore, is the root and basis of all revealed theology. Without it Systematic Theology, or Dogmatics, could not be legitimately constructed, and would, in fact, be essentially impossible. For the doctrines of revelation can only be learned from a correct understanding of the oracles of God (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp.21-22).

4. The study of hermeneutical principles is an important and relevant subject for every Christian because:

A. The Bible, which was completed approximately two-thousand years ago,

is widely separated in its language, culture, customs, and topography from ours in the twenty-first century – and, therefore, there is the need to bridge that gap by seeking to understand those principles which help modern readers to grasp ancient languages, customs, and how to interpret antiquated documents in order to gain comprehension of its original meaning.

Moreover, the diversity of the kinds of literary genres found in the Bible (e.g., poetry, prophecy, parables, ancient figures of speech) makes hermeneutics mandatory for the Christian who takes the Scriptures seriously.

B. Every Christian, to some extent, engages in hermeneutics since none of us comes to the Scriptural text mindlessly. Each one of us brings his/her presuppositions or theological baggage when attempting to understand the Bible's message. The real question is: Are we following sound guidelines that will help us to comprehend the text – or – Are we reading the Bible with no real direction or employing faulty rules of interpretation?

C. As noted earlier, proper hermeneutical principles serve as the foundation for systematic theology. A true understanding of the Bible's message (via hermeneutics) forms the basis out of which Christian theology can be developed.

Exegesis is prior to any system of theology . . . We can only know the truth of God by a correct exegesis of Scripture . . . Great mischief has been done in the church when the system of theology or its framework has been derived extra-biblically . . . If the grounds of Christian theology is the revelation of God, then theology must be grounded in revelation and not in philosophy. The historic Protestant position is to ground theology in biblical exegesis. A theological system is to be built up exegetically brick by brick. Hence the theology is no better than the exegesis that underlies it. The task of the systematic theologian is to commence with these bricks ascertained through exegesis, and build the temple of his theological system. But only when he is sure of his individual bricks is he able to make the necessary generalizations, and to carry on the synthetic and creative activity that is necessary for the construction of a theological system (Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, pp.168-169).

D. A sound hermeneutic will keep us from drifting into heresy or falling prey to a religious cult. The vast majority of people who join a cult or an apostate religious system (such as Rome) are not persons who possess a strong grasp of Scripture and its intended meaning, but persons who are woefully ignorant of God's Word as well as those hermeneutical principles which would have kept them from twisting God's revelation. As James Sire has noted, "If traditional Christianity affirms the Bible as its sole authority – Sola Scriptura, as the Reformers said – how can these very different religious movements [i.e., Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science] claim Scripture for their own? The obvious answer is the right one, I believe. They can only do so by violating the principles of sound literary interpretation" (Scripture Twisting, p.12).

E. A sound hermeneutic, especially a clear understanding of redemptive history and the differences which exist between the Old and New Covenants, will help us to avoid making wrong deductions from the Old Testament (a common mistake throughout church history that has led to all sorts of abuses and atrocities in the name of Christ).

Because Scripture has not been properly interpreted the following has been urged as the voice of God: in that the patriarchs practiced polygamy we may practice it; in that the Old Testament sanctioned the divine right of the king of Israel, we may sanction the divine right of kings everywhere; because the Old Testament sanctioned the death of witches, we too may put them to death; because the Old Testament declared that some plagues were from God, we may not use methods of sanitation, for that would be thwarting the purposes of God; because the Old Testament forbade usury in the agrarian commonwealth of Israel we may not employ it in our economic system; because the Scriptures make certain remarks about the suffering of women in childbirth we may not approve any method of easing the pain; because tithing was a law (de jure) in Israel, it is a law to the Church . . . A sound hermeneutics would have prevented all of this. It would prevent an uncritical and unrealistic application of the Old Testament to Christian morality. It would prevent an expositor from using some mere phrase as an eternal principle of morality. It would prevent the effort of trying to force some binding principle upon contemporary life from an obscure Old Testament incident. It would prevent the justification of ritualism and priestcraft from an improper extension of the Tabernacle worship and sacrificial system. The result

of an erratic hermeneutics is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light (Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, pp.2-3).

F. Proper hermeneutical principles are essential for those who are teachers of God's Word – for if they are poor at interpretation, the saints are not likely to be edified and brought to greater spiritual maturity.

G. The goal of hermeneutics is not to feed our intellectual pride or mere academic interests, but so that we might be better interpreters of Scripture and, thereby, kept from doctrinal error and many other abuses that arise from a mishandling of Holy Writ. But perhaps the greatest reason is so that we might discern God's will on any matter confronting us and, as a result, glorify our Triune Creator.

H. Hermeneutics is vital for our development in the Christian life since a proper application of biblical truth is dependent upon a correct interpretation of it – as John Balchin has said, “Interpreting the Bible is one of the most important issues facing Christians today. It lies behind what we believe, how we live, how we get on together, and what we have to offer to the world.”

III. Presuppositions & Necessities of A Sound Bible Interpreter

1. Spiritual regeneration is a necessary prerequisite in order to properly understand and apply Scripture. The Bible is a divine and spiritual book and, therefore, requires that its interpreters be spiritually regenerate in order to fully comprehend and maximize its message of redemption – for “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

We are not suggesting that unbelievers are unable to decipher the historical, contextual, or surface-level meaning of Scripture. In some instances, they may

even surpass evangelical interpreters at this. Instead, we are pointing out that the unregenerate mind, which is at enmity with God (Romans 8:7-8), cannot grasp the true significance of divine revelation; he is oblivious to its deeper meaning, redemptive theme, and connection with other doctrines in the Bible (this may help to explain why liberal theologians have been so adverse to systematic theology and a cohesive presentation of it); he might be able to comprehend the Bible's message of the necessity of a blood sacrifice in order to obtain peace with God, but he will be puzzled by this Scriptural insistence because he does not first understand the nature and penalty of sin nor the holy character of God; and finally, he is unable to fully implement God's Word within his life because he lacks both the right motive and power to obey. Although he is able to intellectually comprehend Scripture within certain limits, he is unable to sufficiently appropriate its truth.

For example, when Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes as to where the Messiah was to be born (Matthew 2:3-4), they were able to correctly point him to the prediction of Micah 5:2 which foretold that the King of Israel would be born in Bethlehem, but were blinded and apathetic to the possibility that the Messiah might have now appeared – especially when others, such as the Magi who had claimed to see His star in the east (v.2), were obviously interested and some of the populace were even troubled (v.3).

To the Sadducees, who possessed the religious rule within Israel and, therefore, should have known better than to publicly ask such a foolish question on the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-28), Jesus replied, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God” (v.29). Later, the Pharisees were also stumped and silenced when they, at the request of Jesus, were unable to answer the interpretation and Christological meaning of Psalm 110:1 (vv.41-46).

Jesus repeatedly rebuked the Pharisees for failing to see Him in the writings of Moses – “for he wrote of Me” (John 5:46). In fact, so clear was Jesus predicted in the Mosaic documents that Moses himself, at the last judgment, will personally accuse them (v.45). Thus, we see that while the unregenerate

are held responsible for knowing Scripture's meaning and primary focus, they remain blinded as to its true message – and like the unbelieving Jews, “Their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the Old Covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:14-16; see also 2 Corinthians 4:3-4; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 2 Peter 3:16).

2. The sound interpreter of Scripture must rely upon the Spirit of God to illumine a text's original meaning as well as provide insight as to how that discovered meaning may be practically applied.

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law” (Psalm 119:18).

“Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, and keep it with all my heart” (Psalm 119:34).

“Give me understanding, that I may learn Thy commandments” (Psalm 119:73).

“I am Thy servant; give me understanding that I may know Thy testimonies” (Psalm 119:125).

“Then he said to me, ‘Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words’” (Daniel 10:12).

If we rely solely upon our own intellectual or creative abilities, we will miss many of the deeper lessons which the Holy Spirit has in store for us. A prayerful attitude, therefore, is necessary from the very outset of the interpretive process and must continue until the task of exegesis and application is completed. Moreover, a mature student of Scripture bathes his exegetical studies in prayer because he knows his own limitations and frailties when engaged in divine pursuits.

3. An open mind is another prerequisite for the biblical interpreter. The assiduous student must not only be aware of his own presuppositions which he brings to the text, but he must fairly evaluate what others, from various theological traditions, have said about its meaning. We need to be careful that we do not limit our avenues for learning by reading only those who support our preconceived opinions.

This means, for example, that Dispensationalists should read beyond those in their own camp and thoughtfully consider what Reformed or Covenant theologians have written on any given passage – and vice versa. This does not necessarily mean that we have to agree with those in opposing theological parties, but only that other interpretive options should be examined before reaching a settled conclusion.

I soon began to find out that there was a good deal to be said, after all, concerning some matters that Dr. Gill and John Calvin did not mention, and I found that I was obliged somewhat to stretch my charity, and to take to my heart some brethren who did not quite see all things which those enlightened men saw. And, moreover, I found out that I did not know everything, and that I had a good deal still to learn, and I find the same thing every day. I hope at all times to hold firmly all the truth I have received. I intend to grasp tightly with one hand the truths I have already learned, and to keep the other hand wide open to take in the things I do not yet know (Charles H. Spurgeon).

4. The sound interpreter of Scripture will commit himself to the full inerrancy and divine authority of God's Word. In the same way that "without faith it is impossible to please Him [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:16), so also must the person who undertakes the study of Scripture presuppose that the Bible is God's inspired revelation to man. Without such a presuppositional starting-point (particularly when one is already persuaded that the Bible is merely the written opinions of primitive men), we will make very little headway in our understanding of Scripture and, in the end, the Bible will appear mostly enigmatic and confusing to us.

5. The wise interpreter of Scripture must also presuppose that the Bible is

intelligible and, therefore, God desires that we truly understand the contents of its pages. If God has indeed given His people a complete and sufficient revelation of Himself and our duties, then it is proper for us to believe in the clarity and intelligibility of the Bible – for even the simple can understand God’s Word (Psalm 119:130); in some instances, even more than the aged (Psalm 119:99-100).

I believe that the Bible is to be understood and received in the plain obvious meaning of its passages, since I cannot persuade myself that a book intended for the instruction and conversion of the whole world should cover its meaning in any such mystery and doubt that none but critics and philosophers discover it (Daniel Webster).

This is not meant to imply that the Scriptures contain no difficulties, apparent contradictions, or hard sayings – for we must frequently confess that “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12) and that some Biblical authors are “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). Following the ancient Talmudic rule, we must learn to “teach thy tongue to say, I do not know.” Nevertheless, the clarity of the Bible’s central message of redemption for lost sinners remains coherent and discernable (Reformed theologians have termed this the “Perspicuity of Scripture”).

6. After the interpreter has done his exegetical homework, particularly if he comes to a novel interpretation of a given passage not discovered by other scholars, it would be wise to lay out one’s conclusions before others for their evaluation. This helps to prevent us from forming incorrect views of the passage or chapter under examination as well as safeguards the local church from receiving false doctrine.

Along the same line of thought, we should also follow the “checking principle,” which means that we carefully check whatever scholarly reference sources stand the best chance of providing us reliable information on a passage or subject.

For example, if we are studying a matter that touches on Bible history, we

should try to find a reliable book(s) that deals with such history (such as Alfred Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History*, Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, and others). When “checking” a commentary, don’t limit yourself to one, but survey several commentators before deciding an issue. Some of the best commentaries and commentators that you should be aware of are: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament by various authors; New Testament Commentary Series by William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker; The New International Commentary on the Old Testament & New Testament by various authors; The New American Commentary on the Old Testament & New Testament by various authors; Commentaries on the New Testament by R.C.H. Lenski; and The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Series: Old Testament & New Testament by various authors.

The “checking principle,” rightly used, will help us to avoid making dumb mistakes and reaching shallow assumptions as well as expand our understanding of God’s Word.

7. The interpreter must also practically apply what is discovered in the interpretive process. It is not enough to merely know, we must go on to do – for all knowledge gained from the Divine Word brings accountability.

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

“I have inclined my heart to perform Thy statutes forever, even to the end” (Psalm 119:112).

“But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

IV. Why Are There So Many Different Interpretations?

1. Many people are lazy and less than diligent when studying the Bible. Others would rather be spoon-fed the opinions of their pastor or Bible study

leader, instead of coming to interpretive conclusions based upon their own hard work. Thus, such persons tend to arrive at rash, simplistic, and wrong interpretations of the Bible.

Like the mass of Roman Catholics, many Protestants are content to allow others to do their thinking for them, rather than invest the time and sweat needed to come to the original thought of the biblical writer. In a real sense, then, we end up producing our own version of a “Teaching Magisterium” or “Protestant Popery.”

This should not be misconstrued as legitimizing the opposite extreme of those who ignore the general consensus of Bible scholars and arrive at completely novel or bizarre interpretations of the Scriptures – an error that should be equally castigated!

2. Some Christians lack the gifts or intellectual acumen to be mature interpreters of Scripture. The problem of different interpretations is then exacerbated when such unqualified persons are given a platform in which to espouse their distorted views. In this way, wrong opinions of the Bible’s meaning are perpetuated among the general populace and within local assemblies.

3. Another major contributor is false tradition. Many Christian denominations are held together by a tenacious attitude which, in effect, says, “That’s what we have always believed,” rather than a firm conviction that such views have been carefully exegeted from Scripture. This precarious reliance upon human tradition does much to foster incorrect interpretations of the Bible.

4. The presence of false teachers among the visible church helps to contribute to wrong views of the Bible’s message. Had the members of our churches been careful Bible students (including church leaders), the popularity of such doctrines as Word-Faith theology would have been less devastating within evangelicalism. It is only among an ignorant and Scripturally illiterate church

that such heretical movements can flourish.

5. Some Christians are not sovereignly granted the insight needed in order to better understand Scripture's message. For a variety of reasons -- such as pride, hardness of heart [Mark 6:52], or worldly distractions (some of which are known only to God) – He has chosen not to give every believer the same level of biblical and spiritual understanding. In some cases, we may not yet be able to bear such Divine truths (John 16:12). Thus, God waits until we progress further in our sanctification.

6. Many churches do not offer a class on hermeneutics and far too many pastors are convinced that such a study would be irrelevant or impractical. The common assumption seems to be that the study of hermeneutics should be left to seminary students and, that such a course, would prove to be far too intellectual for the average church member. But such thinking is misguided at best. It fails to realize that since Bible study is going to be a life-long pursuit for any Christian (or should be), it is imperative that they be taught how to properly interpret and apply it. But, let's face it: How many churches (even so-called "Bible churches") practice this or would even dare to teach hermeneutics during the corporate meeting time?

V. The Basics of Bible Interpretation

1. When studying through a text of Scripture, learn to ask the right questions:

A. Who are the central figures in this passage or account? Who wrote this book? Who is the audience?

B. What is the central message? What is the primary intent of the writer? What is the context and historical setting? What is God trying to teach me?

C. When did this event take place? When was it written or recorded?

D. Where did it take place? Where was the author when he wrote this book or recorded this event?

E. Why did it occur? Why did the writer choose to include this narrative and how does it fit into his particular theme or purpose?

F. How did this happen? How does this narrative relate to other events within the same book? How can I apply this to the circumstances of my life?

By asking the right questions, we help to flesh out the author's original meaning as well as comprehend the historical circumstances in which the narrative is cast. The problem with many novices who engage in exegesis is that they arrive at conclusions about the meaning of a passage without having first asked the appropriate questions and, consequently, they commit the fallacy of eisegesis (i.e., reading into the text of Scripture foreign ideas that were not originally present).

2. Always examine closely the context of any given passage. All literature, including the Bible, must be read or studied in light of its context. To do otherwise, will only cause confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the reader.

For example, when reading an article in the local newspaper, is it wiser to begin in the middle of a paragraph halfway through the story – or – is it wiser to start at the beginning and follow closely the writer's logic or flow of thought? Obviously, it is the latter. Likewise, when interpreting the Bible, we must track the author's meaning by carefully studying both the immediate and surrounding context of the passage. Only then, can we begin to decipher the intended meaning and thereby apply the instruction.

The word context, as the etymology intimates (Latin, con, together, and textus, woven), denotes something that is woven together, and, applied to a written document, it means the connection of thought supposed to run through every passage which constitutes by itself a whole. By some writers it is called the connection. The immediate context is that which immediately precedes or

follows a given word or sentence. The remote context is that which is less closely connected, and may embrace a whole paragraph or section (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p.210).

This same rule also pertains to words: The meaning of any word is always determined by its context. In some cases, it may be necessary to examine not only the immediate context of the chapter, but also the entire book in which the particular word occurs.

For example, during an encounter with a Jehovah's Witness, I appealed to Hebrews 1:6 (which speaks of the angels worshipping the Son of God) as proof of Jesus' deity. My opponent immediately took me to Revelation 3:9 which pictures apostate Jews "worshipping" the saints. He sarcastically retorted, "Does this now mean that they're members of the Trinity also?" He went on to point out that the Greek word "worship" (*proskuneo*) does not always mean worship to God, but may simply denote a general respect or obeisance.

While it is true that *proskuneo* does not always denote the kind of worship that belongs to God alone and, as clever as this argument may at first appear, it wrongly assumes that the word "worship" in both contexts are identical. Nothing could be further from the truth.

By simply reading the context of Hebrews chapter one wherein the word "worship" occurs, it becomes obvious that the writer of Hebrews intended to denote the kind of worship reserved only for God. For instance, the Son is spoken of as "the exact representation of His [God] nature," who "upholds all things by the word of His [Jesus] power" (v.3); He is distinguished from the angels in vv.4-13 which means that He could not be Michael the Archangel as Jehovah's Witnesses claim; the Father Himself calls Jesus "God" (v.8) and "Lord" (v.10), telling Him that "the heavens are the work of Thy hands" (v.10); and finally, the Father praises the Son for His eternity and immutability (vv.11-12). Is it not, then, clear what kind of "worship" the writer of Hebrews had in mind?

In the Summer of 1994, I engaged in a formal debate with a local church pastor on the question of the extent of Christ's atonement (I defended the view that Christ died a substitutionary death on behalf of the elect only). My Arminian opponent repeatedly cited passages where Jesus' death is connected to phrases such as "world," "whole world," "all", and "all men" without first explaining in what sense those terms were used by the New Testament writers. He wrongly assumed that "world" and "whole world" referred to every person without exception. For him, it was enough to simply cite a passage where such words occur and move on to the next text – without any explanation or exegesis bothering to prove that the term "world" must refer to all men universally!

But this was a fatal flaw in his argument and demonstrated his ignorance of that important principle which says that the meaning of any word should be determined by its context. Had my theological opponent bothered to investigate the terms "world" and "all," he would have discovered that the New Testament gives a multiplicity of meanings to these terms – most of which are used in a restricted sense and, therefore, cannot denote every person without exception. The following is a small sampling where such terms are used to include some or "all kinds of," but not all without exception:

Matthew 10:22 – Jesus' words should not be pressed, since there have always been and will continue to be people who refuse to exhibit hatred toward Christians. Jesus is speaking of most, but not all persons.

Mark 1:5 – This cannot mean each and every person, for both the Romans and Israel's religious leaders had very little interest in John's call to repentance.

Luke 1:21 – Rome did not tax all the inhabitants of this planet, but only those within her jurisdiction.

John 1:9 – Not every person has been enlightened, since the vast majority of mankind remains in darkness (1 John 5:19).

John 1:10 – Within this one passage there are three different uses of "world,"

which should cause Arminians to be more cautious in their claims.

John 12:19 – Certainly not everyone in the world has gone after Christ, for the majority of the Pharisees refused to.

Acts 2:17 – The phrase “all mankind” cannot refer to the entirety of the human race, but must mean people of every sort; not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles (Acts 10:45).

Acts 10:12 – The Greek says, “all four-footed animals,” but clearly means “all kinds of” as the NASB renders it (for other instances of the same, see Matthew 9:35; 10:1; Luke 11:42; 1 Timothy 6:10).

Acts 17:6 – This cannot mean every person since the Gospel had not yet reached every region on the earth, nor did the apostles upset everyone they preached the Gospel to (Acts 13:48-49; 17:10-12).

Romans 1:8 – “Whole world” cannot be taken to mean every place on earth or every person but, instead, refers to most of the regions that were occupied by Rome.

Romans 5:18 – The latter usage of “all men” can hardly mean every person, but must be interpreted in a restricted sense to denote all those in Christ.

Romans 11:26 – “All Israel” cannot mean every Israelite, but the majority or a large number of Israelites.

2 Corinthians 5:14 – “All died” cannot mean every person, for not all have died to sin (Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 3:3).

1 John 5:19 – “Whole world” cannot possibly mean every single human, since Christians have been freed from Satan’s control (Acts 26:18; 1 John 5:18).

Revelation 3:10 – “Whole world” cannot be interpreted to mean every person without exception, since Christians will be kept “from the hour of testing.”

Revelation 12:9 – “Whole world” cannot refer to all living persons, since Christians will not be ultimately deceived by Satan.

Revelation 13:3 – “Whole earth” cannot mean each and every person, since

Christians will not follow after the beast.

A similar problem happens when Bible students assume that every occurrence of the term “law” (nomos) within the Pauline writings denotes the Mosaic law. But this is surely misguided since Paul employs a variety of different meanings for nomos within his assorted epistles (see Douglas J. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” Westminster Theological Journal, 43 [1983], pp.73-100).

3. The Historical-Grammatical method of interpretation is necessary if one is going to rightly interpret the Bible. This means that the interpreter must be sensitive to the historical context and setting of the passage under examination as well as its grammar or word usage.

Another term frequently used by theologians is “literal interpretation.” It is commonly employed in its dictionary sense: “. . . the natural or usual construction and implication of a writing or expression; following the ordinary and apparent sense of words; not allegorical or metaphorical” (Webster’s New International Dictionary). Thus, when we adhere to the literal interpretation, we do not mean a crass, wooden literalism, but the usual, customary, or normal sense of words. Neither do we mean letterism which fails to recognize nuances, hidden metaphors, hyperbole, plays on words, or the various figures of speech which the biblical writers frequently used.

Further, in common life, no prudent and conscientious person, who either commits his sentiments to writing or utters anything, intends that a diversity of meanings should be attached to what he writes or says; and, consequently, neither his readers, nor those who hear him, affix to it any other than the true and obvious sense . . . The Literal Sense of any place of Scripture is that which the words signify, or require, in their natural and proper acceptation, without any trope [figure of speech], metaphor, or figure, and abstracted from mystic meaning (Charles Horne; cited in Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 121).

Some, however, prefer the term “normal” or “historical-grammatical”

interpretation because the term “literal” is too often confused with literalism or letterism – and there is, perhaps, some warrant in this criticism. Moreover, as the late Old Testament scholar, Oswald T. Allis, has written: “No literalist, however, thoroughgoing, takes everything in the Bible literally. Nor do those who lean to a more figurative method of interpretation insist that everything is figurative. Both principles have their proper place and their necessary limitations” (Prophecy & The Church, p.17). Whatever word one chooses to use, it is imperative to qualify our terms so that our hearers do not misunderstand what is intended by the phrase “literal interpretation.”

The advantages of the “literal” or “historical-grammatical” interpretation is seen in that: (1) This method is the usual practice in the interpretation of literature, whether ancient or modern; and (2) This method controls the exegete from falling prey to common abuses of Scripture, such as the mystical and allegorical form of interpretation.

4. Allow clear or plain passages of the Bible to explain those which are obscure or doubtful. In fact, without the help of clearer or parallel passages, some words and sentences in Scripture would hardly be intelligible. In a real sense, then, Scripture interprets Scripture – meaning that by a careful comparison of one verse with another (making certain that there is a legitimate parallel in thought or doctrine and not merely a verbal one), we are able to elucidate that passage which was previously shrouded in mystery.

The Protestant Reformers spoke of this principle as the “analogy of Scripture” (analogia Scriptura), meaning that since the Bible does not contradict itself, we must look to other passages in Holy Writ to help illumine those which are less clear. As J.I. Packer has stated, “The Bible appears like a symphony orchestra, with the Holy Ghost as its Toscanini; each instrumentalist has been brought willingly, spontaneously, creatively, to play his notes just as the great conductor desired, though none of them could ever hear the music as a whole . . . The point of each part only becomes fully clear when seen in relation to all the rest” (God Has Spoken, p.74).

5. Be alert to the historical background. The Bible was written within human history and, therefore, the interpreter must seek to inform himself as to the historical events, culture, geography, archeology, and other pertinent information surrounding the passage or book under study. Thankfully, there is an abundance of Bible study tools and other resources which help Bible students to bridge the historical and cultural gap between the ancient biblical world and ours in the twenty-first century.

A religion which is thus rooted and grounded in history cannot ignore history. Hence a historical understanding of the Bible is not a superfluity which can be dispensed with in biblical interpretation, leaving a body of ideas and principles divorced from the process out of which they were born (H.H. Rowley; cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p.154).

6. Recognize the principle of progressive revelation. The failure to grasp this important rule has brought much harm to the church historically when well-meaning, but misguided, theologians have forced upon the conscience of New Covenant believers practices that were limited to the Old Covenant era.

By progressive revelation we mean that the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man, in which God brings man up through the theological infancy of the Old Testament to the maturity of the New Testament. This does not mean that there are no mature ideas in the Old Testament nor simple elements in the New Testament. Progressive revelation is the general pattern of revelation . . . The law was proper as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. It taught a basic morality for the children of Israel, but our Lord elevates the law to a higher level of motivation and spirituality . . . The morality of the Ten Commandments was a necessary point of beginning in man's ethical, spiritual, and theological development, but the Sermon on the Mount summons believers in God to a much higher level of ethical conduct . . . This perspective of progressive revelation is very important to the interpreter. He will expect the full revelation of God in the New Testament. He will not force New Testament meanings into the Old, yet he will be able to more fully expound the Old knowing its counterparts in the New. He will adjust his sights to the times, customs, manners, and morals of the people of God at any given state in the Old Testament period of revelation, and he will be aware of partial and elementary nature of the Old Testament revelation. He will take Augustine's words, "distinguish the times and you will harmonize Scripture," as a guide so as not to

create a contradiction in Scripture by forcing a New Testament standard of morality or doctrine upon an Old Testament passage (Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, pp.102-104).

7. Distinguish between what the Bible records and what it approves. Bible readers frequently make the mistake of assuming that because the Scripture records the particular actions of a biblical character, therefore, that action is endorsed by God. The Bible, however, is a record of redemptive history which records a variety of deeds on the part of humans (both good and bad); and every instance noted within its pages is not morally evaluated in explicit terms. Thus, we may have to consider other hermeneutical factors in order to arrive at a settled conclusion concerning the morality of the incident set forth.

For example, 1 Samuel 25 records an incident when David was prepared to slaughter Nabal and all his household (v.17) because of Nabal's lack of hospitality and disrespectful words toward David and his servants (vv.3,10-11). The only thing that spared David from committing this deed was the gracious words of Abigail, Nabal's wife (vv.23-35). There is, however, no indication that David's original intention was the will of God. More than likely, David's hand was sovereignly spared from carrying out such a foolish and unnecessary act (regardless of how discourteous Nabal may have spoken).

Another instance is the tragic account recorded in Judges 11:30-39 when Jephthah presumably sacrificed his own daughter in order to fulfill his vow unto the Lord (vv.30-31). In no way, however, should Jephthah's vow and subsequent action be viewed as normative for believers today, nor does it justify "sticking to our guns" when we make a rash or foolish promise to God. Once again, just because something is described in Scripture does not mean God prescribes us to follow it.

8. Incidental or rare events within Scripture should not necessarily be taken as normative for Christians today. For example, Acts 1:26 says that the early apostles drew lots in order to find the Lord's will on who would replace Judas (whether Joseph or Matthias). But it is less than likely that this should be our

approach when confronted with important decisions – especially since the drawing of lots occurred at the beginning stage of early church history and was, apparently, discontinued soon after (the New Testament records no other instances of drawing lots).

In Acts 21:22-26 Paul took upon himself a vow in which he shaved his head, purified himself according to Jewish custom, went into the temple, and even offered a sacrifice in order to demonstrate that he was not hostile to the law or his Jewish heritage. This particular incident, however, can hardly be normative for contemporary Christians. In fact, there's no evidence that this was even considered normative for Jewish Christians living in the first century, since it was only Paul and four other companions which undertook that vow.

What factors help us to discern whether an early apostolic church practice is normative for modern Christians? How can we tell if something recorded in the New Testament is merely cultural or a distinctive apostolic practice which is normative for Christians of all ages?

Admittedly, this is not always an easy question to answer and Christian theologians have not always found agreement. But the following points may help the Bible student to effectively separate those early church practices which were clearly cultural or limited to the customs of the first century era and those which were intended by God to be implemented by all the assemblies throughout church history.

To begin with, we ought to separate those church practices which were clearly cultural (such as using candles to light our meetings, wearing tunics, writing on parchments, etc.) and those which were the distinctive practices and ministry patterns of the early church. But what is meant by “distinctive” apostolic patterns? And how can we tell what is “distinctive” and what is not? Briefly, a distinctive apostolic church pattern is a practice that:

A. Often goes contrary to the culture of the day (e.g., Jews and Gentiles

meeting and eating together as one body [Ephesians 2:11-16]).

B. Goes contrary to the religious custom of the day. In other words, it is those religious practices or apostolic traditions which went counter to the pagan religions then prevalent in the Greco-Roman world (e.g., the early Christians, in contrast to Judaism and the pagan mystery religions, had no need for temples or shrines; nor did they have any need for special “holy men” or priests who would perform religious exercises on their behalf).

C. Is usually (though perhaps not always) repeated within the New Testament and which seems to have been the normative practice of the early Christian assemblies. A uniformity in basic church structure and practice appears to have been the mark of all apostolic churches. For example, the pattern of multiple participation is found in Romans (12:4-8), 1 Corinthians (14:26), Ephesians (4:11-16; 5:19), Colossians (3:16), Hebrews (10:24-25), 1 Peter (4:10-11), and most books of the New Testament – indicating, of course, that there was a distinctive apostolic practice common to all the churches regardless of their geographical location (1 Corinthians 4:16-17; 11:16; 14:33).

D. Distinctive apostolic practices are rooted in theology. In other words, New Testament church forms were not meaningless or merely cultural, but instead, reflective of theological truth (such as celebrating the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with a full meal which prefigures the Marriage Supper of the Lamb [Matthew 8:11; Revelation 19:9]; using one cup and one bread in the Lord’s Supper which symbolizes our oneness in Christ [1 Corinthians 10:16-17]; and allowing mutual participation in the assembly which is the practical outworking of Paul’s theology of the Body [1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:16]).

E. A distinctive apostolic practice does not need to be explicitly commanded in order to remain authoritative for church practice. In fact, most church practices which we deem necessary to have if we are going to be faithful to apostolic teaching, are not even commanded in the New Testament! For example, there is no direct command to gather weekly every Sunday; there is

no direct command to celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly; and there is no direct command that every congregation have a plurality of elders and deacons. Granted, these were clearly the distinctive apostolic patterns of the early church and, therefore, should be practiced by our churches, but there is no direct or explicit command that such patterns be followed. Yet, many churches would feel that they have been less than faithful to the New Testament if they did not implement such ministry patterns (and rightly so). This is because we all instinctively know that the apostles of our Lord did not need to explicitly preface all their words with direct commands; most often the example or model which they set before us and encourage us to imitate is sufficient (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1-2,16; 14:33; Philippians 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 2:15).

F. It must be made clear that we are not exalting first-century Christianity and everything which transpired as the supreme example for churches today (except in those cases where a distinctive apostolic pattern is established). No period of church history is infallible and to be emulated without question. In fact, we know that the early churches had many problems and could behave quite carnal at times (think of the Corinthians and their numerous divisions and strife; the Galatian churches which were duped by the Judaizers; and our Lord's stern warning to the seven churches of Asia in the Book of Revelation).

Furthermore, later periods of church history, because of the long span of time which allowed greater insight and theological understanding to develop, probably had more intellectual maturity than did the first-century church when Christian doctrine was not as clearly organized. Thus, we must be faithful to apostolic ecclesiology and yet appreciative for those advances or contributions which Christ has brought to His church through His servants (e.g., such men as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and others).

9. Don't build a doctrine upon an uncertain textual reading. In other words, we should not erect an entire teaching or system of theology upon a verse which has dubious textual support. Christian theology should be built upon

passages which exist in the original manuscripts and can be confirmed through the science of textual criticism.

For instance, it would be wrong to defend the doctrine of the Trinity from the KJV reading of 1 John 5:7 (“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one”) since no known ancient manuscript can attest to this reading. Neither should we build a case for contemporary tongues and miraculous signs based upon Mark 16:15-18 since our oldest and most reliable manuscripts do not contain this ending (although some scholars, admittedly, have attempted to present an apologetic for its inclusion).

10. Recognize the Christocentric focus of the Bible. The New Testament writers primarily viewed the Old Testament as Christological documents. In other words, they understood the Hebrew Scriptures as ultimately pointing to the person of Christ and the redemptive-historical fulfillment that He would bring. As Martin Luther once said, “If you will interpret well and securely, take Christ with you, for He is the man whom everything concerns.”

“And He took the twelve aside and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished’” (Luke 18:31).

“And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

“Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’” (Luke 24:44).

“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45).

“For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me” (John 5:46).

“And so, because he [David] was a prophet, and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay” (Acts 2:30-31).

“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:18).

“Of Him all the prophets bear witness . . .” (Acts 10:43).

“And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ’” (Acts 17:2-3).

“And all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Peter 1:10-11).

In light of this, we should view the Old Testament not as Israel-centered (as Dispensationalists mistakenly assume) nor as law-centered (as Covenant theologians think), but as having its focus on the person of Christ and His redemptive mission – for “of Him all the prophets bear witness” (Acts 10:43). This doesn’t mean that every text of Scripture in the Old Testament speaks directly or explicitly of Him; rather, that every text of Scripture within the Hebrew Bible is part of the one story which has its ultimate focus in Him. As the late New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, has written:

In Jesus the promise is confirmed, the covenant is renewed, the prophecies are fulfilled, the law is vindicated, salvation is brought near, sacred history has reached its climax,

the perfect sacrifice has been offered and accepted, the great High Priest over the household of God has taken His seat at God's right hand, the Prophet like Moses has been raised up, the Son of David reigns, the kingdom of God has been inaugurated, the Son of Man has received dominion from the Ancient of Days, the Servant of the Lord, having been smitten to death for His people's transgression and borne the sin of many, has accomplished the divine purpose, has seen light after the travail of His soul and is now exalted and extolled and made very high (New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes, p.21).

11. Recognize the "sensus plenior" of Scripture. The term sensus plenior ("fuller sense") has been used by Christian theologians in order to teach that Israel's Old Testament history has a deeper and far-reaching meaning than a purely historical-grammatical exegesis can exhaust or bring to light. "Sensus Plenior," by definition, denotes God's intended meaning in Scripture, which may or may not have been discerned by the human author, but which is made clear by the subsequent revelation of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. As William LaSor points out, "In either event, the author does not intentionally convey the sensus plenior to his hearers. But at a later date, in the light of further revelation, the fuller meaning becomes clear to readers under the influence of the Spirit who inspired the original author" ("Interpretation of Prophecy," Hermeneutics, ed. Bernard Ramm, p.108).

This should not be seen as a denial of the validity of the historical-grammatical method nor as an endorsement of allegorical or mystical exegesis. Instead, when guided by proper controls, the principle of sensus plenior helps us to see the Divine intention or deeper theological purpose behind certain events and persons within the history of Israel. Moreover, these are not arbitrary meanings discovered by a creative interpreter, but are the insights of the New Testament writers who were uniquely granted such insight by the Holy Spirit. As the Reformed theologian, Louis Berkhof, has stated:

The real meaning of Scripture does not always lie on the surface. There is no truth in the assertion that the intent of the secondary authors [God being the primary author], determined by the grammatical-historical method, always exhausts the sense of Scripture, and represents in all its fullness the meaning of

the Holy Spirit (Principles of Biblical Interpretation, pp.59-60).

For example, King David's shocking betrayal by a close friend, as recorded in Psalm 41:9, was not a literal prediction or direct Messianic prophecy. Nevertheless, Jesus applied this historic experience and cultic lamentation to Himself (John 13:18), and thereby elevated David's unfortunate betrayal to a type which was "fulfilled" in Christ. Just as David was betrayed by a close friend, so also the greater David, the true King of Israel, is likewise betrayed. Thus, our Lord unfolded Psalm 41:9 in a deeper, Christological sense that is not discovered by a historical-grammatical exegesis.

Would a purely historical-grammatical exegesis lead one to interpret Hosea 11:1 ("Out of Egypt I called My Son") as a future reference of the Messiah – particularly when the prophet is not looking forward to the distant future, but to the past when God brought the nation of Israel out of their Egyptian bondage? Yet Matthew, in chapter 2:15, understands Hosea 11:1 as having its ultimate reference and fulfillment in Jesus who, as the true Son of God, not only represents Israel before God, but also recapitulates Israel's history in His own life. Thus, Matthew, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who sees the deeper significance and Christological sense of Hosea 11:1, tries to teach us that the meaning of Israel's history is fully revealed in the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

Take, as another example, the words of Jeremiah 31:15 ("Thus says the LORD, 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more'") which, in its historical context, refers to the deportation of the Jews to Babylon. Symbolically, Rachel, as the mother of Israel, is pictured weeping. However, Matthew sees this weeping as "fulfilled" in the wailing of those mothers whose children were slaughtered in Bethlehem by Herod (Matthew 2:17-18). Thus, Matthew understands the words of Jeremiah 31:15 as having its ultimate and fuller meaning in the events of Jesus' early life – for it is He, as Messiah, who recapitulates many of the redemptive-historical events which occurred in the stages of Israel's life.

According to Hans K. La Rondelle:

Matthew interprets many crucial events in Israel's history as a foreshadowing of Messianic fulfillments. In the life of Christ the fuller meaning of Israel's sacred history is brought to light. In this way, Matthew tries to confirm the Christian faith that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and that God has achieved His goal in His salvation-history with Israel . . . In summary, the New Testament reveals a multiplex, Christ-centered approach to the Old Testament, which is theologically richer and more comprehensive than the hermeneutic of literalism (*The Israel of God in Prophecy*, pp.74,77).

It should be noted that not all scholars accept the notion of *sensus plenior* as valid. Many see such New Testament uses of the Old Testament as analogies, parallels, or implications from the Hebrew text which have a unique and limited correspondence to events in the life of Jesus. They would argue that the Gospel writers were not attempting to draw the "fuller" or "deeper" meaning from the verses they cited and applied to Jesus. Instead, they were merely showing analogies or similarities between Old and New Testament events – a practice, for instance, which would have been appreciated by Matthew's Jewish readers.

Although there is some truth to this objection (since the New Testament writers do, in fact, make analogies and parallels between important Old Testament incidents and their correspondence to certain events in the life of Christ), it still appears that the New Testament writers brought forth the fuller meaning of certain verses which were Divinely intended to have a broader range of meaning than what the historical-grammatical approach could discover. For instance, the promise spoken to Abraham in Genesis 22:18 had a much broader significance than at first appears, and which later revelation would eventually discover (Galatians 3:16). The words of Caiaphas in John 11:49-50, according to the apostle, also had a much deeper meaning and significance than at first appeared (see vv.51-52). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, He was able to see the Divine intention in Caiaphas' proposed solution to deal with Jesus.

Furthermore, it is not the modern exegete who employs the *sensus plenior* of Scripture, but solely the New Testament authors who were Divinely guided to see the Holy Spirit's meaning in specific Old Testament passages. As Robertson McQuilkin states, "Whatever position a person takes on the question of a hidden, secondary meaning in prophetic utterances or a fuller meaning intended from the beginning, Jesus Christ or the inspired writers are the only ones who can designate that secondary or fuller meaning. When Christ spoke, He had every right to interpret the author. The same may be said of those apostles He authorized to reveal God's will through the New Testament" (Understanding and Applying the Bible, p.46).

12. Be alert to the presence of Hebrew parallelism/poetic parallelism. Contrary to what some might believe, the biblical writers were not dispassionate authors who merely transcribed information. Instead, their world was one in which people (similar to ours in the 21st century) sought to express their thoughts using emotive and picturesque language. One of the more common forms of expression is known as Hebrew parallelism or poetic parallelism.

Although there exists different types of poetic parallelism (e.g., synonymous parallelism, antithetical parallelism, climactic parallelism, and chiasmic parallelism), they are usually observed in a passage where the second line repeats or contrasts the thoughts of the first line. The purpose of parallelism is to give intensity and force to the subject under discussion. By repeating or contrasting the second line from the first, the reader becomes more deeply impressed with the author's argument or flow of thought. Here are some basic examples of poetic parallelism:

A. (synonymous parallelism)

"Because I called you, and you refused;

I stretched out My hand, and no one paid attention;

And you neglected all My counsel,

And did not want My reproof;

I will even laugh at your calamity;

I will mock when your dread comes,

When your dread comes like a storm,

And your calamity comes on like a whirlwind,

When distress and anguish come on you.

Then they will call on Me, but I will not answer;

They will seek Me diligently, but they shall not find Me” (Proverbs 1:24-28)

“If you have been snared with the words of your mouth,

Have been caught with the words of your mouth” (Proverbs 6:2)

“Ask, and it shall be given to you;

Seek, and you shall find;

Knock, and it shall be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives,

And he who seeks finds,

And to him who knocks it shall be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8)

B. (antithetical or contrasting parallelism)

“The memory of the righteous is blessed,

But the name of the wicked will rot.

The wise of heart will receive commands,

But a babbling fool will be thrown down.

He who walks in integrity walks securely,

But he who perverts his ways will be found out.

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,

But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” (Proverbs 10:7-9,11)

“Better is a dish of vegetables where love is,

Than a fattened ox and hatred with it” (Proverbs 15:17)

**“Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also
confess him before My Father who is in heaven.**

But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before

My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33)

13. Be alert to figurative language. The Bible is filled with figurative language and, because of its presence in the Scriptural text, it should cause the interpreter to be even more careful in his treatment of the Bible, making certain to not interpret literally that which was intended to be understood metaphorically or figuratively.

When a word is employed in another way than its primary meaning, or applied to some object different from that to which it is appropriated in normal or common usage, we call this figurative language (also known as “trope,” derived from a Greek word which means a turn or change of language; that is, a word turned from its primary usage to another meaning).

Figurative language, however, is not merely limited to the biblical writers, but has been universally discovered in every language and culture throughout human history. In fact, figurative language provides depth, richness, and imagery in our conversations with others and is generally necessary to effective communication. In 1937, W. MacNeile Dixon, the distinguished professor of English literature at the University of Glasgow, wrote:

If I were asked what has been the most powerful force in the making of history . . . I should have answered . . . figurative expression. It is by imagination that men have lived; imagination rules all our lives. The human mind is not, as philosophers would have you think, a debating hall, but a picture gallery . . . Remove the metaphors [i.e., figurative expressions] from the Bible and its living spirit vanishes . . . The prophets, the poets, the leaders of men are all of them masters of imagery, and by imagery they capture the human soul (cited in Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, p.143).

To show how common figurative language is, note the following examples from both modern usage and ancient biblical usage:

A. (modern usage)

“It’s raining cats and dogs.”

“That argument doesn’t hold any water.”

“He was so angry that he started to boil.”

“I was tickled to death.”

“When I heard the joke, I started to crack up.”

“Now, that’s a heavy thought!”

B. (biblical usage)

“Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29)

“Where will you be stricken again, as you continue in your rebellion? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is nothing sound in it. Only bruises, welts, and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil” (Isaiah 1:5-6)

“I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears” (Psalm 6:6)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink” (John 6:53-55)

“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:24)

C. What is the purpose of figurative language/figures of speech?

- **Figures of speech add color or vividness to language.**
- **Figures of speech make abstract or intellectual ideas more concrete.**
- **Figures of speech aid in retention and make indelible impressions.**
- **Figures of speech abbreviate or condense an idea.**
- **Figures of speech encourage deeper reflection upon what is said.**

D. Basic types of figurative language:

- **Simile** – A simile is a comparison in which one thing resembles another, usually with the expression “like” or “as”. Terry defines it thus: “When a formal comparison is made between two different objects, so as to impress the mind with some resemblance or likeness, the figure is called a simile” (Biblical Hermeneutics, p.254). See Isaiah 55:9-11; Jeremiah 23:29; Matthew 7:24-27; Mark 1:10; 1 Peter 1:24.
- **Metaphor** – A metaphor is a comparison in which one thing is, acts like, or represents another, although the two are basically unlike. See Jeremiah 50:6; Matthew 5:13; John 6:48; 10:7,9.
- **Metonymy** – A metonymy is the substituting of one word for another. For example, when we refer to a decision being made by the White House, we actually mean the President of the United States. We have simply substituted the residence of the President for the President himself. See Proverbs 15:12; Jeremiah 18:18; Matthew 3:5; Mark 3:25; Hebrews 13:4.
- **Hyperbole** – A hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration, in which more is said than is literally meant, for the purpose of adding emphasis, attention, or force. See Deuteronomy 1:28; 2 Samuel 1:23; Psalm 6:6; Matthew 5:29-30; 19:24; 23:24.
- **Irony** – Irony is a kind of ridicule expressed indirectly in the form of a compliment. Irony is often conveyed by the speaker’s tone of voice (as in sarcasm) so that the hearers know immediately that irony is intended. See 2 Samuel 6:20; 1 Kings 18:27; Mark 7:9; 1 Corinthians 4:8,10. According to Grant R. Osborne, Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: “Irony is an important rhetorical device that consists of stating one thing while meaning the direct opposite. It is frequently employed in polemical contexts and is accompanied by sarcasm or ridicule, as in Michal's retort to David, ‘How the King of

Israel has distinguished himself today' (2 Samuel 6:20), with open contempt for his dancing before the ark . . . In such cases irony becomes biting sarcasm" (The Hermeneutical Spiral, p.107).

- **Personification** – This is the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to inanimate objects or ideas or to animals. See Isaiah 55:12; 35:1; 1 Corinthians 15:55.
- **Anthropomorphism** – This is the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to God. See 2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 8:3; 31:2.
- **Anthropopathism** – This is the ascribing of human emotions to God. See Genesis 6:6; Zechariah 8:1.

Special note should be given to the comprehensive work of E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Reprint, 1968; 1104pp.), which is, perhaps, the best overall treatment of the numerous figures of speech employed in the Scriptures.

14. While meaning is primarily one, application is many. This means that while any given passage may have only one meaning in light of its historical-grammatical context (unless we have an instance of "sensus plenior"), there may exist a multiplicity of ways in which the text can be practically applied by the modern reader. For instance, numerous sermons could be preached from the words of Jesus in Mark 7:9 ("Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men") or the words of Paul in Philippians 4:11 ("I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am") and applied to a wide range of contemporary problems or issues. However, the interpreter must always distinguish between the initial meaning of the text from any particular application that is made of it.

15. Learn to chew on a text of Scripture. In order to more fully understand a text or portion of Scripture, the interpreter should spend time slowly chewing, mulling over, regurgitating, or meditating on, the passage under examination.

One has not reasonably exhausted the meaning of a text or its implications simply because the historical and lexical preliminaries have been completed. The interpreter must additionally proceed to think deeply about its meaning, rethink prior assumptions, and ask more penetrating questions.

Within time, the reader will discover not only its original meaning and its application to contemporary life, but also how the text relates to other passages in the Bible – leading the interpreter to eventually correlate a full-orbed systematic theology.

16. Doctrine must be squarely built upon Scripture. Our theology must be erected from a proper interpretation of Scripture or a legitimate inference from Scripture, and not from cherished traditions, human creeds or confessions. While there is a place for creeds (and some are clearly more biblically-based than others), the Christian's conscience is ultimately bound to Scripture alone.

Thus, we must be careful to distinguish between human creeds which seek to summarize Christian doctrine (even the best ones!) and the authoritative, inerrant Word of God. Although most evangelicals would, in principle, agree with this, the history of the Christian Church has sadly proven that we have too often been concerned to defend our ecclesiastical creeds – even treating them at times as if they were on par with Scripture! – than with openly admitting the fallibility of our creeds and that Scripture alone is the final arbiter of any theology or practice (sola Scriptura).

VI. A Brief Word on the Place & Value of Bible Commentaries

1. Commentaries are important for the serious student of Scripture since they not only help to explain the meaning of the passage(s) under discussion, but provide valuable background information (e.g., authorship, date and setting of the book, the flow of the writer's argument, major themes developed in the book, textual issues), practical and homiletical encouragement, and offer assistance in dealing with apparent contradictions or Bible difficulties. Thus, to reject the insight which commentaries bring under the guise of a false piety

(e.g., “I don’t need commentaries, the Holy Spirit teaches me”) is to reject the wisdom of those godly teachers whom Christ Himself has placed in the Church for our spiritual benefit and edification.

2. In purchasing commentaries, purchase only the best. Don’t waste your money and time on commentaries that are excessively brief, overly devotional, or those which are consumed with chasing after every higher-critical theory that very little space is devoted to explaining clearly the text’s meaning. If you are not sure which commentaries to add to your growing library (and every Christian, to some extent, should seek to have a solid, biblically-based library), start with the following Bible commentary survey’s:

- Jim Rosscup, *Commentaries for Biblical Expositors* (Sun Valley, CA: Grace Book Shack, 1993; 314pp.).
- D.A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986 [Third Edition]; 79pp.).
- C.H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications Reprint, 1988; 288pp.).

3. When working through a text or portion of Scripture, don’t make the mistake of immediately consulting your commentaries. Wait until you have completed your initial reading and lexical studies. Allow the Spirit of God to teach you what He may and then, as you peruse your commentaries, you will be in a much better position to discern whether the commentator has properly interpreted the passage(s).

4. Don’t limit your commentaries to only those which agree with you. Try to purchase the best commentaries which represent different theological or denominational camps (Calvinists, Arminians, Lutherans, etc.) since it will help to inform you (in some cases, even correct) on how others within the Body of Christ have arrived at their exegetical conclusions. This will help to broaden your thinking as well as give you an appreciation for how others have

grappled with Scripture's meaning.

5. Always remember that a commentator is only human. Like all of us, he often brings his presuppositions and theological grid to the text of Scripture. We must be careful, therefore, to not make our favorite commentator a paper Pope whose decisions are considered infallible. After many years of using commentaries, I have not yet found a commentator with whom I agree in everything. But this is as it should be if we are critically evaluating what we read, following closely the biblical text, and developing our own thoughts as to what God is saying. J.C. Ryle has said:

In fact, the conclusion I arrive at, after a diligent examination of many commentators, is always one and the same. I trust none of them unreservedly, and I expect nowhere to find perfection. All must be read with caution. They are good helps, but they are not infallible. They are useful assistants, but they are not the pillar of cloud and fire. I advise my younger readers to remember that. Use your own judgment prayerfully and diligently. Use commentaries; but be a slave to none. Call no man master (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels [Vol.4] p.ix-x).

6. A commentary should not necessarily be rejected because the author follows an interpretation that is different from our own, since on many other passages he may have valuable insight. As noted above, there is rarely a commentator that you will agree with on everything. Even those Arminian commentators with whom I find myself in complete theological disagreement with – particularly on those passages which are the crux of the Calvinist-Arminian controversy (e.g., Romans 8:29; 9:22; Hebrews 6:4-6) – I have still discovered a wealth of helpful information on other verses which are less polemically treated.

7. The question is sometimes raised whether it is better to buy individual commentaries or a commentary series. While there is no definite rule in this matter (since some commentaries within a particular series have proven to be quite insightful – for example, D.A. Carson's commentary on Matthew in The Expositor's Bible Commentary [Vol.8] series), it is probably better to

purchase individual commentaries on each book of the Bible. The problem of buying an entire series is that the commentaries tend to be uneven, brief, and rather mediocre. This is especially true in purchasing a one-volume commentary on the whole Bible – a mistake that many new converts make when setting out to secure their first commentary!

VII. Interpretation of Parables

One of the more common ways that Jesus taught spiritual truth was through the use of parables. But what exactly is a parable? According to Zuck, “A parable is a form of figurative language involving comparisons. But rather than using a single word or phrase to make the comparison or analogy, as in a simile, metaphor, or hypocatastasis, a parable is an extended analogy in story form. A parable is a true-to-life story to illustrate or illumine a truth. It is true to life though it may not have actually occurred in all the details as the story is presented. Historic events may serve as illustrations; but parables are special stories, not necessarily historic events, that are told to teach a particular truth. Since parables are true to life, they differ from allegories and fables The word ‘parable’ comes from the Greek para (‘beside or alongside’) and ballein (‘to throw’). Thus the story is thrown alongside the truth to illustrate the truth” (Basic Bible Interpretation, p.194).

1. Why did Jesus speak in parables?

A. To reveal spiritual truth to His disciples and to conceal it from those whose hearts were hardened to the message of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:10-17).

B. Parables helped to illustrate truth as well as spark interest in those who heard Jesus. All humans can relate to a good story and, by seizing upon parabolic stories or illustrations, Jesus was able to capture and sustain the interest of the crowds.

C. Parables encouraged the listeners to ponder or think deeply upon what Jesus said – and, by thinking upon the parable’s spiritual lesson, the listeners

would more dramatically understand and apply its meaning. In addressing the general use of parables, Terry notes:

The general design of parables, as of all other kinds of figurative language, is to embellish and set forth ideas and moral truths in attractive and impressive forms. Many a moral lesson, if spoken in naked, literal style, is soon forgotten; but, clothed in parabolic dress, it arouses attention, and fastens itself in the memory. Many rebukes and pungent warnings may be couched in a parable, and thereby give less offence, and yet work better effects than open plainness of speech could do. Nathan's parable (in 2 Samuel 12:1-4) prepared the heart of David to receive with profit the keen reproof he was about to administer . . . It is easy, also, to see that a parable may enshrine a profound truth or mystery which the hearers may not at first apprehend, but which, because of its striking or memorable form, abides more firmly in the mind, and so abiding, yields at length its deep and precious meaning (Biblical Hermeneutics, pp.277-278).

2. According to the Gospel narratives, Jesus told at least thirty-five separate parables which can be generally classified as follows:

Seed parables – e.g., the Sower (Matthew 13:3-8); the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30); the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32).

Nature parables – e.g., the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46); the Fishing Net (Matthew 13:47-50); the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9); the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7).

Servant parables – e.g., the Two Servants (Matthew 24:45-51); the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35); the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-9); the Servant's Reward (Luke 17:7-10).

Father parables – e.g., the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32); the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

King parables – e.g., the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14); the King's Rash War (Luke 14:31-33).

Money or Treasure parables – e.g., the Hidden Treasure (Matthew

13:44); the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30); the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-9); the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10).

Harvest parables – e.g., the Wicked Vinegrowers (Matthew 21:33-46); the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29).

Women parables – e.g., the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13); the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8).

Social or domestic parables – e.g., the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24); the Doorkeeper (Matthew 13:34-37); the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

Compassion parables – e.g., the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7); the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32); the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

Kingdom parables – e.g., the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32); the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46); the Net (Matthew 13:47-52); the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14).

Judgment parables – e.g., the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31); the Wicked Vinegrowers or Farmers (Matthew 21:33-41).

3. How should we approach parables and their interpretation?

A. When interpreting a parable, it's important to recognize the Christological nature of Jesus' parables. This means that when Jesus employed parables, He was not merely attempting to illustrate a spiritual reality (as even many of the Rabbis did during the first century era), but primarily a spiritual truth concerning Himself. Thus, in approaching parables we must ask ourselves: How does this parable relate to Christ? This is what makes Jesus unique from others, since His parables not only portrayed spiritual and heavenly realities, but many of them pointed directly to His person.

B. Another important principle is the kingdom principle. One of the major

themes that Jesus frequently addressed was the kingdom, its nature, its inhabitants, its nearness, and its consummation. Thus, when interpreting parables, we must also ask ourselves: What does it say about the kingdom of God? What is the central lesson in the kingdom narrative?

C. Determine the one central truth which the parable is attempting to teach. According to C.H. Dodd, “The typical parable presents one single point of comparison. The details are not intended to have independent significance” (The Parables of the Kingdom, p.18). If you try to hunt for distinct meanings in every detail within a parable, you will most likely turn the story into an allegory. One well-known example of violating this principle is Augustine’s allegorization of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37:

The man who fell into the hands of robbers is Adam. Jerusalem is heaven, and Jericho signifies man’s mortality. The robbers are the Devil and his angels who stripped man of his immortality. In beating him they persuaded him to sin, and in leaving him half dead the Devil and his angels have left man in a condition in which he has some knowledge of God but is yet oppressed by sin. The priest represents the Law, and the Levite represents the Prophets. The Good Samaritan is Christ who, in bandaging the man’s wounds, seeks to restrain sin. Oil is hope and wine is a fervent spirit. The man’s donkey is Jesus’ incarnation, and the man being placed on a donkey pictures his belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the church. The next day pictures the Lord’s resurrection, the two coins represent either the two precepts of love or this life and the life to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle Paul (Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* 2, p.19).

D. Determine how much of the parable is actually interpreted by Jesus Himself. For instance, the Parable of the Sower (or Soils) in Matthew 13:3-8 is interpreted for us in verses 18-23.

E. Look for clues within the immediate and surrounding context concerning the parable’s meaning. In some instances, the meaning will become obvious by simply examining the context in order to see what prompted the parable in the first place.

F. Compare the parable with any possible Old Testament association. Since

both our Lord and His listeners were familiar with much of the Old Testament Scriptures, we must attune our thinking to be sensitive to any possible Old Testament references in the parables – such things as vineyards, fig trees, harvests, and feasts.

G. It is wise not to build entire doctrinal systems from parables. This doesn't mean that parables do not contain doctrine, but only that we must be very careful in our interpretation and always make sure that any doctrine which is gleaned from a parable is in accord with the rest of the New Testament. If proper cautions are followed, parables may be used to illustrate doctrine, illumine Christian experience, and to teach practical lessons.

VIII. Interpretation of Prophecy

1. Many people assume that prophecy or the prophet's ministry was primarily concerned with predicting future eschatological events, but the Old Testament reveals that prophetic revelation was much broader than this. The prophet was understood more as a forthteller of God's message (i.e., declaring God's message of judgment upon an unrepentant people existing during the historical period in which the prophet lived) than a foreteller of future events. This is not meant to suggest that predictive elements were completely missing from the prophet's oracle (for indeed they often spoke of the future eschatological reign of the Messiah and His kingdom), but only that he was not exclusively concerned with future events which had no real significance to his own generation. Berkhof defines prophecy in the following manner: "Prophecy may simply be defined as the proclamation of that which God revealed" (Principles of Biblical Interpretation, p.148).

2. Recognize that in interpreting prophetic portions of Scripture it is the central or primary meaning that is significant, and not the relatively minor details which accompanies the prophet's message. In the same way that we interpret the parables of Scripture, so also we must guard ourselves from deriving separate or obscure meanings from the various details in which the prophecy is cast and, instead, fix our attention on the central thrust of the

prophet's discourse.

For example, in Isaiah 11:6-9 the prophet describes the universal peace which shall exist during the Messianic age in terms of wild animals living peaceably with the rest of creation. Yet, later in Isaiah 35:8-10, this same period is described as having no wild animals present. Is there a contradiction? Not at all. Once again, while the metaphorical details may change in each respective narrative, the central message of universal peace in the Messianic age remains the same. Thus, our focus must be on the primary intended meaning, and not upon the details per se (which may change).

To give another example, most Dispensationalists have interpreted Ezekiel chapters 40-48 as describing the future Millennial temple and its worship. The elaborate description given of the temple and its measurements, particularly of the various sacrifices that are to be offered at the temple (45:15-20), have lead them to interpret these chapters literally. Thus, in their thinking, not only will a literal and physical temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem during the Millennial age, but so also will the sacrificial system – although the animal sacrifices are alleged to be “memorial sacrifices,” without expiatory value. Aside from the fact that the Old Covenant sacrificial system has been abolished with the coming of Christ (and thus it would be retrogressive to return to such types and shadows), what would be the point of doing so when the Lord Jesus has already given us a memorial of His death in the Lord's Supper? By failing to understand the figurative nature of prophecy as well as ignoring the central meaning that the prophet is attempting to convey, Dispensationalists have misunderstood these important chapters and erected a theology which, ultimately, contradicts the fuller revelation of God found in the New Testament. In contrast to the Dispensational understanding, Ezekiel is simply describing the glorious worship of God's people in the age to come in terms and ideas which the Jews of that period would have recognized – as the late Anthony Hoekema has written:

Ezekiel gives no indication in these chapters that he is describing something which is to happen during a millennium preceding the final state. An

interpretation of these chapters which is in agreement with New Testament teaching, and which avoids the absurdity of positing the need for memorial sacrifices in the millennium, understands Ezekiel to be describing here the glorious future of the people of God in the age to come in terms which the Jews of that day would understand. Since their worship previous to their captivity had been centered in the Jerusalem temple, it is understandable that Ezekiel describes their future blessedness by picturing a temple and its sacrifices. The details about temple and sacrifices are to be understood not literally but figuratively . . . What we have in Ezekiel 40 to 48, therefore, is not a description of the millennium but a picture of the final state on the new earth, in terms of the religious symbolism with which Ezekiel and his readers were familiar (The Bible and the Future, pp.204-205).

3. Recognize the figurative or non-literal nature of prophecy. Much of the prophetic portions of Scripture are couched in figurative language, symbolism, and dramatic imagery for the express purpose of emphasizing the gravity and imminence of God's judgment. Such picturesque language, however, was clearly understood by the prophet's audience as a way of describing God's intervention into human history. Perhaps the following examples taken from Scripture will help to elucidate this point:

- Isaiah 13:9-11 uses cosmic imagery (which too many would appear to describe the end of the world) in connection with God's judgment upon the Babylonian empire approximately six-hundred years before the birth of Christ (see Isaiah 13:1,19).
- In Acts 2:14-21, Peter interprets the prophecy and cosmic imagery of Joel 2:28-32 as having its fulfillment on the day of Pentecost. Although such cosmic signs as expressed by the prophet Joel did not literally occur at Pentecost, what the author willed to convey by those signs did. Some have objected by positing the view that Joel's prophecy was only partially fulfilled at Pentecost, and that its final fulfillment will take place when Christ returns. But, as Robert H. Stein notes, this interpretation does not satisfy the words of Peter:

There have been attempts to deny that the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 was fulfilled

at Pentecost. Usually this is due to a misunderstanding of the figurative nature of this cosmic terminology. Some have suggested that Luke and Peter believed that Pentecost was ‘kind of like’ what Joel prophesied but not its actual fulfillment. Such a manipulative interpretation of this passage of Acts, however, is impossible in light of Peter’s words in Acts 2:16: ‘this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.’ Furthermore such interpretive gymnastics are unnecessary when we are willing to accept what the author meant by the use of such terminology. We need only note other passages to see how widespread the use of such cosmic terminology is in the Bible (Isaiah 24:23; Jeremiah 4:28; 13:16; 15:9; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10,31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Habakkuk 3:11; Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25; Revelation 6:12). Attempts to see Mark 15:33; Matthew 27:45; Luke 23:44-45 as the fulfillment of this prophecy err. They do not explain the signs of Acts 2:19 and most of 2:20. Second, and more important, they err because Peter and Luke associated the fulfillment of these signs with what is happening then and there on the day of Pentecost (Playing by the Rules, p.93).

4. When interpreting prophetic accounts in Scripture, consider first the possibility that the words may apply to and have their fulfillment in the historical period in which they were announced. By doing so, we will avoid the common abuse of many Dispensational preachers who engage in a sort of “newspaper exegesis” because they have wrongly interpreted prophetic passages which, in their historical context, referred to events and fulfillment’s in the life of Israel, and projected them to a distant future (most notably ours in the twenty-first century) that had no relation to the prophet’s own generation. Osborne warns us against such mistaken notions:

I would add a fifth type of erroneous preaching, the ‘newspaper’ approach of many so-called prophecy preachers today. This school assumes that the prophecies were not meant for the ancient setting but rather for the modern setting. Amazingly, that setting is often post-1948 (after Israel became a nation) America. Such preachers ignore that fact that God chose all the symbols and passages to speak to Israel and that modern people must understand them in their ancient context before applying them today . . . ‘Newspaper’ preachers instead take prophetic passages out of context and twist them to fit the modern situation. This is dangerous for it too easily leads to a subjective ‘eisegesis’ (reading meaning into a text), which does anything one wants to the Scriptural text . . . Many today leap too quickly into a futuristic interpretation of passages that were more likely meant to speak to the author’s own day (The

Hermeneutical Spiral, pp.217-218).

5. Recognize the non-systematic character of prophecy. The prophetic portions of Scripture are not always as organized or presented as systematically as we might wish. Instead, as Ramm points out: “The future may appear present, or nearby, or indefinitely remote. Widely separated events on the actual calendar of history may appear together in the prophetic sequence. The Jewish scholars unable to decipher pictures of Messianic suffering and Messianic glory were not properly prepared for the advent of the humiliation of our Lord. Only in the pages of the New Testament are these two pictures properly related in terms of two advents of the Messiah (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12 and Hebrews 9:28)” (Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p.249).

IX. New Testament Uses of the Old Testament

There are approximately three hundred instances in which the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament. Some are introductory formulas (e.g., “As it is written”) and exact citations, while others are summaries or loose paraphrases of Old Testament passages. Since the New Testament revelation of Christ fulfills the Old Testament promises and types, this should not surprise us for there is indeed great continuity between the two Testaments.

The problem arises when New Testament writers fail to quote verbatim from the Hebrew Bible or when they discover meanings from an Old Testament passage which seems to run counter to its original design. Does the New Testament, then, distort the Old Testament? Were the apostles of Christ taking undue freedom by reinterpreting certain Old Testament passages? Can we, as evangelical believers, legitimately adhere to the doctrine of inerrancy in light of such apparent abuses of the Old Testament? While this is not a particularly simple matter to resolve, there are indeed answers to such questions which, in the end, vindicates the doctrine of inerrancy and proves that the New Testament writers did not abuse their Old Testament Scriptures. Carefully consider the following points.

1. Exact, verbatim quotations were not as common in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. as in our modern era of the twenty-first century. Usually, a summary or paraphrase was sufficient to make one's point, and this especially true in the case of the ancient Rabbis who quoted the Old Testament extensively, yet not always with exact verbal precision. The intended meaning was the important thing. Thus, to hold the New Testament writers to a level of precision which was rarely practiced in their time period, is unfair at best. In fact, there are several instances when later portions of the Old Testament quotes from earlier ones and, yet, does so without adhering to an exact verbal procedure.

2. Many Christians wrongly assume that when a Gospel writer cites an Old Testament verse and applies it to Jesus – particularly if it is introduced by the phrase, “Thus it was fulfilled” – that such passages were understood as literal or direct predictions which, in turn, were literally fulfilled. This doesn't mean that the concept of a direct Old Testament prediction with its corresponding fulfillment in the life of Jesus is completely absent from the Gospel writers' thinking (Isaiah 53 is one such example), but only that Messianic prophecy was much broader than this.

In fact, contrary to much of the popular books dealing with Messianic prophecy (where, for instance, we find such extravagant claims as Jesus fulfilling three hundred literal Old Testament prophecies in His first coming!), the majority of New Testament uses of the Hebrew Bible follow a non-literal interpretation – as New Testament scholar, Donald A. Hagner, makes clear:

But such clear predictive prophecy and fulfillment is seldom found in the New Testament; it is the exception rather than the rule. Instead, . . . the New Testament writers looked for the meaning of the Old Testament as contained in its *sensus plenior* (full meaning). In so doing, they found varied correspondences, analogies, and suggestive similarities – some more substantial, some less substantial – but all based on the underlying presuppositions of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of history; the unique character of the Scriptures as divinely inspired; and the identity of Jesus as the *telos*, or goal, of the history of salvation (“The Old Testament in the New Testament,” eds. Samuel J. Schultz & Morris

A. Inch, *Interpreting the Word of God*, p.103).

The esteemed Bible teacher, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., similarly writes:

It is a common misconception of casual Bible readers that when the New Testament states that a text from the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New, the use of the Old Testament text is that of precise predictive fulfillment. Thus readers are puzzled when they discover from a careful reading of the Old Testament that the Old Testament passage does not seem to speak precisely of what the New Testament seems to suggest. They fail to bear in mind the philosophy of the biblical authors. The writers of Scripture believed that God controlled history. Therefore, history of all kinds, especially the sacred record, spoke ultimately of the activities of the triune God. They did not think it necessary to define the precise kind of fulfillment found in New Testament texts, for it was God who controlled the prophets who wrote direct predictive prophecy and the other authors of Scripture who wrote of people, events, and institutions as types or foreshadowings of the future. Thus both kinds of material were fulfilled in the New Testament, although in a slightly different way (*The Old Testament in the New*, p.76).

3. The New Testament employs the Old Testament Scriptures in a variety of ways to demonstrate that, in Jesus, the biblical prophecies, types, and shadows have all found their divinely appointed fulfillment:

A. **Direct Prediction and Fulfillment.** Specific verses from the Old Testament were understood as directly predicting the person and work of Christ (e.g., Isaiah 53; Micah 5:2 – Matthew 2:4-6). In such instances, there is a one-to-one correspondence between an Old Testament prediction and its New Testament fulfillment.

B. **Typology.** In many instances, the New Testament writers used the Old Testament in a typological manner. Typology, according to Terry, is defined in the following manner: “In the science of theology it properly signifies the preordained representative relation which certain persons, events and institutions of the Old Testament bear to corresponding persons, events, and institutions in the New” (*Biblical*

Hermeneutics, p.336). Thus, types are pictures or object lessons by which God taught His people concerning His grace and the redemption which He would provide through the Messiah. Such typology can be seen in the following passages: Hosea 11:1 – Matthew 2:15; Isaiah 7:14 – Matthew 1:23; Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:1-25; King David (Psalm 16:9-10; 22:11-18); and the entire sacrificial system which typified the ultimate sacrifice of God’s Lamb (John 1:29)

C. Analogical. In several places, the New Testament writers interpreted Old Testament persons and events in an analogical sense (i.e., the New Testament circumstances being like an Old Testament one). In this way, important events within the history of Israel are recapitulated in the life of Jesus (e.g., Rachel weeping for her children in Matthew 2:16-18) and help to demonstrate the close identification which exists between the Messiah and those whom He came to redeem (consider, for example, Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 1:13-15; and His words to Saul on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:4-5). This is often termed “corporate solidarity.” It might be easy to accuse Matthew or any other New Testament writer of twisting Old Testament passages but, as the prolific Bible commentator, D.A. Carson, has said:

Matthew is not simply ripping texts out of Old Testament contexts because he needs to find a prophecy in order to generate a fulfillment. Discernible principles govern his choices, the most important being that he finds in the Old Testament not only isolated predictions regarding the Messiah but also Old Testament history and people as paradigms that, to those with eyes to see, point forward to the Messiah (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew [Vol.8], p.77).

D. Thematic Parallels. The Gospel writers and even Jesus Himself frequently enlarged or built upon Messianic motifs that were present in the Old Testament (e.g., such concepts as “Son of David” and “Son of Man; the “Servant” idea in the Book of Isaiah). Such thematic parallels would have been clearly discerned and appreciated by the

early Jews whose minds were steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures and who understood the Messianic implications of redemptive history.

4. In other instances, an inaccuracy may seem apparent because the New Testament author is citing the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), rather than the Hebrew text. This is, however, not much different from contemporary Christians who might quote from a modern English translation in order to express a Scriptural point. It's only natural that the Septuagint would be quoted as frequently as it is in the New Testament, since it was the most widely used translation in the Greek-speaking world of the first century period. The New Testament writers, then, employed a translation that was familiar to their readers thereby alleviating any unnecessary confusion which most certainly would have come had they used exclusively Hebrew manuscripts which very few would find accessible. In fact, the Septuagint, in some cases, has proven to more accurately reflect the thought of the original autographs than even the Masoretic text.

5. Before we accuse the New Testament writers of error, it is important to first ascertain their purpose in citing an Old Testament text. In other words, before we accuse a Gospel writer, such as Matthew, of misapplying verses from the Old Testament by interpreting them as literal predictions of Jesus, we ought to first consider the possibility that such passages were not actually understood by him as direct prophecies.

There exists, in fact, a multiplicity of reasons or purposes for citing the Old Testament (some of which have been explained previously). Among the many reasons, the New Testament author may wish to confirm that a New Testament incident is in agreement with an Old Testament principle; to explain or clarify a point given in the Old Testament; to illustrate a New Testament truth; to provide the general sense of what the Old Testament said concerning the Messiah; to summarize an Old Testament concept; to draw parallels between Israel and the Church; to provide warnings to New Covenant believers; to show the progress of redemptive history; and, of course, to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the Messiah predicted in the Old

Testament Scriptures.

X. Resolving Alleged Discrepancies

Any person who studies the Scriptures seriously must, eventually, face the claim of unbelieving critics who charge the Bible with numerous internal contradictions and factual errors. The faithful student, rather than avoiding such thorny questions, faces them head-on with full confidence that the Bible is God's inerrant Word and wisely reasons that, since God is a God of truth, He will not allow genuine contradictions or historical blunders to corrupt its veracity. The following are some basic guidelines to aid the interpreter in resolving or harmonizing Bible difficulties.

1. Contrary to the opinions of some, seeking a plausible solution or harmonization to a difficult set of texts is not scholastic dishonesty. In fact, harmonization is something which every literary critic engages in when studying texts of antiquity, whether it be the writings of Homer, Josephus, or the Bible. According to Craig Blomberg, Associate Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, "All historians, whether they employ the term or not, practice some kind of harmonization as they seek to reconstruct the truth of past events . . . [It is a] standard practice among secular historians of both written and oral traditions" ("The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization," [eds. D.A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge] *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, pp.139,144). Thus, harmonization is not, of itself, wrong or an intellectually dubious practice. The legitimacy of one's attempt at harmonizing a difficult passage is not dependent upon whether it succeeds at cleverly answering the problem, but in whether the harmonization comports with the author's intended meaning and contextually resolves the seeming discrepancy. Stein urges his readers to not reject such a practice simply because it is an attempt to harmonize conflicting verses:

The terms harmonize and harmonization have fallen into disrepute. Some of this may be due to the farfetched and unconvincing harmonizations made in the past by certain scholars. This writer still remembers attending a graduate seminar at a famous German university where a student's explanation was rejected on the

grounds that “Das ist nur Harmonisierung!” (“That is simply a harmonization!”). To reject an explanation because it harmonizes difficult gospel passages is certainly as prejudicial as to accept an explanation on the grounds that it harmonizes these passages. The correctness or incorrectness of an explanation is not dependent on whether or not it harmonizes the disputed passages. It depends on whether that explanation correctly interprets the authors’ meanings and logically illustrates that these meanings do not conflict with each other (Difficult Passages in the Gospels, p.13).

2. Recognize that in the vast majority of cases (if not all), direct answers or reasonable solutions exist to problem passages. Such answers or harmonizations are primarily found in conservative Bible commentaries and specialized works which treat Bible difficulties, such as:

- Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).
- Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament: Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the Gospels and Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).
- Walter Kaiser, F.F. Bruce, Manfred Brauch, Peter Davids, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996).
- John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).
- David E. O’Brien, *Today’s Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990).

3. When working through an apparent discrepancy, remember to apply such hermeneutical basics as in carefully studying the context, historical background, and framework of the verse in dispute; its grammar; and its relation to other passages in the Bible which treat the same subject or doctrine.

4. Recognize that a large proportion of alleged discrepancies in the Bible are traceable not to actual errors in the original manuscripts, but to transmissional errors in the numerous manuscripts that we possess, including “the variety of names applied to the same person or place; different methods of reckoning times and seasons; different local and historical standpoints; and the special scope and plan of each particular book. Variations are not contradictions, and many essential variations arise from different methods of arranging a series of particular facts. The peculiarities of oriental thought and speech often involve seeming extravagance of statement and verbal inaccuracies, which are of a nature to provoke the criticism of the less impassioned writers of the West. And it is but just to add that not a few of the alleged contradictions of Scripture exist only in the imagination of skeptical writers, and are to be attributed to the perverse misunderstanding of captious critics” (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p.514).

5. Remember that the Bible itself mentions that some of its contents are, by nature, hard or perplexing (1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Peter 2:16). Thus, it should not surprise us when we come across difficult portions of Scripture which challenges our thinking. Instead of throwing up our hands in frustration, the interpreter must gird up the loins of his mind, laboring diligently and prayerfully for the correct solution. The good news, as Gleason Archer advises, is that there “is very little that God will long withhold from the surrendered heart and mind of a true believer” (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p.15).

6. One of the major reasons why God has allowed apparent discrepancies to exist in Scripture is to compel His children to grapple with its meaning; to dig deeper into a text and thereby arrive at a mature understanding of His Word. The true believer, then, rejoices at the presence of difficulties in Scripture since it is one of the many God-ordained ways of bringing him to an advanced knowledge and appreciation of the Bible.

7. Finally, God in His infinite wisdom and providence allows biblical difficulties to exist for the express purpose of testing one’s moral character,

thus providing stumbling-blocks for those who might wish to intellectually “justify” their unbelief in His revelation. We must remember, however, that the unbeliever is not neutral in his rejection of Christ, and seeks to the best of his ability (frequently under the guise of a pseudo-intellectual veneer) to avoid the claims of God upon his life. For such people who refuse to receive the truth so that they may be saved, God permits the presence of difficulties and apparent errors so that their supposed intellectual superiority might condemn them. In many instances, even when they know that reasonable solutions exist, choose to ignore them and defiantly hold on to their foolish assumptions. Think of all the unbelieving critics and infidels (e.g., Voltaire, Thomas Paine, John Shelby Spong) who have sought to excuse their unbelief because of apparent contradictions in the text of Scripture, yet have conveniently forgotten or willfully ignored the many books written by Christians scholars who have pain-stakingly answered such “contradictions.” One such example, as noted by Haley, is the “Swedish traveler, in looking through Voltaire’s library, found Calmet’s Commentary, with slips of paper inserted, on which the difficulties noticed by Calmet were set down, without a word about the solutions which were given by him” (Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible, p.27).

The biblical discrepancies were plainly appointed as a test of moral character; and, probably, to serve an important judicial purpose. They may be regarded as constituting no insignificant element of the means and conditions of man’s probation. There is a peculiar and striking analogy and harmony between the external form and the interior doctrines of the Bible. Both alike present difficulties – sometimes formidable – to the inquirer. Both alike put his sincerity and firmness to full proof. Hence, as Grotius has fitly said, the Gospel becomes a touchstone to test the honesty of men’s dispositions. Our Savior’s teachings were often clothed in forms which to the indifferent or prejudiced hearer must have seemed obscure, if not offensive. To the caviling and skeptical Jews He spoke many things in parables, that seeing they might see and not perceive, and hearing they might hear and not understand [Mark 4:12]. When He said, ‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you’ [John 6:53], he intentionally used such phraseology as would be repugnant to insincere and squeamish hearers. He thus tested and disclosed men’s characters and motives, and sifted out the chaff among His hearers. ‘From that time, many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him’ [John 6:66]. The

seeming harshness and obscurity of His sayings served to rid Him of those followers who were not of teachable spirit, and thoroughly in earnest, and who would not look beneath the surface. The indolent and superficial, the proud and fastidious, were discouraged and repelled by the rough husk in which the doctrinal kernel was encased. In an analogous manner, the apparent contradictions of the Bible afford opportunity to an unfair mind for explaining away and deceitfully hiding from itself that evidence which it might see . . . Those who are disposed to cavil do, in the wise arrangement of God, find opportunities for caviling. The disposition does not miss the occasion . . . There is light enough for those whose main wish is to see; and darkness enough for those of an opposite disposition . . . Those persons who cherish a caviling spirit, who are bent upon misapprehending the truth, and urging captious and frivolous objections, find in the inspired volume, difficulties and disagreements which would seemed to have been designed as stumbling-stones for those which 'stumble at the Word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed' [1 Peter 2:8]. Upon the willful votaries of error God sends 'strong delusions, that they should believe a lie' [2 Thessalonians 2:11], that they might work out their own condemnation and ruin (Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, pp.38-40).

Recommended Reading:

Dan McCartney & Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994). A clearly written and helpful introduction to the study of hermeneutics (Reformed).

Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991). A practical and generally reliable guide (Dispensational).

Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950). An older, but generally reliable work on hermeneutics (Reformed).

Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reprint, n.d.). A comprehensive and older treatment of hermeneutics, but considered by many (including myself) to be the finest on the subject (Moderately

Calvinistic).

Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chicago: Moody Press [Revised], 1992). A good book to give to beginning Bible students because of its simple style and practical guidelines (Moderately Calvinistic).

Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House [Third Revised Edition], 1970). A generally sound approach to hermeneutical issues and which, for many years, served as the primary textbook in most conservative theological institutions (Dispensational).

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan [Second Edition], 1993). A well-written and popular book on Bible interpretation from two leading evangelical Bible scholars (Arminian).

Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991). A comprehensive and partly technical work on hermeneutics from a prominent evangelical New Testament scholar. While there are some questionable assumptions in this book, there is still much that can be read with profit (Arminian).

R.C. Sproul, Knowing Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977). An easy-to-read and practical guide for Bible interpretation (Reformed).

D.A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984). An outstanding work from a highly respected New Testament scholar who exposes many of the grammatical, logical, and historical fallacies which Bible interpreters make when handling Scripture