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## GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION FOR BIBLE STUDY

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Ti 2:15 ESV)

[“correctly handles the word of truth” (NIV), “rightly dividing the word of truth” (KJV), “accurately handling the word of truth” (NASB), “rightly explaining the word of truth” (NRSV).]

The key word in this verse is *handle*, which comes from the Greek word ὀρθοτομέω (*orthotomeo*). It is actually a combination of two Greek words: *orthos* (where we get the words *orthodox* or *orthopedic*), which means “straight”, and *temno* which means “to cut.” It was used in the first century to refer to cutting a path through a forest area. This verse is essentially saying that we should cut a straight path to the truth. In other words, we should give accurate instruction—to teach correctly or to expound rightly.

### • Introduction

The Bible is God’s word to us. God speaks to us, like a Father to his children, to guide us into an intimate relationship with him so that we may grow in his image. God loves us and he wants us to understand the way of salvation and how to live to please him. He wants us to find the way of blessing and to avoid the tragedy of going astray, so that we may have a happy, victorious and fruitful life.

Learning how to listen to God’s word properly is very important. In the Scriptures, we can find salvation and the way to a meaningful and fruitful life (2Ti 3:15). Bernard Ramm says, “Everything essential to salvation and Christian living is clearly revealed in Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> The biblical authors wrote in a straightforward and direct manner so that readers would understand their message and live accordingly. However, the Bible was originally written in foreign languages to people who lived a long time ago in different parts of the world with different ways of life. Statements that were quite clear to the initial readers may not communicate clearly to us at all.<sup>2</sup> We need spiritual insight and guidance to truly understand it.

The Bible has been read and studied by countless people for many centuries. There are many ways to study the Bible, and there are many excellent study aids available to help us with

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Ramm 1970: 105.

<sup>2</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr. 2004: 213.

specific books of the Bible. But the most important thing is to read the Bible for ourselves first. We should first discover what the Bible truly says, what it means, and how we are to apply it to our life. The best way to do this is through the process called inductive study.

The main requirement in learning to study the Bible inductively is the willingness to slow down and accurately observe what the Scripture is saying. Inductive Bible study uses the Bible itself as the primary source of information about the Bible. Commentaries, books, tapes, and other information about the Bible are consulted only after we have made our own thorough examination of the Scripture. Inductive Bible study consists of three component parts: observation, interpretation, and application.

**Observation** asks, “What does the passage say?” Observation is simply the gathering of all the facts of who, what, where, when, and how. Careful examination of the facts is the foundation upon which we build accurate interpretation and proper application of God’s word. Careful examination of anything requires time and practice. The more time spent looking at the text itself, the more fruitful our study will be. On the other hand, hasty and poor observation leads to misunderstanding and causes serious problems. As we carefully observe Scripture, the meaning will become apparent. However, if we rush into interpretation without laying the vital foundation of accurate observation, our understanding will be colored by our presuppositions—what we think, what we feel, or what other people have said, rather than what God’s Word says. We can say that good observation is the beginning of good interpretation.

**Interpretation** asks, “What does the passage mean?” Interpretation flows out of observation. Interpretation is not necessarily a separate step from observation, for often, as we carefully observe the text, at that very moment we begin to see what it means. However, interpretation can also involve separate steps that go beyond merely observing the immediate text. Interpretation is both a science and an art. It is a science because it provides a logical, orderly classification of the laws of interpretation. Interpretation is also an art because it is an acquired skill demanding both imagination and an ability to apply the “laws” to selected passages or books.<sup>3</sup> When we consider interpretation as both a science and an art, we can interpret the Bible accurately. Biblical interpretation entails “spirals” One spiral is from the interpreter to the text. As the interpreter encounters the text, the text affects the interpreter, thus enhancing his ability to interpret. This happens repeatedly as the interpreter continues to encounter the text and is enlightened until he or she comes to a correct understanding.<sup>4</sup> (See appendix I, figure 1) Another spiral is from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance for the church today.<sup>5</sup>

**Application** asks, “How does the meaning of this passage apply to me?” Application is the goal of Bible study. Application is not just a third step in the inductive process; it takes place anytime we are confronted with truth and decide to respond in obedience. It leads to a transformed life and a deep and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Bible study without application produces hypocrites. On the other hand, when we apply God’s word properly, we can be nourished and

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<sup>3</sup> Grand Osborne 1991:5.

<sup>4</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard 2004:166.

<sup>5</sup> Grand Osborne 1991:6.

grow and be ready to serve. The Scriptures were given “for rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:16-17).

- **Qualifications of an Interpreter**

Although everyone can read the Bible for themselves, not everyone is qualified to interpret what it means. An interpreter must have the Spirit of God who inspired the Bible. Marcus Dods says, “In order to appreciate and use the Bible, the reader of it must himself have the same Spirit which enabled its writers to understand their revelation of God and to record it. The Bible is a record, but it is not a dead record of dead persons and events; it is a record inspired by the living Spirit who uses it to speak to men now... It is the medium through which the living God now makes himself known.”<sup>6</sup> Several things characterize those who have the Spirit of God.

**A. The person is born again.** Natural, fallen people have a carnal mind which is hostile toward God. So, they cannot possibly interpret Scripture correctly. Only those who are born again by the work of the Holy Spirit can interpret the Bible correctly.

- John 3:3: “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’” Unless a person be born again spiritually, he or she cannot see—can neither understand the nature nor share the blessedness—of the kingdom of God.
- 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”

**B. The person has a passion to know God’s word.** The Bible is a book of hidden treasures (Mt 13:44). However, these treasures are not reserved for special people with special knowledge. Anyone can find these treasures if they have a passion to know the truth, like the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26-38) and the noble Bereans (Ac 17:11). We can say the Bible is an “open secret.” Jesus told those who asked the meaning of his parables, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you” (Mk 4:11a).

- Matthew 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”
- Acts 17:11: “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

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<sup>6</sup> Marcus Dods, *The Nature and Origin of the Bible*, p. 102; Bernard Ramm 1970:12-13.

**C. The person has a deep reverence for God.** When we study the Bible, we need deep reverence for God which is characterized by meekness, humility, and patience. God's thoughts and God's ways are higher than our thoughts and ways, as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa 55:8-9). We must constantly empty ourselves to be open to God's thoughts and ways. Though we cannot understand the deep meaning of God's words immediately, we should not find fault with God or his word. Rather, we should patiently and prayerfully try to understand until God helps us to do so.

**D. Spiritual purity.** Sanctified, Spirit-filled living is vital for anyone who wants to interpret the Scriptures. The greatest hindrance to proper interpretation is sin in one's heart. Sin's aim is to put out the Spirit's fire. Sin that is not confessed and repented of undermines the dynamic of the Holy Spirit and will hauntingly follow us and rob us of our power. Sin should grieve us because it grieves the Spirit of God who lives within us. On the other hand, purity should motivate our every decision because we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Co 6:19).<sup>7</sup> And we also should grow in the image of Christ. The more I grow in Christ, the more my understanding of the Bible grows.

- **General Principles of Interpretation**

Now that we know who is qualified to interpret the Scriptures, we can consider the general principles that interpreters should follow.

***Principle 1: Depend on the Holy Spirit: Pray for the Spirit's illumination:***

A. The Bible is both a human book, and a spiritual book. As a human book, it must be studied intelligently like any other form of human communication. This requires us to apply the natural principles for gaining knowledge. As a spiritual book, the Bible is God's revelation, written under divine inspiration. As such, it must be understood with the Holy Spirit's illumination.

- John 16:13a: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will **guide you into all the truth.**"
- Through the Bible, God speaks directly to us and to our specific life situation. The Spirit's work in our hearts is subjective and unique to individual believers. However, that subjective aspect can never replace the objective meaning of Scripture. We must recognize that as the Holy Spirit illuminates people, he does not contradict Scripture. So, no one should insist on a private understanding of Scripture which is in conflict with the generally understood objective meaning. We need to be patient. The Holy Spirit guides and illumines individual believers step by step until they come to a full understanding of the truth which is universally applicable to all people. We should trust God who will make everything clear (Php 3:15).

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<sup>7</sup> Greg Heisler 2007:83.

- It is helpful to understand the difference between inspiration and illumination. Oftentimes, we use these words interchangeably, and that is acceptable. However, when we want to understand the process of Bible interpretation better, we should distinguish between them. The Bible is the word of God which is fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and this process of inspiration has been completed (2Ti 3:16; 2Pe 2:21). On the other hand, there is a continuing work of the Holy Spirit to illumine individual believers step by step until he guides them into all the truth. “Inspiration” in a certain sense belongs only to the original authors of the Bible. When we say that we are inspired by the words of God it is more properly understood as “illumination.” We desperately need this illumination because we are sinful, fallen, and fallible human beings.

B. We can discover God’s wisdom only by the Holy Spirit, not by human wisdom.

- The Holy Spirit is the only one who can prove God’s Word is true and He does this as He works in the heart and mind of the Christian whom He indwells.<sup>8</sup>
- 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”
- Horace Bushnell said, “The worldly spirit shuts out the Bible; the Spirit of God makes it a fire, flaming out all-meaning and glorious truths.”<sup>9</sup>

C. Since truth must be revealed by the Spirit of God, it follows that prayer must be an integral part of Bible study. Prayer is crucial to Bible study. To interpret the Bible well, we need to pray for understanding. Charles H. Spurgeon said that when he faced those things which he could not understand, it seemed to him as though God had set a chair there for him to kneel down and worship.”<sup>10</sup> Prayer should not be done only in the beginning and at the end, but throughout the entire process.

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” (Psalms 119:18)

### ***Principle 2: Interpret the Bible literally, not allegorically or mystically:***

Though inspired of God, the Bible was written in human language and within human cultures. The Bible is literature. The subject of literature is human experience—not abstract ideas or propositions, but experience. The knowledge or truth that literature gives us is an awareness of reality or truth as it is actually experienced.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the words should first be understood in their historical context, having the intended meaning in the usage of that day. The Bible should not be primarily understood mystically. We should, first of all, take the Word of God at face

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<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, *Why Believe the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980). P. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Traina 1980:13.

<sup>10</sup> Irving Jensen 1980:74.

<sup>11</sup> Leland Ryken 1984:17.

value, in its natural, normal sense. In general, the most accurate meaning of a text is the most obvious one. The Bible simply means what it says.

*A. Understand in light of literary genre.* The Bible is composed of various kinds of literature: narrative, history, poetry, parables, prophecy, wisdom, and so on. Each kind of literature should be interpreted according to the rules for that genre. For example, Jesus' parables usually have just one clear and main point. If we try to interpret various details mystically, we can lose sight of the main point. So, we should keep in mind the principle that parables generally have one main point. (For a comprehensive treatment of literary genre see the appendix II.)

*B. Avoid allegorical interpretation without context.* Parables, types, allegories, symbols, figures of speech, myths and fables presume that there is a spiritual meaning to a text. But we should not try to understand this meaning without first understanding the context of a passage. The parable of the sower is understood within the context of literal "agricultural" language. The symbolism of a lion is based upon what is asserted about lions in literal speech. Incense as a symbol of prayer is understood within the context of the use of incense in daily life and expressed in the literal language of daily conversation. Even the allegorical way Paul speaks of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the book of Galatians is based upon the historical and factual statements about these people which in turn reflects the literal stratum of language.<sup>12</sup>

*C. Literal interpretation is not the same as letterism which exalts the very letters of Scripture.* To interpret Scripture literally is not to practice "letterism" nor to neglect the nuances of language. Rather, it is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, customary, tradition range of designation which includes "facit" understanding.<sup>13</sup> Or stated differently, the literal should be plain-literal and figurative-literal. For example, "The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him" (Ps 33:18) would be a figurative-literal sentence. It should be interpreted to mean God's omniscience. However, according to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence was an actual eye of God.<sup>14</sup>

*D. Historical errors of allegorical interpretation.* As we study the history of Bible interpretation, we find some interpreters were erroneous in their basic principles. For example, those in the School of Alexandria misused the principle of allegorical interpretation. Their motive was to show the superiority of the Scriptures over Greek philosophy. But they tried to do this with a Greek mindset. They thought that the Bible speaks to us only in a language of symbols. And its interpretation requires a gift of divine grace. In their zeal, they often gave allegorical interpretations which were unrelated to the plain meaning of the text. They seemed to have a Scriptural basis for doing so.

Their representative scholar, Origen, interpreted Proverbs 22:20-21 in light of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 to advocate a three-fold analysis of human personality. Proverbs 22:20-21 says, "Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you to be honest and to speak the truth, so that you bring back truthful reports to those you serve?" 1

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Ramm 1970:124.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

Thessalonians 5:23 says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then he applied this to the interpretation of Scripture to justify a “bodily” or literal sense, moral sense, and “spiritual” or allegorical-mystical sense to every Bible passage. On this basis, they could interpret Bible verses to mean just about anything. For example, they interpreted the tables of the Law to be symbols of the universe, and Sarah and Hagar as symbols of wisdom and pagan philosophy, respectively.

In this way, the Alexandrines deprived the whole biblical history of its reality. Adam was not really Adam; paradise was not really paradise; the serpent was not a real serpent. Since there are no real events—since Adam was not really disobedient—how did death enter the world, and what meaning does our salvation have? The apostle Paul surely believed in the reality of the events he describes in Romans 5:18f and 2 Corinthians 11:3. The School of Antioch opposed the School of Alexandria, and insisted on the historical reality of the biblical revelation. This School had a great influence on the reformed scholars. This historical example demonstrates the importance of interpreting the Bible literally, not allegorically.

### ***Principle 3: Interpret the Bible in its Context:***

A. The meaning of a passage must be viewed within the setting of the book. Since we normally communicate by a series of related statements, each sentence must be understood in light of the other ideas expressed in the context—in terms of the writer’s train of thought.<sup>15</sup> When we understand the structure and message of the book as a whole, the meaning of the individual parts becomes more clear. The most common reason people misunderstand, misinterpret, and, therefore, misuse Scripture is because they fail to study a passage in the context of its entire surroundings.<sup>16</sup> The surrounding verses (the paragraphs before and after, the chapter before and after, the whole book) help us understand it. The smaller the passage being studied, the greater the chance of error. Short texts usually contain very little information about the general theme of the larger passage.

For example, Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” If someone were to interpret this verse apart from its context in Roman 8 and the entire letter, he or she might incorrectly use it to convince a parent whose child has just died that the death was a good thing. However, death is not good, but God will accomplish his salvific purpose (which are good) for his people, even though they suffer greatly. Larger passages provide more facts about the meaning and thus give the interpreter a clearer perspective for understanding each statement within it. To interpret a passage correctly we must examine different circles of context: 1. Immediate context. 2. Entire book context. 3. Context of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> (See appendix I, figure 2).

<sup>15</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr. 2004: 215.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Finzel 2003:91.

<sup>17</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr. 2004: 218-219.

*B.* Words and sentences occur in the context of a conversation, in the context of language, and in the context of a culture. For example, the word “salvation” has a different meaning in the context of each passage. It can be salvation from enemies (2Sa 3:18; Ps 44:7), trouble (Jer 30:7), disease (Isa 38:20), temptation and the evil one (Mt 6:13), or sin and death (Lk 1:77; Heb 5:7). We need to discover the exact meaning from the context.

When we try to understand what the author is saying and why he is saying it, we are faced with a couple of barriers: a language barrier and a cultural barrier. The goal of interpretation is to understand what the original author meant. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, and a few sections were written in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek. However, most of us don’t read Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. We don’t need to master these languages in order to study the Bible deeply. The Bible has been translated by many scholars in various ways. Some translators emphasize faithfulness to the original text. Others emphasize accuracy in contemporary language. A comprehensive study of several versions will give us a thorough understanding of the original text. For example, KJV, ESV, NASB and others strive to be faithful to the original text. The NIV, on the other hand, gives more weight to making a translation that is easily readable in modern language. Other versions, such as the New Living Translation, the Message and the Amplified Bible include more descriptive words to make the meaning of the original more fully understandable. Some software, such as Logos and Lumina, provide tools that allow someone who does not know the original languages to study the original words and how they are translated into English. If one is committed to digging out the meaning of the original text, they can do so by means of these tools without having to study Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

*C.* A cultural barrier is huge. Bernard Ramm says, “People of the same culture, same age, same geographical location understand each other with facility... But when the interpreter is separated culturally, historically, and geographically from the writer...the task of interpretation is no longer facile. The greater the cultural, historical, and geographical divergences are, the more difficult is the task of interpretation... The most obvious divergence is that of language...There is also the culture-gap between our times and Biblical times.”<sup>18</sup>

In the first century AD, Paul spoke of women needing to wear head coverings to church. They weren’t to come for worship without it. If a woman were to read that passage today, she might think, “I need to wear hats for worship.” Ramm goes on to say, “Agricultural methods are different. Legal systems are different. Military systems are different...And then there’s geography. The understanding of most passages of Scripture is dependent on some understanding of history. If geography is the scenery of Scripture, history is the plot of Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> We need to become thoughtful students of linguistic and cultural contexts in the Bible. Fortunately, as we have stated above, there are many tools available to help us interpret the Bible.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Ramm 1970:4-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



***Principle 4: Let Scripture interpret Scripture: Correlation.***

This is the first tenet of the Reformation, known in Latin as *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, “Sacred Scripture is its own interpreter.” It means that the Bible does not contradict itself; it is internally consistent in its teaching. The Bible is a unity of revelation, internally evidencing a supernatural inspiration of its writing and a supernatural superintendence in the preservation and canonization of its integral parts. The Bible has one divine author, the Holy Spirit, and His message is coherent and harmonious.<sup>20</sup> When we are deriving the meaning of a passage we cannot just look at one passage or an isolated verse. We need to understand the passage across the entire story of Scripture, comparing with other relevant passages to ensure that we are understanding the text correctly. No verse in the Bible is isolated. No truth stands by itself. Just as the diamond in a ring has a setting, so every verse of Scripture has a broader context. By comparing one Scripture with other Scriptures, and the verse with other verses, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means.

For example, in John 15:7 Jesus says, “...ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Does this mean that we can ask anything at all from God and He will give it to us? The answer is no! The Bible has much more to teach about prayer than just one statement. 1 John 5:14 says, “...if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” James 4:3 says, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

For this, it is helpful to use cross-references found in the margins of many Bibles to compare the verses we are studying with related passages found elsewhere in the Bible. Also, we need to use a concordance to look up similar teachings or topics mentioned in other places in Scripture.

Correlating Scripture is invaluable. When we carefully compare one Scripture with others, we are accurately handling the Word of God. God’s Word correlated with God’s Word keeps us on the straight and narrow path of correct thinking and righteous living.<sup>21</sup>

***Principle 5: Interpret the Bible through Christ:***

The Bible is the book of salvation (2Ti 3:15). Jesus Christ is the central figure of the Bible. The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The unity of the Bible is Christological. The Old Testament tells us what Christ is and the New Testament who he is; thus we have a complete picture of Christ in the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The bond between the Old Testament and the New Testament is prophecy (predictive and typological) understood in terms of (1) progressive revelation, and (2) the literal and historical exegesis of Messianic passages.<sup>23</sup> For example, God gave many promises to Abraham, such as “I will make you into a great

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<sup>20</sup> Hans Finzel 203:56.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Swindoll 2016: 143,151.

<sup>22</sup> Grand Osborne 1991:280.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Ramm 1970:50.

nation...I will make your name great," and, "...to your offspring I will give this land..." (Gen 12:2-3,7). Yet, as Paul explains in Galatians, these promises all converge into one: "...though your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed..." (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Paul says that "offspring" it is not plural but singular, and refers to one person, who is Christ (Gal 3:16). In giving his promise to Abraham, God looked forward to Christ. It was the promise of the gospel of grace to all nations.

The Old Testament contains the old covenant and foretells the coming of Christ through promises, prophecies and types. The New Testament reveals a new covenant and shows how Christ fulfilled all the promises, prophecies and types of the Old Testament. Thus, Christ made the old covenant obsolete (Heb 8:13). So, we don't need to observe many of its elements, such as dietary laws, keeping the festivals, sacrificing animals, perpetuating the Aaronic priesthood, and temple worship. The book of Hebrews tells us how the Old and New Testaments are related to each other and how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament by becoming the perfect sacrifice, our everlasting high priest, and the new and living way opened to God.

So, in interpreting the Bible we must keep our eyes focused on its main figure: Jesus Christ. "Christ is the point in the circle from which the whole circle is drawn."<sup>24</sup> Otherwise, we risk missing the point. Jesus said to the Pharisees: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jn 5:39-40). Jesus said to his disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Lk 24:44). Hebrews 1:1-2a is a sweeping view of God's redemptive history. It teaches us that in the past, God spoke to mankind through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son Jesus Christ, who is the final and complete revelation of God to us.

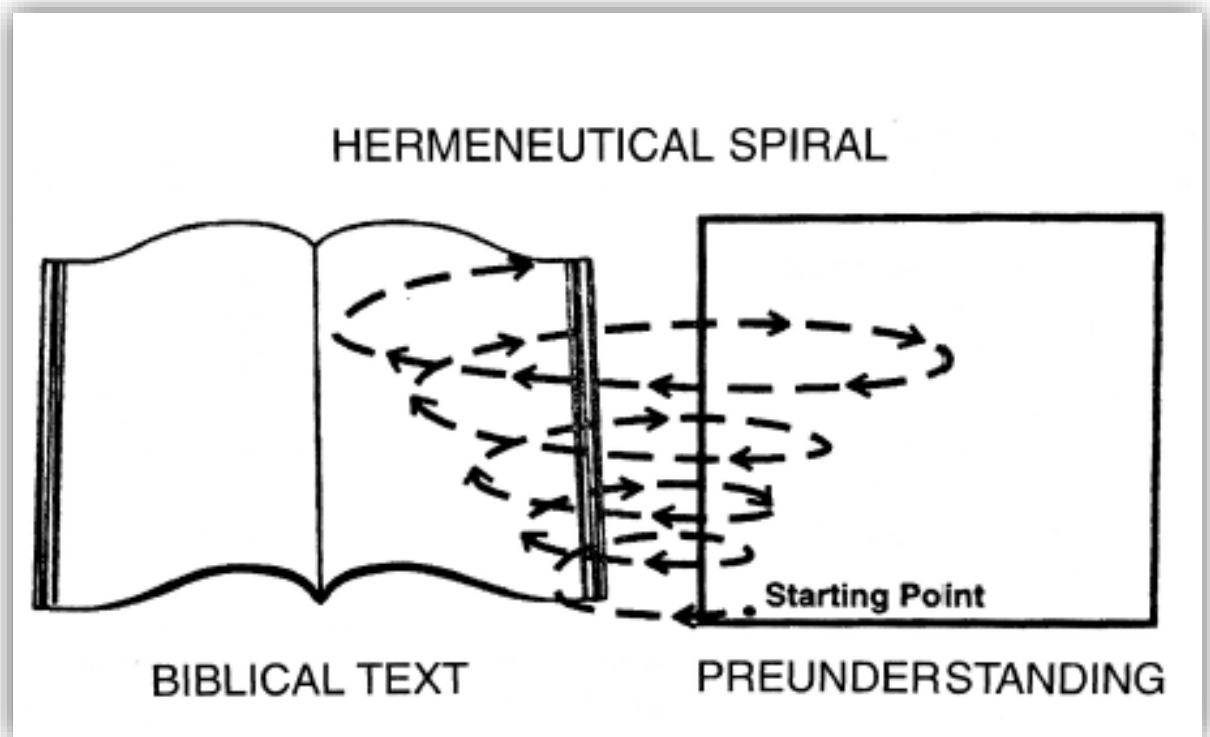
But there are dangers of the Christocentric interpretation. We must not allegorize or spiritualize every part of the Bible to fit preconceived "types of Christ."<sup>25</sup>

## APPENDIX I

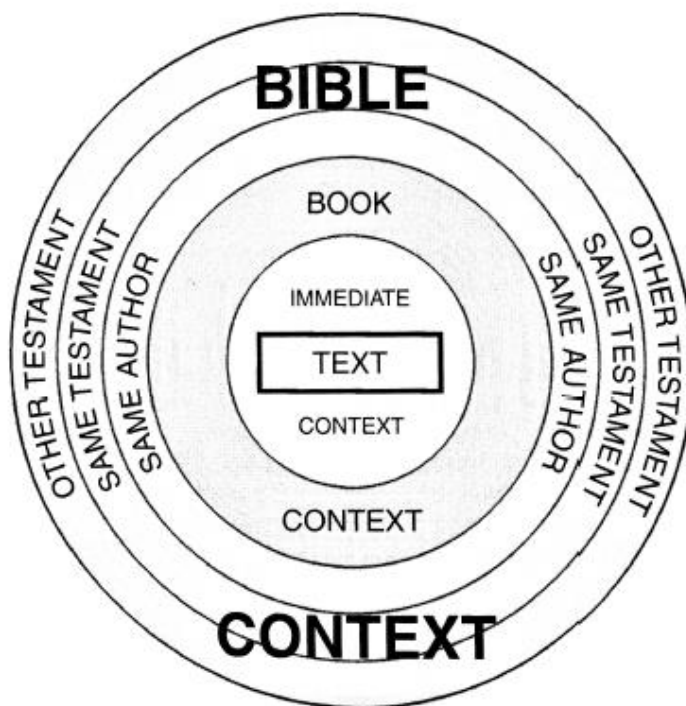
- Figure 1: HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL  
(Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr. 2004:166.)

<sup>24</sup> Robert Grant and David Tracy 1984:94; quoted by K. Fullerton, "Luther's Doctrine and Criticism of Scripture" (1906),p.8.

<sup>25</sup> Osborne, p. 280.



- Figure 2: CIRCLES OF CONTEXT  
(Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr. 2004: 219)



### Guidelines of interpretation for five categories of biblical literature

One of the beauties of the Bible is its diversity of literature. There are many different types of literature, written by 40 different kinds of people in vastly different settings and for different reasons. To interpret each kind of literature we need to take a distinctive approach.

“The fact that biblical literature is an anthology results in a remarkable variety of forms and styles. Literary forms represented in the Bible include the story of origins, heroic narrative, epic, parody, tragedy, lyric, epithalamion (wedding poem), encomium (high praise), wisdom literature, proverb, parable, pastoral, satire, prophecy, Gospel, epistle, oratory and apocalypse.”<sup>26</sup> God has chosen to use many different and creative ways to communicate His message to us, Scholars typically divide the different types of biblical literature into five major categories: narrative, epistle, wisdom literature, poetry, and prophecy.

*Narrative:*

Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 and Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ester, Daniel, Jonah, Haggai

New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts

More than half the Bible is narrative. Over 40 percent of the Old Testament and 65 percent of the New Testament is stories. What is narrative? Narrative is material that relate the history of an era in a narrative manner—telling how God worked in a certain time and allowing us to hear the characters of history speak. For example, the Gospels present the historical account of the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts deals with the birth of the church.

In their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart summarize what biblical narratives are and what they are not.<sup>27</sup>

1. Old Testament narrative are not just stories about people who lived in Old Testament times. They are first and foremost stories about what God did to and through those people. In contrast to human narratives, the Bible is composed especially of divine narratives... Characters, events, developments, plot, and story climaxes all occur, but behind these, God is the supreme “protagonist” or leading decisive character in all narratives.
2. Old Testament narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings.
3. Old Testament narratives do not always teach directly. They emphasize God’s nature and revelation in special ways.

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<sup>26</sup> Leland Ryken 1974:15.

<sup>27</sup> Fee and Stuart 1981:75-77.

4. Each individual narrative or episode within a narrative does not necessarily have a moral all its own.

Historical narrative is nearly half of the Old Testament. One historical book in the New Testament is Acts. Historical narrative is mostly characterized by accounts of people involved in events at certain places and at certain times. They were real people in real places, and the events were real. A real human author under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit recorded these words for our benefit. They aren't myths, fables, or fairy tales, and they aren't even secular history. Rather, they are God's holy Word, and they reveal God's relationship to these people and events. Following are guidelines:<sup>28</sup>

1. *Focus on observing the people and events.* History is about people or characters and what they do. We discern principles to live by as we observe these events and notice how they relate to God. Is God pleased or displeased? How does He respond to what people say or do? In the Bible, God is the main character.

2. *Pay attention to time.* References to time are often keys to understanding a narrative. For example, the books of Kings and Chronicles tie events to the reigns of the kings to establish the historical context. Historical books also refer to the annual sacred or civil calendars in use at the time of the writing. Learning the months of the Jewish calendar and the religious festivals will help you feel more at home in the narratives.

3. *Keep up with location.* Historical narrative often moves from location to location. If you get a mental picture of distances and directions, many of the time references will make more sense, and you'll feel even more a part of the accounts. Reference works that explain geography, topography, and climate can also help you understand stories. Reference works that explain cultural manners and customs from the period can also be a great help in understanding the significance of some things that are foreign to our own culture and time.

4. *Look for what is revealed about God.* Find out what you can about God's character, attributes, and nature. Discover what you can about His ways—how He operates and interacts with people. What does He do and why? What principles of life are revealed in the records of his relationship with people?

#### *Epistle:*

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude

Epistles were written as ordinary correspondence to first-century Christians. They address specific concerns and needs (typically some doctrinal error or practical behavior) requiring immediate attention. They are unique letters in that the Holy Spirit inspired them to be

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<sup>28</sup> Kay Arthur 2010:105.

written. God worked through the apostles to pen letters that would not only guide first-century believers in the faith, but us as well. The Epistles are full of God's design for Christian faith and practice. General guidelines are:

1. Try to distinguish between what is cultural and therefore belongs only to the first century, and what transcends culture and therefore applies to all people everywhere. For example, Paul instructs Timothy to bring him his cloak from Troas (2 Ti 4:13), but common sense tells us that this instruction does not apply to us today. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:10, Paul addresses the issue of food sacrificed to idols. It is unlikely that we will ever be in a situation where we will face this same concern that confronted the believers of the first century.
2. A passage cannot mean now what it never meant to the original audience. This is why the first step of inductive Bible study is observation,
3. Where we share comparable life situations with those of the first century, God's Word to us is the same as it was to the original audience.

#### *Wisdom Literature:*

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

#### *Poetry:*

Psalms, Song of Solomon

The book of Psalms is a handbook of prayer. Psalms seem to express in such a rich way what we're feeling, whether it's joy or sorrow, hope or discouragement, trust or doubt.

Wisdom has been defined as "the discipline of applying truth to one's life in the light of experience." Advice being given is from a wise man. In Hebrew culture, three types of leaders influenced the people's behavior and taught them how to relate to God: prophets, priest, and wise men. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are collections of the sayings of those wise men of Israel.

A proverb is "a brief, popular epigram or maxim." It is a general truth, recognized by all, and concisely like "a rolling stone gathers no moss." Proverbs tend to use figurative language and express things suggestively rather than in detail.

Wisdom literature uses a variety of literary devices other than the proverbs to teach general truths. These devices include:

- **Parallelism:** the use of two statements side by side to present a general truth in different ways. There are two kinds of common parallelism: Antithetical parallelism and Synonymous parallelism. Antithetical parallelism is that the second statement expresses the antithesis or opposite of the first statement. Ex. Proverbs 21:1, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid." Synonymous parallelism is that the second statement repeats the sense of the first

statement in slightly different words. Ex. Proverbs 12:14, “From the fruit of their lips people are filled with good things, and the work of their hands brings them reward.”

- Comparison: the association of like things. Ex. Proverbs 12:9, “Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.”
- Metaphors and similes: using figurative language to compare one object or idea with another. Ex. Proverbs 12:4, “A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.”
- Portraits: extended pictures that represent a type of person. Ex. 31:10-31 is the portrait of a wise and mature woman of God.
- Brief Narrative: a brief description of an event or experience. Ex. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon includes several brief descriptions of his search for the meaning of life.
- Morris and Hassel explain: To interpret wisdom literature, one must understand the cultural situations in which it arose. Probably the two key areas were the royal court and the teacher-pupil relationship. From the Old Testament it is clear that wise men, as well as astrologers and soothsayers, flourished in the courts of Egypt and Babylon.<sup>29</sup>

### *Prophecy and Revelation:*

Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

A prophet is “one who speaks directly for God.” Throughout the Old Testament there were prophets who spoke for God. Generally, we know more about what these prophets did than what they said, and what they said was placed very specifically in the context of their times. But in the prophetic books, our attention is turned away from the messenger and onto the message. When studying prophetic books, we need to understand why they spoke, when they spoke, and what they spoke.

Revelation: Because of the unusual character and complexity of the Book of Revelation, there have been four main ways of interpreting it. One’s understanding of the events of the book and when they come to pass depends on which school of interpretation one follows.<sup>30</sup>

1. *Preterist*. This is from the Latin word meaning “past.” This view denies the future predictive quality of most of Revelation holding that the events have already been fulfilled in early church history. Preterists see Revelation 5-11 as the church’s victory over Judaism, chapters 12-19 as its victory over pagan Rome, and 20-22 as its glory because of those victories.

<sup>29</sup> Morris A. Inch and C. Hassel Bullock, *The Literature and Meaning of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Finzel 2003:158-159.



2. *Historical*. This view holds that the prophecies of Revelation have been in the process of being fulfilled throughout the Christian era. According to this view, the various symbols in the book point to the rise of the papacy, the corruption of the church, and various church wars throughout history.

3. *Allegorical*. This interpretation grew up in the Alexandrian school of theology in the third and fourth centuries. It views Revelation as an unfolding picture of great principles in constant conflict. It spiritualizes and allegorizes the text, and does not link the events of Revelation with specific historical events.

4. *Futurist or plain interpretation*. This is the view adopted by most conservative and premillennial scholars who believe chapters 4-22 of Revelation deal with events yet to come. Futurists believe that chapters 4-18 describe the last seven years preceding the second coming of Christ, chapter 19 the second coming, chapter 20 the Millennium, and chapters 21-22 the eternal state.

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