

## **WHOSE VIEW IS VALID**

[Adapted from Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1991), 59-75].

In geometry an axiom is a self-evident truth, "a statement accepted as true for the sake of argument." In logic an axiom is a statement that does not need proof to substantiate its validity. An example of such an axiom is that things, which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. If A equals C and if B equals C, then it follows that A equals B. Another example of an axiom is that the whole is greater than any of its parts.

A corollary is a logical inference from an axiom. Given the truth of an axiom, certain logical statements may be inferred from them. In approaching the Bible it is a self-evident truth that the Bible is a book. Like other books it is written in languages spoken by people for the purpose of communicating ideas from the writers to the readers. Another obvious observation about the Bible is that it is a divine book. It is clear that the Bible, though like other books, is unique in that it has a divine origin.

From these two axioms - the Bible is a human book, and the Bible is a divine book - several corollaries can be drawn. I like to think of these corollaries as the basic principles of interpretation or hermeneutics. In other words the rules or principles for interpreting the Bible are not arbitrary. They are not imposed like laws over the Bible, for if that were so then some might conceive of the principles as having more authority than the Bible itself. These hermeneutical principles, these corollaries drawn from axioms, are not the result of some unusual genius of a select few individuals. The principles of interpretation are not invented or learned but are part of the very nature of man. Man, as a communicator, has always sought to address other human beings in ways that would enable them to comprehend what the speaker was saying. When a person is addressed, he is automatically engaged in interpretation when he seeks to comprehend what is being communicated to him. This is a part of man's nature.

In other words the principles for interpreting the Bible are simply descriptions of the way people think and read when they seek to understand the meaning of any writing. They are not inventions, they are discoveries. Rather than being created, they are observed. If they were arbitrarily devised by man, then each person could make up his own rules. But since these principles are part of the way man normally communicates, they are to be considered universal. They are not special rules applicable only to Bible study.

Knowing the rules is basic to playing a good game. For a player to ignore the rules or to devise his own would make for havoc. It would then be impossible for the game to be played in any meaningful fashion. When we speak of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) as a science and an art, we mean that as a science, there are rules to be employed, and as an art, those rules are to be observed properly.

## ***Axiom One: The Bible Is a Human Book***

Though the Bible is a supernatural work of God, as will be discussed in Axiom Two, the Bible is still a book. As with any other book, the Bible was written in languages that were intended to communicate concepts to its readers. The signs or symbols on the pages of the Bible were put there by writers for the purpose of communicating something to someone else. This is the purpose of a written communication: to help readers understand something, that is, to convey an idea, to communicate.

Communication, whether spoken or written, always involves three elements: (a) the speaker or writer, (b) the message, given in intelligible audible sounds or intelligible written symbols we call words, and (c) the hearers or readers. The purpose of the speaker or writer is to convey to the hearers or readers an idea he has in mind. He does this by means of linguistic symbols common to both the communicator and the ones receiving the communication. The desired result is that the hearers or readers will understand in their minds the ideas conveyed from the minds of the speaker or writer. A person can know the mind of a speaker or author only by what he says or writes. As Paul wrote, believers can know God's plans only because He has revealed them to man by His Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9-10). Since the Bible is written in human languages, obviously its purpose is to convey truths from God, the ultimate Author, to human beings.

From this axiom - the Bible is a human book given as a written communication in human language to be understood by people - stem several corollaries:

1. ***Each biblical writing - that is, each word, sentence, and book - was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language.***

This suggests that the Bible was not written in an unintelligible code to be deciphered by some magical formula. Since it was written in the languages of the people (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), it did not have to be decoded, deciphered, or translated. Those who read the Bible did not need to read into, beyond, or between words for some "deeper" or other-than-normal meaning. God communicated truths about Himself in the languages of the people who first read the Scriptures - languages they knew.

The words were immediately understandable. The readers knew immediately the concepts being conveyed by the sentences in the Bible. They understood them in the way they would normally understand other sentences written in their languages. They did not need to call on a wizard, a sorcerer, or a person with unusual spiritual insight or mystic intuition to convey its meaning. Of course that language included idioms, unusual expressions unique to that language, and figures of speech.

The basic presupposition of interpretation is that God is a *God of sense, not of nonsense*. By this, I mean that whatever God reveals through His ancient spokesmen must have made sense both to them and to their hearers. The very fact that we have a Bible at all, from the human standpoint is an indication that it made real sense to the people. It spoke to them where they were.

This corollary suggests that we should not go to the Bible with preconceived notions or ideas, but instead should let the Bible speak for itself. For example in the sentence, "The man rode the horse," the horse should be understood as referring to a four-legged domesticated animal, not "a spirit of vengeance." In Mark 5:1-20 the demons do not mean false doctrine nor do the swine represent the unconscious mind. Such an approach ignores this basic corollary since normal grammatical meanings are not considered. Henrichsen notes,

If you were to say to an audience, "I crossed the ocean from the United States to Europe," you wouldn't want them to interpret your statement to mean that you crossed life's difficult waters into the haven of a new experience. Likewise, no journalist would like to write of the famine of a country such as India and have his words interpreted to mean that the people of India were experiencing a great intellectual hunger.<sup>1</sup>

Ramm points out that finding the literal sense of a writing is the normal approach to all literature.

Whenever we read a book, an essay, or a poem we presume the literal sense in the document until the nature of the literature may force us to another level. This is the only conceivable method of beginning or commencing to understand literature of all kinds.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible itself follows the normal or literal method of interpretation. For example the Old Testament prophesied that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that He would ride on a donkey (Zech. 9:9), that He would be punished for our sins (Isa. 53:4-8). And He did all those things just as literally predicted. In quoting the Old Testament, the New Testament writers treated it as a normal, human instrument of communication. Of course the so-called literal or normal approach to Scripture includes figurative language.

This corollary also suggests that the goal of Bible interpretation is to determine the original meaning of the text. This is called *exegesis*, reading the meaning out of the text, and is the opposite of *eisegesis*, reading a meaning into the text. If one person can make a Bible verse say what he wants it to say, and another person may say it means something else, something he wants it to mean, and if neither meaning is derived from the actual statement of Scripture, then we destroy the ability of the Bible to communicate as a normal piece of literature. Unless we accept the normal or natural sense of Scripture we have no controls in our approach to the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Henrichsen, *A Layman's Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 123.

An issue sometimes discussed by biblical scholars is whether the goal of interpretation is to determine the intended meaning of the author or the intended meaning of the text. In one sense this is a fine distinction that some consider unnecessary. The "intended meaning of the author" or the "intended meaning of what the author wrote" would seem to be the same. However, can we really know what was in the mind of the biblical authors apart from what they have written? We cannot get *behind* a person's writings to know his intentions. All we can do is look at what he actually wrote; it is in this way that we know his intended meanings.

Speaking of "determining the intended meaning of the author" has become popular in some circles because of the influence of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. In his book, *Validity in Interpretation*, he was responding to the view of Hans-Georg Gadamer and others who were teaching that a text can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean. The meaning, according to Gadamer, goes beyond what the author intended. Hirsch objects to this view by stating that meaning is to be seen in what the author intended. Hirsch certainly was correct in rejecting Gadamer's view, but he located the meaning in the author rather than in the text. In interpreting the Bible we seek to understand what the Bible says, not the human author's "intended meaning." We study the biblical text to understand its meaning.

**2. *Each biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical geographical situation for a specific purpose.***

This corollary suggests that each portion of the Bible was originally written to address a certain reader or readers who were living in certain locations and times, and that that writing had a given purpose. This relates again to the point that exegesis is to discover the original meaning of the text. In other words what were the words conveying to their initial readers? Before we can determine their significance or relevance to us today, people who are not the original readers, we must first seek to determine what the words meant to those who originally read them.' God told Noah to build an ark. But does that mean every Christian today should be engaged in ark-building? We must understand the command to Noah as being given in a specific historical, geographical situation. Jesus told His 12 disciples not to enter into any town of the Samaritans (Matt.10:5). Obviously that does not mean that readers today are never to enter a town in Samaria.

Suppose you go to someone's house and you see a note on the door with the words, "Come in and wait." At first you may be tempted to go in, but then you ask yourself, "Was this written to me?" If not, who is the note for, and what problem or situation is being addressed by the note?

**3. *The Bible is affected and influenced by the cultural environment from which each human writer wrote.***

This means that the Bible interpreter needs to give attention to cultural matters. An ignorance of certain cultural customs may lead to faulty interpretations. These cultural areas include, among others, agricultural, architectural, geographical, military, and political aspects of life.

#### **4. *Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.***

Understanding a word or sentence in its context is another *aspect* of normal interpretation, of how we normally and usually approach any written material. A single word or even a sentence may have several meanings depending on the context in which it is used. The word *trunk* may mean a part of a tree, the proboscis of an elephant, a compartment at the rear of a car, a piece of luggage, the thorax of an insect, a part of the human body, or a circuit between telephone line exchanges. Obviously it cannot mean all these things or even several of them at once in a single usage. The reader can determine its meaning based on how it is used in the sentence.

The same is true of the sentence, "He is over the hill." The context may suggest that he is literally on the other side of a small mountain or that he figuratively is "over the hill" in the sense of having lived beyond middle age. Ignore the context and you lose a basic tool for interpretation. Even the words *saved* and *salvation* are used in the Bible to mean different things. The context in each case helps determine its meaning.

In Matthew 24:13, Jesus said, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved." At first glance such a statement may seem to contradict statements elsewhere in Scripture that man is saved by grace, not by works. A look at the context, however, shows that this is not the meaning of this verse. Jesus was speaking of the Tribulation period, as indicated by His reference to "the abomination that causes desolation" in verse 15, and He was speaking of Jews who in that time will be persecuted, for in verse 16 He refers to "those who are in Judea." Verse 13 then seems to be suggesting that those Jewish believers who live through the Tribulation and are not martyred will be delivered ("saved") at the end when Christ returns.

More than 400 years ago, Myles Coverdale wrote of the importance of noting the context, as well as other elements we have already discussed. "It shall greatly helpe ye to understande Scripture, if thou mark not only what is spoken or wrytten, but of whom, and to whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what extent, with what circumstances, considering what goeth before and what followeth."

#### **5. *Each biblical writing took on the nature of a specific literary form.***

Though our usual way of understanding a piece of literature is its ordinary, plain sense, we at the same time recognize differences in the kinds of literature. When we read a historical novel, we do not expect all the details to be accurate historically. But when we read a physics textbook or a Latin grammar, we approach it differently from a novel. The way we read a board report differs from the way we read a cartoon. We do not read a recipe and a will the same way.

Since the Bible contains various kinds of literature, the unique characteristics of each form of literature need to be taken into consideration as we interpret the Bible. The Bible includes narratives, poetry, prophecy, letters, proverbs, drama, law, wisdom literature, apocalyptic visions, parables, and discourses. If we are not aware of these literary forms we may misinterpret statements in those sections.

6. ***Each biblical writing was understood by its initial readers in accord with the basic principles of logic and communication.***

When we approach a piece of literature, whether a drama, autobiography, or newspaper, we follow the normal principles of communication. We usually give a writer the benefit of the doubt and do not look for him to be contradicting himself. If it appears that one statement of his contradicts the other, then we look for some way of explaining the apparent contradiction. Some critics of the Bible give secular writers this benefit of the doubt, but do not do so with the Bible.

For example 1 John 1:8 reads, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Then later in the same book the apostle wrote, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (3:9). The Bible interpreter looks for a way of putting those two verses together, assuming that the writer was following the principle of self-consistency (or noncontradiction). Many evangelicals explain these verses by saying that while no Christian is entirely free from sin (1:8), he does not *continually* sin (3:9) because he is a new creation, born of God. Other evangelicals say verse 9 is referring to the absence of sin in the believer's new nature.

These six corollaries suggest that in approaching the Bible we ask the following questions (which correspond to the six corollaries in order).

1. What did the words convey in the grammar of the original readers?
2. What was being conveyed by those words to the initial readers?
3. How did the cultural setting influence and affect what was written?
4. What is the meaning of the words in their context?
5. In what literary form is the material written and how does that affect what is said?
6. How do the principles of logic and normal communication affect the meaning?

Suppose we read the sentence, "That is some turkey!" How do we know what that sentence means? The word *turkey* can mean (a) a weird person, (b) a bird, (c) three strikes in a row in bowling, or (d) a failure in a theatrical production. To determine the meaning we can apply all six corollaries. First, we may ask, what is the normal, grammatical meaning? In this case the word *turkey* would normally refer to a bird. However, if the sentence is used in a figurative way, then any of the other definitions would apply.

Second, we may ask in what historical, geographical situation was the sentence about the turkey written? who spoke the words and to whom? If this exclamation were spoken in a drama class, it is possible that the fourth meaning (a failure in a theatrical production) is intended. If it were mentioned in a sportscast, it might be the third definition or it could possibly be the first. If it were spoken by someone in a dining room, it might be number two or possibly one of the others. These various possibilities suggest that the other corollaries also need to be applied.

So the next question may then be asked: In what cultural setting were the words spoken? If the sentence were in a book written in 1920, then the first definition (a weird person) is probably not the meaning since *turkey* was not used in that way at that time.

Fourth, what is the context in which the sentence is used? This is probably the best clue to the meaning as the writer used the sentence about the turkey.

Fifth, what is the literary form in which it is used? If the sentence occurs in a book on how to produce drama, it may well refer to the fourth meaning. Or if it occurs in a rule book for bowling, it is most likely the third definition (three strikes in a row).

The sixth corollary on logic and communication does not help much in this case. Any four of the meanings might be intended.

### ***Axiom Two: The Bible Is a Divine Book***

As a means of communication, the Bible, as already seen, is a book like other books. Individuals were involved in recording the words. Since these human instruments used human language in writing the books of the Bible, the first axiom suggests we pay attention to the common rules of grammar and syntax. (Grammar is the study of words and their functions in sentences, and syntax refers to the way sentences are put together.)

Yet the Bible is like no other book. It is unique for it has come to us from God Himself. This is evident from its own claims to inspiration. Paul wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). Though human writers were used by God to record the Scriptures, using their own styles of diction and expressing their own personalities, their words were the "out-breathing" of God. Inspiration then is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit whereby He guided and superintended the writers of Scripture so that what they wrote is the Word of God. This "breathing" into the writings, or superintending over the writings, was an act both verbal and plenary. It was verbal in that the Holy Spirit guided in the choice of the words, which cannot be separated from thoughts. The Bible's inspiration was also plenary in that it extended to every portion of the Bible. As a result it is infallible in truth and final in authority. The Greek word for "inspired" (2 Tim. 3:16, NASB) is *theopneustos*, literally "God-breathed" (as the NIV translates it). Because of its divine origin and nature, the Bible in its original writings was without error.

Second Peter 1:21 states the method the Holy Spirit used in the act of inspiration: "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The writers recorded their God-given words as they were carried along (*pheromenoi*) by the Holy Spirit. They were moved by the Holy Spirit in their writings, much as a sailboat is borne along by the wind. In inspiration, the Holy Spirit caused the writers to record God's revelation. They put in writing the truths God was unveiling about Himself and others. As I have written elsewhere:

The Bible is revelation (not only a record of revelation), and inspiration is the act whereby God put the revealed truths into infallible written form. Revelation is the

communication of truth which would not otherwise be known, whereas inspiration is the process whereby this information is presented accurately in written language. Revelation is the Spirit's disclosure of divine truth, whereas inspiration is the Spirit's superintending process of recording His revelation.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously then the word *inspiration* when used of the Bible refers to something other than the way the word is often used today. Music, art, and poetry are often referred to as being inspired. By this we simply mean they were composed as unique works that have an emotional effect on us. When we speak of inspiration of the Bible, we do not mean that the *writers* were inspired but that the *words* themselves were inspired, that is, they were God-breathed. In some sense God infused His life into the words of the Bible so that they are actually His. This can be said of no other book in the world! Many times we read in the Old Testament that the prophets introduced their messages with the words, "Hear the word of the Lord" or "Thus says the Lord." Scores of times their words are referred to as the Word of God. There can be no question that the Old Testament writers sensed they were speaking and recording the very words of God.

The New Testament frequently affirms the divine nature of the Old Testament. For instance Matthew wrote that the virgin birth of Jesus "took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22). Matthew affirmed that the words in Isaiah 7:14 were not merely Isaiah's words; they were what the Lord said, and Isaiah was the instrument through whom the Lord spoke. Matthew used similar terminology in Matthew 2:15: "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet," referring this time to the Lord speaking through Hosea. Matthew 15:4 reads, "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" In these two quotations from Exodus 20:12 and 21:17, it is noteworthy that Matthew did not say "Moses wrote," but rather "God said." Moses' words were God's words. In Matthew 4:14 the evangelist again referred to Isaiah as the instrument through whom God spoke: "to fulfill what was said through the Prophet Isaiah."

In responding to a question by the Pharisees, Jesus referred to David "speaking by the Spirit" (22:43). "Through the Prophet Daniel" are words by which Jesus referred to Daniel's mention of "the abomination that causes desolation" in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 (Matt. 24:15). Jeremiah's prophecy about Jesus being betrayed by 30 silver coins is introduced in Matthew 27:9 by the words, "What was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled." Jesus' recognition of the authority of the Old Testament is also indicated by His words, "It is written." He used these words five times in the Book of Matthew alone: 4:4, 7, 10; 21:13; 26:31. In these verses Jesus quoted from the Books of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Zechariah.

Our Lord recognized the divine nature of the Old Testament by quoting it with authority. For example in Matthew 22:37 He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, and in Matthew 22:39 He quoted Leviticus 19:18. In Matthew 23:39 He quoted Psalm 118:26; in Matthew 11:10 He quoted Malachi 3:1; in Matthew 18:16 He quoted Deuteronomy

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<sup>3</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *The Holy Spirit in Your Teaching*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1984), 49.



19:15. Several times in the Book of Matthew Jesus pointed to the divine authority of the Old Testament by introducing an Old Testament quotation by asking, "Haven't you read?" He did this as recorded in Matthew 19:4 (quoting Gen. 1:27), Matthew 21:16 (quoting Ps. 8:2), Matthew 21:42 (quoting Ps. 118:22-23), Matthew 22:31-32 (quoting Ex. 3:6 and Deut. 6:5).

From these observations in only the Book of Matthew, it is clear that Jesus recognized the divine nature of the Old Testament. The words He quoted were accepted by Him as words from God Himself. Other New Testament writers also acknowledged the divine origin of the Old Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul quoted from Deuteronomy 25:4 and introduced the quotation with the words, "For the Scripture says." Interestingly in the same verse he also quoted from Luke 10:7, thus placing both quotations on the same level as Scripture, that is, as material written and accepted as from God.

Peter acknowledged the divine nature of Paul's writings by referring to his letters as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16). No wonder the Thessalonians acknowledged that what they heard from Paul was indeed not the word of men but the Word of God (1 Thes. 2:13). The apostles themselves recognized their own writings as being God's Word with His authority. For example Paul wrote, "what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Cor. 14:37). The scores of times the New Testament writers referred to the Old Testament point to their acceptance of it as Scripture, as the Word of God, given by the Holy Spirit. It is thus clear that the Bible is from God. The affirmation, "The Bible is a divine book," is clearly an axiom, a self-evident truth. From this axiom stem four corollaries, which Bible interpreters should recognize as they approach the Scriptures.

### ***1. The Bible, being a divine book, is inerrant.***

The logical inference from the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the Scriptures is that they are inerrant, that is, without error in their original writings. (Inerrancy is not claimed for copies of the originals, for the copies include a few copyists' mistakes in the process of transmission.) There should be no problem in understanding that the manuscripts were inerrant, when inspiration is understood as the Holy Spirit's work of guarding and guiding the writers to write what He wanted recorded, word for word. The Holy Spirit's work of superintending guaranteed that what they wrote was protected from error. "If the Bible's original manuscripts contained even a few mistakes, how can we say that any of it is reliable? Since God is true (1 Thes. 1:9; 1 John 5:20) and cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), He can and did preserve His Word from error." As we come to the Bible to interpret it, we therefore accept it as a supernatural book that contained no errors in its original form.

### ***2. The Bible, being a divine book, is authoritative.***

The authority of the Bible for what we believe and how we are to live stems from the fact that it is inerrant. Inerrancy in turn stems from the truth of the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Since the Bible comes from God, it has an intrinsic authority. Jesus' frequent

quotations of the Old Testament, in which He recognized its supernatural origin, also indicate His acceptance of its authority. What He accepted as authoritative should certainly be authoritative for us. Because the Bible is our authority, and that authority is binding on us, we are challenged to be as accurate as possible in our interpretation of what the Bible says. As the Word of God, the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative. This behooves us to be reverent and diligent in our approach to understanding the Scriptures.

### **3. *The Bible, being a divine book, has unity.***

Though recorded by approximately 40 human authors, the Bible, as discussed earlier, is the work of God Himself. Thus it can be expected to possess unity. This suggests several matters. First, the Bible will not contradict itself. Being from God, who is truth, the Scriptures are coherent and consistent. All the parts fit together. For example the prophetic portions of the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, 2 Thessalonians, and Revelation, along with others, can all be correlated to give a comprehensive profile of God's plan for the future. The events prophesied in these passages are not contradictory; they correlate together. The four Gospels, though giving differing viewpoints on the life and ministry of Christ, are not contradictory.

Passages that seem to have discrepancies need to be interpreted in light of the harmony of the Scriptures. Peter's words, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38), should not be understood as teaching that salvation comes by water baptism. That view would contradict other Scriptures. However Acts 2:38 is interpreted, it must be understood in such a way that it does not contradict other verses which make it clear that water baptism is not the means of salvation. (See chapter 5 for a suggested interpretation of this verse.) Nor should Paul and James be pitted against each other as if they were contradicting each other. Both were writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore God was presenting non-contradictory truth through both men.

Second, because the Bible contains unity, its obscure and secondary passages are to be interpreted in light of clear and primary passages. When John Knox debated with Mary, Queen of Scots in Edinburgh in 1561, she said, "Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they [Roman Catholics] in another; whom shall I believe, and who shall judge?" John Knox replied, "The Word of God is plain in itself; And if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is not contrarious to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places."

If there are two equally possible interpretations of a passage (and in a number of passages this is the case since we do not know with certainty how to interpret every verse), a general rule of thumb is, Accept the clear and sensible meaning. When Paul wrote in Colossians 1:6, "All over the world this Gospel is producing fruit and growing," he most likely meant the then-known world rather than people around the entire globe.

Third, another implication of the unity of the Scriptures is that the Bible often

interprets itself. Martin Luther and John Calvin often said, "Scripture interprets Scripture." Some passages give light on other passages. And this is not surprising since the book possesses harmony and emanates from the mind of God Himself.

As we approach the Bible, we should interpret each part in light of the whole. Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 7:17, "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him," should not be construed to mean that if a man accepts Christ as his Savior he can continue living with a woman in an adulterous relationship. This interpretation would contradict the whole of Scripture elsewhere and would ignore its unity and destroy its harmony. John Stott quotes Sir Charles Ogers, who gives several rules for interpreting legal documents. His seventh rule is, "The deed is to be construed as a whole." He adds:

Every part of the deed ought to be compared with the other and one entire sense ought to be made thereof. ... The words of each clause should be so interpreted as to bring them into harmony with the other provisions of the deed if that interpretation does no violence to the meaning of which they are naturally susceptible.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, accepting the unity of the Bible also means that we should acknowledge what is called the progress of revelation. This does not mean that biblical revelation progressed in an evolutionary sense. Instead it means that in later Scriptures God added to what He had given in earlier portions. This is not to suggest that what was recorded in earlier portions of the Bible was imperfect and that the later revelations were perfect. Nor does it suggest that earlier portions were in error and the later portions were truthful. Instead it means that what may have been given as partial information was then added to later so that the revelation is more complete. What Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and others prophesied about the end times is expanded in the Book of Revelation. What is said about death in the Old Testament is then elaborated in the New Testament. The Trinity in the Old Testament is presented in fuller statements in the New Testament. Recognizing this progress of revelation means that the interpreter will be careful not to read back into the Old Testament from the New. (The relationship of the Old Testament to the New is discussed in chapter 11.) Progressive revelation does not mean that the Old Testament is less inspired than the New nor that the Old Testament is less clear than the New.

Progressive revelation also means that some commands were changed later. Circumcision, enjoined on Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17:10, was later rescinded (Gal. 5:2). The Law of Moses has been superseded, as indicated in 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 and Hebrews 7:11-19. In Matthew 10:5-7 Jesus gave the Twelve instructions that obviously differ from those He gave after His resurrection, as recorded in 28:18-20. Also Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit, who was with them, would be in them (John 14:17). This is parallel to what John wrote in 7:39, "Up to that time the Spirit had not been given." This implies that the coming of the Holy Spirit was later, on

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Ogers, *The Construction of Deeds and Statutes*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Sweet and Maxwell, 1956), 27, cited in John R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Glendale, California: G/L Publications, 1972) 230-231.

the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Looking back on that event Peter said to those in the house of Cornelius, "the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning" (11:15). These and other passages point to differences in God's revelation. As Ryrie has pointed out, "to fail to recognize this progressiveness in revelation would raise unresolvable contradictions between passages."

#### **4. *The Bible, being a divine book, has mystery.***

It must be recognized that the Bible contains many things hard to understand. Bible students must acknowledge that they cannot always ascertain what a given passage means. The Bible contains mystery in four areas. One is prophecy. The Bible includes predictions of future events, which no human could possibly predict by himself apart from divine revelation. This unique element needs to be taken into consideration as the Bible is interpreted. Liberal scholars tend to discount the predictive element in Scripture. They state, for example, that the Book of Daniel was written around 200 or 150 B.C. They assert this since they believe that Daniel could not have written prophecy. They say he wrote those events after they occurred and recorded them as if he had written them beforehand. Liberals do this because they start with the assumption that the Bible is not supernatural in origin.

Another aspect of the mystery of the Scriptures is its miracles. How can anyone explain how an axhead can float? How can anyone walk on water? How could a man rise from the dead? How could the earth be made out of nothing? No one of these is possible unless we allow for God's supernatural working. If we accept the divine nature of the Bible, we then can accept the record of these miracles as being true.

Another aspect of the mysterious nature of the Bible is its doctrine. A number of teachings in the Bible are difficult for the finite mind to comprehend. How can God exist as three Persons in one essence? How could Christ rise from the dead? How can He indwell each believer? How can God be omnipresent? How can God be sovereign and man still exercise his will?

In summary, accepting the divine nature of the Bible means we acknowledge its inerrancy, authority, unity, and mystery. If the Bible is looked on as merely a human book, then as we seek to interpret the Scriptures, we would not expect it to be inerrant, authoritative, harmonious, and to contain mystery.

The Bible then, according to these self-evident assertions, is a human book and is also a divine book. Neither can be denied. If we look on the book as only human, then we approach the Bible rationally. If we look on the book as only divine while ignoring its human elements, we approach the Bible as a mystical book. Seeing that the Bible is a book that is both human and divine, we seek to interpret it as we would any other book while at the same time affirming its uniqueness as a book of divine truth from the hand of God.

