

HE GAVE US STORIES



The Bible Student's Guide
to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

RICHARD L. PRATT, JR.

RR

P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Reprinted in paperback 1993

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pratt, Richard L., 1953—

He gave us stories : the Bible student's guide to interpreting Old Testament narratives / Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

p. cm.

Originally published: Brentwood, Tenn. : Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-379-X (paper)

ISBN-13: 987-0-87552-379-8 (paper)

1. Bible. O.T.—Study and teaching. I. Title.

[BS1193.P673 1991]

220.6—dc20

93-1565

To my wife, Gena
and
my daughter, Becky

*"The things revealed belong
to us and to our children forever."
(Deuteronomy 29:29)*

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PREFACE

When my wife and I decided that I should pursue an advanced degree in theological studies, we had a difficult choice. My personal interests and academic training were in philosophy of religion. But we became convinced that many serious problems in the church stem from a neglect of the Old Testament. With that conviction we committed ourselves to a lifetime of helping God's people understand and apply the Old Testament. *He Gave Us Stories* is one step toward reaching our goal.

This book focuses on interpreting Old Testament narratives. Many outstanding books on Biblical interpretation have appeared in recent years. Why another?

First, this book is not a scholarly study. Some of the best works on Biblical interpretation have been too technical for widespread use. My target audience is motivated lay people and beginning theological students. I have assumed very little knowledge of the Old Testament, theology, and interpretation. I have also avoided many complexities for the sake of inexperienced readers. For the most part, technicalities are addressed in the endnotes.

Second, this book specifically deals with Old Testament narratives. Many guides to understanding Scripture consider the whole Bible in general terms and neglect the unique challenges presented by Old Testament stories. Many of the perspectives of this book have implications for all Biblical interpretation, but I have concentrated on the special features of stories in the Old Testament.

Third, this book builds on the foundation of orthodox Protestant theology. To the best of my knowledge, the views presented in this study are thoroughly consistent with evangelical theological commitments. Beyond this, traditional Protestant doctrinal formulations frequently guide the discussion. In recent years I have become increasingly concerned

that evangelical Biblical scholars often fail to integrate traditional systematic theology with their Biblical research. In response to this trend, I frequently refer to confessions, creeds, catechisms, and representative theological works from the past and the present.

Fourth, this book addresses the practical use of Old Testament narratives in the church. Church leaders have the responsibility to teach the whole counsel of God. Unfortunately, they are seldom well equipped to analyze, explain, and apply Old Testament narratives to the church. In order to meet this need, this book proposes practical guidelines for preparing, investigating, and applying Old Testament stories to the modern world.

This study is little more than an introduction to Old Testament interpretation. Countless issues are left for readers to pursue on their own. The chapters that follow represent the results of my own wrestling with Old Testament interpretation. This struggle has been a consuming academic pursuit for the past decade. But more than this, it has been a driving spiritual quest since I came to know the mercy of God in Christ and realized that He gave us stories.

Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Reformed Theological Seminary
Orlando, Florida
31 December 1989

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of friends deserve special thanks for their help with this project. As usual, my wife, Gena, read through the text and offered many helpful suggestions. I also acknowledge John Farrar, whose enthusiasm and financial support made the project possible. Jane Sheppard and Diana Soule worked diligently on revising the manuscript. Many thanks to my colleague, Knox Chamblin, who read the book and encouraged me to complete it. Jon Balsarak, Bob Cara, Ray Craig, Reeves Flint, Scott Lindsay, Kris Lundgaard, Greg Perry, Janie Pillow, Jerry Robbins, Tim Stewart, and John Van Dyke provided indispensable encouragement and feedback as my research assistants. Finally, I must thank all of my students at Reformed Theological Seminary whose interactions over the years have contributed significantly to this material.

Thanks a lot, friends. This book belongs to all of us.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

THREE PROCESSES OF INTERPRETATION

Several years ago I had the opportunity to work on an archaeological project. My professor had spent months digging up ancient potsherds and tools, which he meticulously cataloged and shipped back to the United States. After nearly a year, the crates arrived at the museum, where other students and I helped piece together the artifacts.

Many things came together to make that dig a success. The team prepared for the excavation well in advance and planned everything down to the last detail. But the hard work had only begun. The crew worked for weeks in the hot sun, digging through the mud and sand, careful not to overlook the smallest item. The dig itself was strenuous but getting the artifacts back home proved to be equally difficult. Government officials had to inspect all the packages, and the shipping lines were unreliable.

One lesson was plain to all of us aspiring archaeologists: To have a successful dig, you must prepare carefully, work hard at the site, and get your discoveries home. If you neglect any of these, the project will be incomplete.

In this book we are going on a dig into the ancient texts of Old Testament narratives. We will make preparations for our work, investigate the Old Testament in its ancient world, and apply our discoveries to modern life. If we overlook any of these steps, our work with Old Testament narratives will be incomplete.

To complete these processes, we must give attention to *hermeneutics*, the study of all that goes into interpreting the Bible.¹ We will speak of three major facets in the interpretation of Old Testament stories: *preparation*,

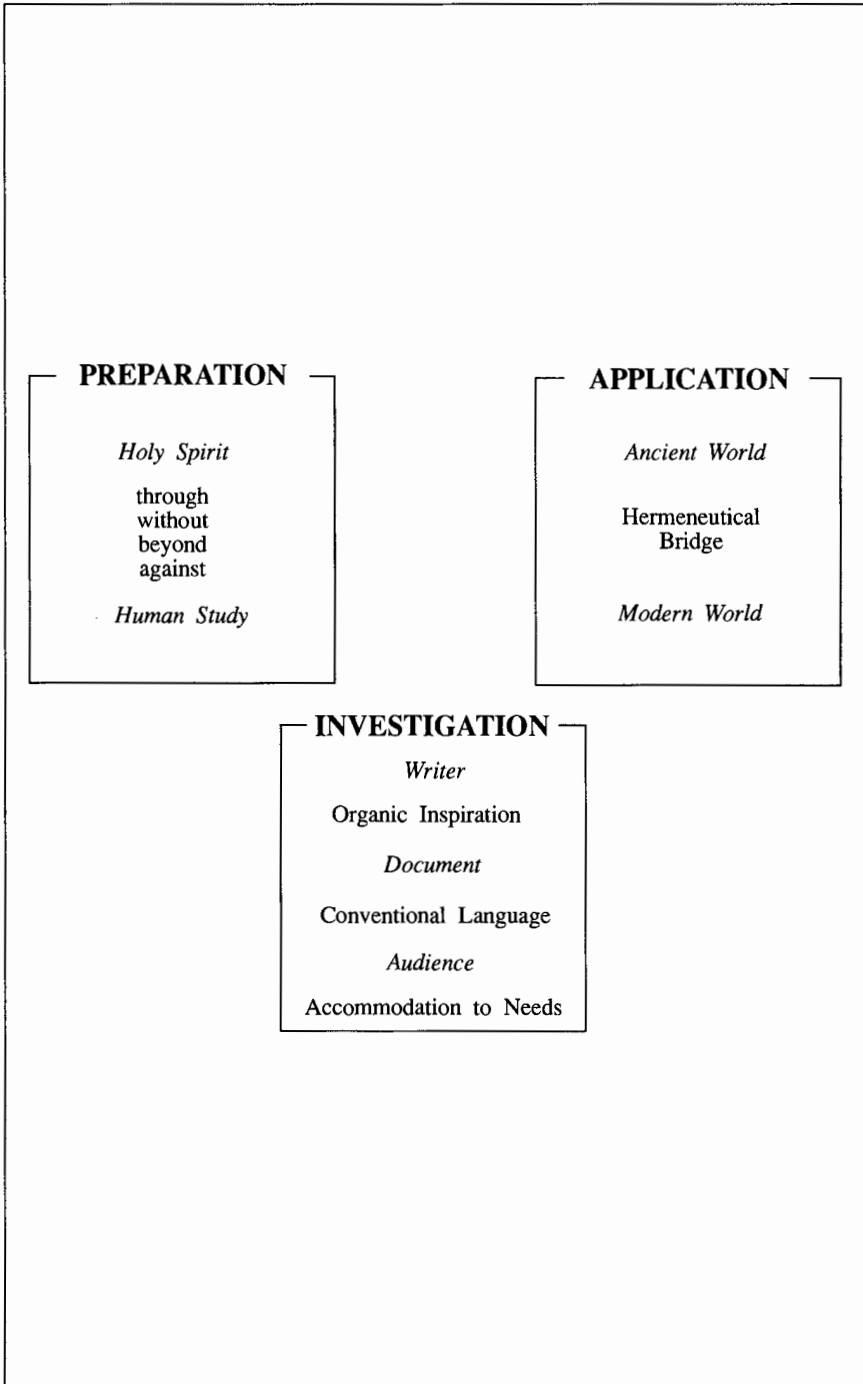


Fig. 1: Three Processes of Interpretation

investigation, and *application* (see figure 1). These processes are not entirely separate; they depend on each other in countless ways. Yet each one is essential for understanding Old Testament narratives. In this chapter we will address several preliminary issues in each area.

Preparation

The first hermeneutical process is preparation—getting ready to interpret Old Testament narratives. Many issues come to the foreground as we approach this subject, but foundational to any discussion is a proper understanding of the relationship between human study and the Holy Spirit.

I have a friend who built his own cabin in the mountains of Vermont. Hoping to finish construction during a two-week vacation, he packed his truck with lathes, power saws, drills, and an assortment of other tools. When he arrived at his property, however, my friend discovered that he had no electricity. Without electrical power he could do no work; his wonderful tools were useless, so he spent the time fishing.

As we prepare to read Old Testament stories, we must realize that it takes tools and power to interpret these texts. Unless we have power, all of our tools will be useless. Likewise, power is of little use without tools.

What are the tools of hermeneutics? What is the power? Our hermeneutical tools are the vast array of human knowledge and skills we bring to interpretation. Hermeneutical power is the work of our divine Teacher, the Holy Spirit. Sadly, we often forget that we need both human tools and divine power to interpret Old Testament stories. Instead we rely too much on one or the other.

Overemphasis on the Spirit

Lay people commonly emphasize the ministry of the Holy Spirit and neglect careful study. They often appeal to the words of Paul, “No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).² Since the Spirit is our Teacher, these believers prepare themselves by searching exclusively for spiritual guidance.

I remember once talking with a friend who had given a lesson from the story of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:10–22). Most of his comments were helpful, but at one point he remarked that Jacob’s ladder represented “the way we climb up to God through our diligence.” Sometime later I suggested that a more careful reading would not have led to his

conclusion. “The ladder was a symbol of God’s grace,” I contended. “The angels, not Jacob, went up and down the ladder.” The distinction seemed obvious to me, so I was surprised when he disagreed.

“No,” he insisted. “The Holy Spirit told me this is what it means, and that’s good enough for me!” No amount of discussion or exegetical observation could move him from his position. He had rejected careful study for what he thought was spiritual enlightenment.

Not everyone goes to this extreme, but many lay people see little need for academic study of the Bible. “Understanding Scripture is a spiritual matter,” they say. “If we depend on the Spirit, we don’t need formal study.” What causes Christians to take this perspective? Why do they turn from rigorous preparation for interpretation? By and large this tendency rests on a misunderstanding of the Spirit’s work in *inspiration* and *illumination*.

Inspiration. Many Christians think that the inspiration of Scripture eliminates the need for human study.³ The Spirit is the author of revelation (Isaiah 61:1–4) and the source of inspiration (1 Corinthians 2:9–10; 2 Timothy 3:16).⁴ In His wisdom the Holy Spirit so inspired Old Testament narratives that many matters can be grasped through simple reading;⁵ they are available to the “learned and unlearned alike.”⁶ The central message of salvation is easily discerned; we are able to grasp it without much effort.⁷ Clarity extends to other teachings as well. For instance, it is obvious that Saul hated David (1 Samuel 18:7–12), and that Ruth loved Naomi (Ruth 1:8–18).

Considering only this side of inspiration, we might think that rigorous study of the Bible is not necessary. But the Spirit also intended Scriptures to require careful examination. Jesus purposefully spoke in obscure parables (Matthew 13:10–13), and Peter commented that many things written by Paul were “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:15–16). In much the same way, large portions of Old Testament narratives are not easily understood. Why were the Israelite midwives blessed when they lied to Pharaoh (Exodus 1:15–21)? How do we reconcile the accounts of creation in the first and second chapters of Genesis? How should we relate parallel texts in Kings and Chronicles? The list goes on and on. The more we read Old Testament stories the more it is evident that “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves.”⁸

The difficulties that the Spirit placed in Scripture reveal the need for serious study. Despite the clarity of many matters in the Bible, the Spirit has been pleased to form portions of the Biblical message in ways that challenge us to vigorous investigation.

Illumination. Some believers also reject human study because they misunderstand the Spirit's illumination. Alongside the objective inspiration of Scripture, the Spirit gives us subjective enlightenment so that we may understand what has been written. Without His ministry we would be left in ignorance and darkness. This work of the Spirit is also vital to hermeneutics.⁹ As John Owen reminds us:

The principal efficient cause of the due knowledge and understanding of the will of God in the Scripture . . . is the Holy Spirit of God himself alone, for there is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, *necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in his word.* (Emphasis added)¹⁰

In a word, the Spirit illumines our minds so we may apprehend and appropriate Scripture (Romans 8:14–17; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13; 1 John 2:27; 5:7–9). Without His enlightenment our interpretative efforts are hopeless.

But illumination does not rule out the need for human study. The Holy Spirit is not a hermeneutical *Deus ex machina*, solving all our interpretative problems. He does not miraculously grant us complete insight and thus remove the need for careful investigation. On the contrary, illumination varies from person to person, group to group, and time to time. We are sinful, finite human beings who always have more to learn.

To sum up, we must depend on the Spirit, who inspired Old Testament narratives and illumines our minds. But the Spirit's inspiration and illumination still require extensive human effort in interpretation.

Overemphasis on Study

While lay people often neglect serious study, Biblical scholars tend to set their hopes primarily on human effort. Many of them base their views on Paul's words to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In this outlook preparation amounts to amassing an arsenal of knowledge and exegetical skills. Human efforts actually take the place of seeking help from the Spirit.

Critical scholars typically treat interpretation as a mere human affair. Correct understanding depends on academic research, not the Holy Spirit. Naive lay people, we are told, simply cannot understand the Bible

properly. A priesthood of intellectuals rules critical hermeneutics. With rare exception this “‘expert’ ethos”¹¹ excludes conscious attention to the Holy Spirit.¹²

This outlook is also evident among evangelical scholars, who give a place to the personal ministry of the Spirit in their theology, but seldom apply these convictions consistently to interpretation. The extent of this neglect is illustrated by the paucity of writing on the Spirit in hermeneutics. On occasion older works focus a bit on the Spirit,¹³ but most modern evangelical studies say precious little about Him.¹⁴ To my knowledge the most recent work of substantial size on this subject was written over three hundred years ago by John Owen (1616–1683).¹⁵

The results of neglecting the Spirit appear all around us. No matter what we say theoretically, in practice evangelicals often treat hermeneutical preparation primarily as a matter of acquiring knowledge and skills. Our hope for understanding rests more on our abilities than on the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Why do we neglect the Spirit in this way? Often human efforts are overemphasized because we assume that the Spirit always teaches through rigorous study. A. Thiselton reflects this conviction when he concludes: “The Holy Spirit may be said to work through human understanding, and not usually, if ever, through processes which bypass the considerations discussed under the heading of hermeneutics . . .”¹⁶ This viewpoint is true as far as it goes, but it places too much importance on one way in which the Spirit teaches His people.

The Holy Spirit usually works through human study, so we must rely to a large extent on our efforts. But the Spirit also works *without*, *beyond*, and *against* our interpretative efforts.¹⁷

Without. We have all experienced times when the Spirit granted insight into a passage without formal study or rigorous reflection. Often the insights of untrained interpreters are more significant than anything derived from academic study. Why? Because the Spirit sometimes teaches without the creaturely means of academic investigation.

Beyond. Insights also go beyond human efforts. Pastors experience this work of the Spirit in their busy ministries. They often find themselves pushed for time and unable to study as much as they would like. Occasionally, however, their poorly prepared sermons actually have more depth than their well-prepared messages. Why? Their meager efforts are superseded by the work of the Spirit. This blessing should not be used as an excuse for neglecting study, but it is comforting to know

that the Spirit gives us insight beyond what we gain through our own research.

Against. The Holy Spirit also works against us, enlightening our minds despite ourselves. Well-meaning believers frequently pursue Scripture to support erroneous preconceptions. Biases cloud our minds and hinder accurate understanding. From time to time, the Holy Spirit works against these tendencies and grants true insights, in spite of our distortions of the truth. In many different ways, the Spirit actually works against our efforts to teach us what He has revealed in Scripture.

In the chapters that follow, we will examine more thoroughly the relationship of human study to the Holy Spirit. For now we must simply recognize that preparation for interpreting Old Testament narratives involves both human and divine effort. We look to the Spirit as the power enabling us to interpret, and we look to hermeneutical skills as the tools of our trade. As we remember both of these elements, we will be better prepared to interpret Old Testament stories.

Investigation

As an archaeologist goes to a site to dig, so also must we go back in time to the ancient world of the Old Testament and investigate narratives in their historical contexts. What are the important issues involved in going back to the original setting of these stories? Is this time travel necessary? To answer these questions, we will examine two issues: *grammatico-historical investigation* and the *importance of historical investigation*.

Grammatico-Historical Investigation

“Look at this ad!” I shouted to my wife. “It’s just what we’ve been looking for, and it’s on sale tomorrow!”

My wife eagerly took the newspaper to look for herself. “It’s a great price too,” she added. But her smile quickly faded. “We can’t buy it,” she said as she pointed to the top of the page. “This is last week’s paper!”

To understand written material, we have to look at the words on the page, but we also have to consider the time when the words were written. We deal not only with grammar but also with history. Unfortunately evangelicals often fail to apply this principle to reading Old Testament stories. We read these texts as if they dropped out of the sky right into

our laps. How much difference does it make for most of us that Moses wrote Genesis?¹⁸ Do we care that the book of Samuel was compiled after the division of the kingdom?¹⁹ What does it matter that Kings was written during the exile and Chronicles after it?²⁰ Often we do not even know these facts, much less incorporate them into our interpretations. “After all,” we think, “we are interested in what these stories mean for us today, not for people long ago.”

In reaction to this outlook, academic hermeneutics has traditionally stressed the historical setting of the Bible. Formal instruction has been oriented toward learning ancient languages, history, customs, and religious beliefs. This orientation can be seen in L. Berkhof’s summary of the goal of hermeneutics:

Hermeneutics is usually studied with a view to the interpretation of the literary productions of the past. Its special task is to point out the way in which the differences or the distances between an author and his readers may be removed. It teaches us that this is properly accomplished only by the readers’ transposing themselves into the time and spirit of the author.²¹

Evangelicals commonly call this hermeneutical outlook the *grammatico-historical method*.²²

The basic elements of grammatico-historical investigation stem from the Reformers’ rejection of allegorical interpretation in the medieval church.²³ The relationship between Protestant and medieval interpretation is complex, but early Protestant exegesis made significant strides toward emphasizing historical and grammatical investigation of the Bible.²⁴ This shift was deeply influenced by Renaissance studies of newly discovered classical Greek and Latin texts.²⁵ As techniques for interpreting these classical documents grew, scholars rejected allegorical methods in favor of meticulous philological and historical methods.²⁶

The term “grammatico-historical” first appeared in the 1788 edition of K. A. G. Keil’s treatise on interpretation.²⁷ Keil’s hermeneutical approach can be traced directly to his influential teacher, J. A. Ernesti (1701–1781).²⁸ Ernesti in turn depended heavily on H. Grotius (1583–1645), who was steeped in Renaissance classical studies.²⁹ The works of these men reflected the growing conviction among orthodox theologians that the Bible should be read as an ancient document. As Ernesti put it, “The Scriptures are to be investigated by the same rules as other books.”³⁰

The resulting method was basically two-fold. As the term “grammatico-historical” suggests, grammar and history were central. In-

interpreters examined words and expressions and explored the historical circumstances in which the text was written, especially the writer's background and purposes.

Through the centuries this historical orientation has undergone a number of significant changes. We commonly distinguish historical-critical exegesis from more conservative grammatico-historical exegesis. The former builds on Enlightenment assumptions of the superiority of human reason over the Bible; the latter maintains belief in the authority of Scripture.³¹ As different as these approaches are, both see grammar and history as the keys for unlocking the meaning of a passage.

Importance of Historical Investigation

As we begin our study of Old Testament narratives, the historical orientation of academic hermeneutics raises a vital question. Why is it necessary to go back to the original settings to interpret these texts properly? Three pillars undergird a concern for the historical contexts of Old Testament stories: *the conventional character of Biblical language*, *organic inspiration through Biblical writers*, and *accommodation to Biblical audiences*.

The conventional character of Biblical language. What allows two people to communicate, to understand each other? In many respects successful communication depends on shared conventions³²—certain symbols, gestures, and expressions that have specific meanings. If we do not agree to some extent on the meanings of these signs, we cannot communicate.

For example, the word “house” often means “a dwelling” in English. But Spanish speakers have a different convention, *casa*. In other languages similar concepts are signified by *maison* and *Haus*. There is nothing inherent in these expressions that make them signify a dwelling; they are meanings agreed upon by the people who speak each language. Linguistic agreements change from people to people, group to group, and age to age, but the ability to communicate rests on these cultural conventions.³³

It is no different with the language of Old Testament narratives. Everything from individual words to overarching literary style is fundamentally conventional. The assumptions that Biblical authors shared with their audiences become road signs directing us to the meaning of their texts. If we are unaware of these historical conditions, we cannot even translate the Bible, much less interpret it. The conventional charac-

ter of Biblical language compels us to explore the ancient world of Old Testament stories.

Organic inspiration through Biblical writers. But isn't the Bible inspired by God and, therefore, above these cultural influences? This question brings us to a second reason for dealing with the ancient world of the Bible: the doctrine of *organic inspiration*—that God worked through the personalities and intentions of human writers when He inspired Scripture.³⁴ B.B. Warfield described the doctrine in these words:

These books [of Scripture] were not produced suddenly, by some miraculous act—handed down complete out of heaven, as the phrase goes; but, like all other products of time, are the ultimate effect of many processes cooperating through long periods. . . . There is the preparation of the men to write these books to be considered, a preparation physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives, and, indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them.³⁵

As Warfield pointed out, God ordained every detail of history so that Scriptures would come through human authors who had been perfectly designed to write them. In this way their personalities, outlooks, and intentions were not circumvented; rather, they were used by the Spirit to form the Biblical text.

The organic quality of inspiration explains many peculiarities of the Old Testament. For instance, in the book of Kings, Manasseh is an arch miscreant who finally seals the fate of Judah (2 Kings 21:10–16). In Chronicles, however, he is a model of repentance and restoration (2 Chronicles 33:10–17). These variations are not contradictory; they simply resulted from the different purposes of each writer. The writer of Kings wrote during the exile and focused on Manasseh's sin to explain why Judah had been taken to Babylon (2 Kings 21:12–17).³⁶ The Chronicler wrote after the return from exile to demonstrate the importance of repentance and prayer for the full restoration of the post-exilic community.³⁷

The organic view of inspiration gives us another reason to pay attention to the original settings of Old Testament stories. Biblical revelation came through human authors whose circumstances, interests, and intentions gave each story its particular shape and content.³⁸ If we fail to

return to their original historical settings, we cut ourselves off from proper understanding.

Accommodation to Biblical audiences. Exploring the world of the past also rests on the *accommodation of revelation* to ancient audiences. The doctrine of accommodation, which teaches that God revealed Himself by speaking to His people in ways they could understand, has been a longstanding belief among Protestants.³⁹ The form of many Old Testament texts illustrates accommodation. The book of Deuteronomy, for instance, resembles aspects of ancient Near Eastern treaties well known to the people of that day.⁴⁰ If God had given Israel this revelation in the form of modern business contracts or on a floppy disk, it would not have revealed anything; it would have been irrelevant.

Some Old Testament books focused on more specific audiences than others. Kings was written to a rather specific original situation, and we must acknowledge this accommodation if we are to understand the book.⁴¹ However, the book of Job, which deals with the perennial issues of evil and suffering, appears to be directed to a more general audience.⁴²

All books of Scripture accommodated their original recipients to some degree. We can understand these books more fully as we become aware of the ancient world of those to whom they were written.

As we have seen, grammatico-historical exegesis orients interpretation toward the original historical context. This orientation is essential because of the conventional language of the document, organic inspiration, and accommodation to the original audience. In the chapters that follow, we will explore these matters in much detail. At this stage we should simply note that the more we learn about the document, writer, and audience, the better we will be equipped to investigate Old Testament narratives.

Application

The third major concern of our study is application of Old Testament narratives. In this aspect of interpretation, we are interested in how passages should affect people today. We return from digging about in the ancient world and bring our discoveries back to modern life. To introduce this hermeneutical process, we will consider *the challenge of application*, *obstacles to application*, and *relevance and distance in application*.

Challenge of Application

As a child I was fascinated by H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. What would it be like to travel back in time? How would things be different? Along with this fascination was a constant dread. What would happen if I could not get back to my own time? Would I want to spend the rest of my life stuck in the past?

In many ways these are questions we need to ask ourselves as we interpret Old Testament narratives. It may be fascinating to go back to the ancient world of these stories, but what good is it if we do not come back to our own day? We must commit ourselves to returning to the modern world and applying what we have learned.

At first glance it might seem that evangelicals focus a lot on the application of Scripture. On an informal level, this is true. But formal studies in hermeneutics have been so concerned with the ancient world that they give little attention to the relevance of Old Testament narratives.⁴³ Some interpreters have shown marginal interest in application, but application has hardly occupied a prominent place in the history of academic discussions.⁴⁴

This neglect of application has produced serious ill-effects. Theological students often reduce interpretation to an academic exercise. Reading Old Testament stories without a keen interest in the Spirit's transforming influence can turn these texts into relics of ancient history. This is a common malady among new students of hermeneutics; they substitute technical, detached examination for personal encounter with God.

Ignoring application also leads to poor teaching and preaching. Many church leaders, especially recent seminary graduates, devote their pulpit time to the historical background of a passage, word studies in the original languages, and summaries of its original meaning. These matters are important, but often application is entirely omitted. "Exegesis is what I do best," they say. "I trust the Holy Spirit to apply the Word." Ignoring explicit application can devastate the church. Congregations are left spiritually malnourished and with little ability to see how Old Testament stories have any bearing on their lives. This practice results in the lifeless orthodoxy plaguing many evangelical churches.

In recent decades evangelical interpreters have challenged this orientation of academic hermeneutics. The challenge has risen primarily out of recent hermeneutical perspectives that stress the vital interconnections between ancient texts and modern readers.⁴⁵

This outlook has been stressed most successfully by Hans Georg Gadamer, who closely followed the lead of Martin Heidegger (1889–

1976).⁴⁶ While we must take exception to many of his viewpoints, Gadamer pointed out that understanding a text is always an encounter of two worlds: the ancient world of the passage and the contemporary world of the reader. Since interpretation always involves an interaction between the present and the past, neither world may be neglected without skewing, even forfeiting, proper understanding.

In response to this challenge, evangelicals have begun to see more clearly that we must give attention not only to the Bible's original meaning, but also to application to the modern world. Several recent evangelical works have pointed in this direction. Among others, E.A. Nida, A.B. Mickelsen, H.A. Virkler, and W. Kaiser have devoted much more space than older works to matters of application.⁴⁷ Thiselton also reflects this shift as he summarizes the goal of hermeneutics. He says, "the goal of Biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter's own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged."⁴⁸ In a word, contemporary trends in hermeneutics not only take the reader into the world of the Bible; they also strive to bring the Bible into the world of the reader. We do not interpret Old Testament stories merely to acquaint ourselves with the original writer, document, and audience; we are also set on reforming the modern world in light of these Scriptures.

Obstacles to Application

While interpreters have become more interested in application, a number of obstacles hinder us from extending this interest to Old Testament narratives. Perhaps the greatest difficulty we face is an acute sense of the historical distance between ourselves and Old Testament stories. We are at ease in the Gospels; we are comfortable in the New Testament epistles; we are even familiar with the Psalms and Proverbs. But Old Testament stories often seem very strange to us.

Reading Old Testament stories is like visiting a foreign country. The people speak a different language; their customs are perplexing. The literary forms of these stories often seem alien to us. The book of Esther is like a short novel,⁴⁹ but books like Samuel and Kings seem to have little coherence by our modern standards. Moreover, many Old Testament narratives offend our modern sensitivities. Who doesn't at least hesitate when Solomon rids the royal court of his political opponents (1 Kings 2:13–46)?⁵⁰ Most of us find it difficult to accept God commanding the execution of innocent women and children (Joshua 6:17, 24; 8:24–26).⁵¹

If we look closely at many Old Testament stories, we feel like strangers in a foreign land.

Despite these difficulties, we must affirm that Old Testament stories are relevant for the church today. God's revelation was designed to be passed down from generation to generation. As the Lord told Abraham about the destruction of Sodom, He said, "I have chosen him, *so that he will direct his children and his household after him* to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him" (Genesis 18:19, emphasis added). In Old Testament days, God did not reveal Himself merely for the people who first heard. He gave His Word to be declared to future generations. As we read in Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us *and to our children forever*, that we may follow all the words of this law" (emphasis added). From a Biblical point of view, revelation has multi-generational significance.

Old Testament writers depended heavily on contemporary application of previous revelation. The writer of Kings applied the theological perspectives of Deuteronomy to his day;⁵² Daniel wrestled with the meaning of Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years (Jeremiah 25:1, 29:10, Daniel 9:2–22); the Chronicler drew extensively from Samuel and Kings and also referred to Jeremiah (2 Chronicles 36:21); Nehemiah was deeply concerned with the relevance of Deuteronomy 30 for his ministry (Nehemiah 1:8–9). Throughout the Old Testament, Biblical figures had much more than antiquarian interests in previous revelation. They applied revelation from long ago to their own day.

Similarly, the New Testament quotes the Old Testament over 320 times and alludes to it even more.⁵³ This dependence on the Old Testament illustrates the importance of contemporary application. Jesus built His entire ministry on applying Scripture to His day, arguing tenaciously for the authority and applicability of the Old Testament.⁵⁴ In a similar way, Paul informed Timothy that the Old Testament Scriptures are for every believer: "All Scripture . . . is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). He also told the Roman Christians: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). To treat the Old Testament as a relic of the past with no significance for today contradicts the Bible's own treatment of the Old Testament. We must strive to know how these texts relate to the modern world.⁵⁵

Relevance and Distance in Application

When we interpret Old Testament stories, we should always remember that we are not hearing texts spoken directly to us; we are *overhearing* stories told to others. This fact creates tension, pulling us back and forth between the relevance and distance of these stories.

This tension can be found in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1–10. In the early verses of this chapter, Paul referred to a number of episodes in the wilderness wanderings recorded in Exodus and Numbers: Israel's grumbling at Meribah, their syncretistic practices, sexual immorality, and the plague of snakes. After recounting these events, he added, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Paul's comment illustrates the tension in applying Old Testament stories. He argued that these stories applied to the Corinthians, but they applied indirectly. Paul affirmed in no uncertain terms that Old Testament stories were relevant for the Corinthians. "These things were written for us," he insisted. He could hardly have put the matter more forcefully. The stories of tragedy in the wilderness had a message pertinent for Christian readers who lived over a thousand years after the events.

Even so, Paul qualified the applicability of these texts by referring to the situation of the Corinthians. These stories were not just "for us." He added the qualification, "for us *upon whom the fulfillment of the ages has come*" (emphasis added). In these words Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians did not live in the days of the Old Testament. They lived after the death and resurrection of Christ. The Corinthians stood in a different place in the history of redemption. While these Old Testament stories applied, the Corinthians had to read them not as the original recipients, but as Christians living in the eschatological age.⁵⁶ From Paul's perspective we have to keep in mind both the relevance and distance of Old Testament stories.

The tension between relevance and distance is not always pronounced. On a rudimentary level, we may not feel far from Old Testament stories. When we read that "the Israelites settled in Egypt" (Genesis 47:27a), we do not sense too much distance from the original setting. If we have some acquaintance with Egyptian geography and living conditions in ancient times, our understanding is very similar to that of the original audience. Moreover, when Moses replied sarcastically to Pharaoh, "Just as you say . . . I will never appear before you again" (Exodus 10:29), few of us have much problem getting the point. We chuckle

much like the original audience must have. Even some theological perspectives easily apply to our day. Joseph's reply to his brothers speaks clearly: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). We hear these words of confidence in God's providence much like the original audience did.

But many times tension is unavoidable. The complexities of applying Old Testament stories become pronounced when we move beyond the basics. For instance, how are we to apply a book like *Kings*, written to help the exiles maintain a hope of return, to modern Christians in the United States who have never been exiled? How do we take the book of Deuteronomy, written for Israelites about to make war in Canaan, and apply it to Christians involved in modern international politics? How should we appropriate Israel's celebration at the Red Sea when our "struggle is not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12)? Even if we have confidence that we understand the original meaning, it is difficult to extend that meaning into our world. We know these stories have something to say to us, but we know just as plainly that we live in a different world.

Application of Old Testament narratives involves building bridges from the ancient world to our day; we seek to span the gulf between ourselves and the Bible. On one side of the historical gulf, we carefully investigate Scripture. We do our best to understand Old Testament stories in terms of their original settings. On the other side, we become aware of our own situation. We learn of needs and opportunities for the Word today. At times bridging the gap will be easy, at other times extremely difficult.

To complete our hermeneutical project, we must focus on how texts apply today. In the chapters that follow, we will pursue a number of ways we may succeed in applying Old Testament narratives.

Conclusion

We began this chapter saying that interpreting Old Testament stories is like working on an archaeological dig. We prepare, work at the site, and bring our discoveries home. Following this analogy we will pursue our study of Old Testament narratives in three major parts. In chapters 1–4 we will explore how the Spirit prepares us to read Old Testament narratives. In chapters 5–12 we will learn how to investigate Old Testament stories in their ancient contexts. Finally, in chapters 13–16 we will find ways to apply Old Testament narratives to modern life. As we examine

each area in detail, we will move forward in our understanding of Old Testament stories.

Review Questions

1. Define hermeneutics. What are the three hermeneutical processes which we will follow in this study?
2. Discuss the importance of dependence on the Spirit and human effort in hermeneutical preparation. How are these two activities interdependent?
3. Why has traditional evangelical hermeneutics been called “grammatico-historical exegesis?” Why is this method crucial to responsible interpretation?
4. How do academic interpreters often ignore application? What are the basic issues involved in applying Old Testament stories to the modern world?

Study Exercises

1. Glance at two books on the subject of Biblical exegesis. List the items they consider in hermeneutical preparation. Do you agree? How may the list be expanded? Why?
2. Quickly make a list of 10 issues you think should be pursued in the interpretation of the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1–9). Review your list and divide the items between the “Ancient World” and “Modern World.” Which side do you tend to stress? Why? How can you balance your questions more evenly between the ancient world and the modern world?
3. Take a look at three commentaries on Genesis 12:10–20 and answer the following questions: Are the commentaries concerned primarily with the ancient world or with the modern world? How does the central concern of the interpreter determine the kind of findings which are made in the passage? What sorts of questions would you add to broaden the scope of the interpretation?

P A R T I

PREPARING FOR
OLD TESTAMENT
NARRATIVES

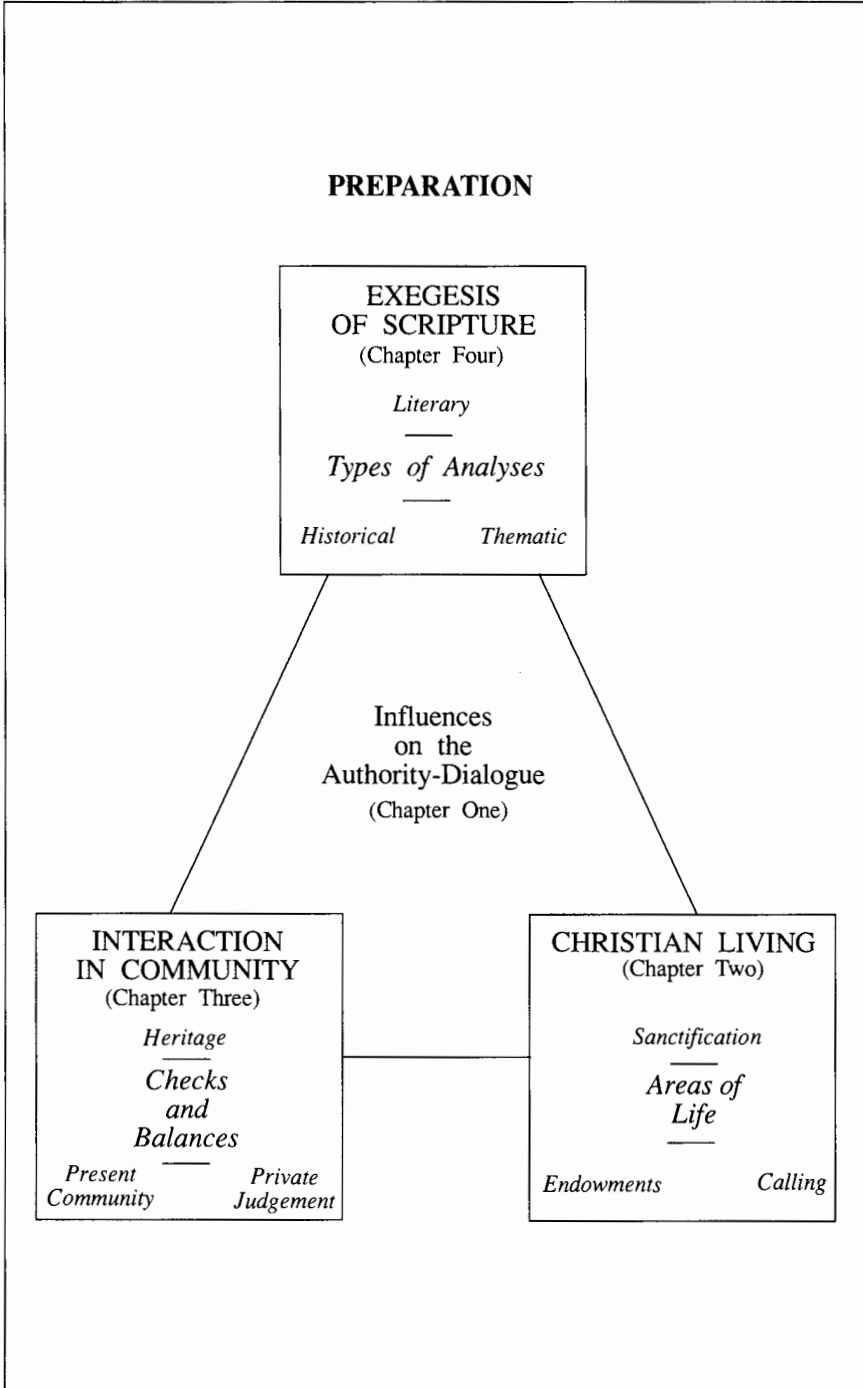


Fig. 2: Schema of Part I: Preparation

SYNOPSIS

In the first part of our study, we will look in some detail at the first hermeneutical process: preparation for reading Old Testament narratives (see figure 2). The Holy Spirit empowers us to interpret, but He uses many means to equip us. In these chapters we will examine some of the main ways in which the Spirit prepares us for interpretation.

In chapter 1 we will see that preparation involves becoming self-conscious of the predispositions we bring to the interpretative enterprise. Understanding Old Testament narratives always involves the interaction of our commitments, beliefs, and experiences with the authoritative presentation of the text. We come to Scriptures with presuppositions, but we also come ready to listen. We will speak of this interaction between ourselves and the text as an Authority-Dialogue.

Chapter 2 deals with the influence of individual Christian living on the Authority-Dialogue. Our sanctification, endowments, and sense of calling affect the way we interpret Old Testament stories. As the Spirit works in these areas of our lives, we are better equipped to understand as we ought.

Chapter 3 explores the influence of interaction in community. Preparation for interpretation also involves learning from others. Within the Christian community, the Spirit has given us a system of checks and balances. We pursue the interpretation of Old Testament narratives while interacting on the levels of our Christian heritage, present community, and private judgment.

Chapter 4 deals with a third major influence on the Authority-Dialogue: our exegesis of Scripture. We will see that the Spirit has led His people to approach Old Testament narratives in three basic ways. We look for themes that are of interest to us; we explore the historical events behind the stories; we treat the passages as literary works. As we become better acquainted with the benefits and limitations of these ap-

proaches, we will be equipped to use them in our investigation of Old Testament narratives.

This portion of our study is preliminary to other aspects of interpretation, but it is no less important. The matters covered in this section continually inform the discussions of later chapters on investigating and applying Old Testament stories.

1

ORIENTATION FOR PREPARATION

I didn't expect him to call on me! After all, he was the teacher; I was just a student. "You mean you didn't come prepared to discuss this material?" the professor asked. I sheepishly nodded my head. "At this school we expect you to be ready to contribute to classroom discussion. You don't expect me to do all the talking do you? Tomorrow *you* will lead the class."

To be frank, I did expect him to do the talking. I liked sitting back and taking notes. Classes were supposed to be professorial monologues, not teacher-student dialogues. But now I was in a real mess; I had to do *all* the talking the next day!

When you go to class, it's important to know who's going to talk. It makes a lot of difference in how you prepare. If the teacher is going to lecture, you come to listen; if you are going to lead the class, you get ready to speak. If you are going to be in a dialogue, you'd better be prepared to talk *and* listen.

The same issues confront us when we prepare to interpret. Is reading Old Testament stories like a student presentation in which we do all the speaking? Is it like a lecture in which we simply listen to the text? Or is it more like a classroom discussion where both we and Scripture make contributions to the final outcome? Our answers to these questions will affect our preparation for reading Old Testament stories.

In recent years all three viewpoints have been adopted. Some interpreters emphasize the reader's contribution; others stress the text; still others seek to give more balanced emphasis. We will speak of these

viewpoints as the *subjective model*, the *objective model*, and the *authority-dialogue model* (see figure 3).

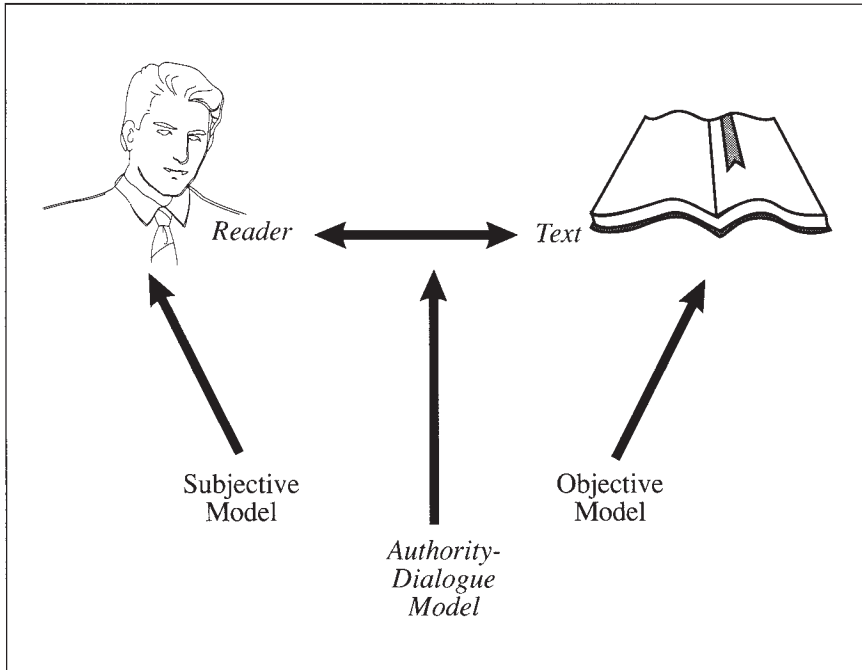


Fig. 3: Different Orientations Toward Preparation

The Subjective Model

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Maybe so, but what is beautiful to one person may be plain, even ugly, to another. One popular hermeneutical model follows a similar motto: “*Meaning* is in the eye of the beholder.” According to this view, understanding Old Testament stories is largely subjective—the interpreter’s own viewpoint and life experience determines the meaning of Scripture.

This tendency is especially common in informal settings. I remember visiting a Bible study class once in which the leader read the Scripture and asked, “What does this passage mean to you?” Several initial observations seemed straightforward, but as we continued, it seemed that everyone had a different opinion of the passage’s meaning. With a sigh of resignation, the leader concluded, “Well, I guess that goes to show you that we all interpret the Bible the way we want to.” That was as far as we could go. Class dismissed.

Too often Christians read Old Testament stories as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We simply pour in our theological convictions. We shrug our shoulders and concede that these texts can mean just about anything we want them to mean.

Even formal hermeneutics has fallen prey to subjectivism. Serious scholars affirm that the text places some limits on interpretation. Even so, many formal approaches to hermeneutics find the primary locus of meaning in the reader's predispositions rather than in the objective, authoritative text. To one degree or another, interpretation has come to be viewed as a process of reading in terms of our subjective individual outlooks.

Philosophical Background

The philosophical background of subjectivity in Biblical hermeneutics is complex. Many aspects can be traced to the views of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).¹ Kant opposed the radical skepticism of David Hume (1711–1776), who challenged the Enlightenment assumption that true knowledge of the world could be discovered through rational investigation. Hume doubted that the external world was ordered in ways that corresponded to the rational structures of the human mind. Kant could not ignore the wedge Hume and others had driven between the external world and the internal world of our mental conceptions.² Therefore, Kant postulated that knowledge always involves conceptualization of the world according to categories which the human mind brings to experience.³ We look at the world through a mental grid. Our minds operate with certain categories through which we understand the world.⁴

From this point of view, knowledge itself does not entail simple apprehension of objective reality. We cannot know a *Ding an sich* (thing in itself); knowledge always involves significant interaction between external realities and our internal processing.

There is at least a kernel of truth in Kant's outlook. Many aspects of ordinary experience confirm it. For example, when you read this page what do you see? Photons bouncing off the page onto the rods and cones of your retina which send electrical impulses down the optical nerve to the brain (although that in itself would be a conceptualization in Kant's outlook)? Of course not! You see letters, words, and sentences. You even understand something of the thought patterns I am experiencing as I write. As a reader of English, you categorize what you see according to certain linguistic rules you have adopted. Moreover, your understanding of this page differs from that of a preliterate child or illit-

erate adult. Their mental categories are different, so their knowledge of the page is different.

Education, culture, psychological dispositions, and countless other factors influence the way we conceive the world. A measure of subjectivity in knowledge is unavoidable.⁵

These epistemological outlooks have highly influenced the interpretation of language and literature. Building on Kant through the work of such figures as Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Dilthey (1833–1911), and Husserl (1859–1938), recent philosophical hermeneutics has emphasized the importance of the reader's preconceptions in interpretation.⁶

In our century Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) brought the influence of preconceptions to the foreground of interpretation. In his early work *Being and Time*, Heidegger insisted that prior experiences in the web of life deeply affect our interpretation of life. He postulated, "Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."⁷

Perhaps the most influential figure in this line of philosophical hermeneutics is Hans Georg Gadamer, who agreed with many of Heidegger's outlooks and also stressed the importance of the reader's input.⁸ In *Truth and Method*, he rejected the Enlightenment's quest for rational objectivity as a "prejudice against prejudice."⁹ In his view the Enlightenment's attempt to get rid of preconceptions was actually a prejudice in favor of poorly conceived rationalistic preconceptions. He argued that preconceptions in hermeneutics are not only inescapable but essential for understanding.¹⁰

The impact of these hermeneutical views has been felt in many ways. For instance, the growing literary school known as "Reader-Response Criticism" has turned attention to the reader as the main concern in interpretation.¹¹ From this viewpoint the locus of meaning lies less in the ancient writer or document (as in grammatico-historical methods) than in the understanding processes of the reader.¹²

Extremes in Subjectivism

While asserting a constant subjective element, Heidegger and Gadamer cautioned against arbitrary interpretation. Although interpretation rests on preconceptions, a reader should not haphazardly impose ideas onto a text. Gadamer sounded a stern warning: "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by im-

perceptible habits of thought and direct its gaze 'on the things themselves' (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts)."¹³

Sadly, many followers of Heidegger and Gadamer have over-emphasized the role of preconceptions and consequently have spawned a growing tendency toward extreme subjectivism in Biblical interpretation.

Several recent theological movements self-consciously read Old Testament narratives with a subjective model. They assume that the objective meaning of these texts, if it exists at all, is unattainable. Rather than submitting themselves to these passages, they boldly construe the texts in terms of their own ideals.

Some Liberation theologians openly admit that they emphasize the subjective side of interpretation.¹⁴ On occasion, Liberationists have attempted to ground their views in more objective approaches, but the majority rely heavily on the importance of preconceptions to justify their approaches and conclusions. For example, Croatto states his approval of subjectivity with alarming clarity: "Exegesis is eisegesis, and anybody who claims to be doing only the former is, wittingly or unwittingly, engaged in ideological subterfuge."¹⁵ Croatto does not deny a place for historical-critical analysis. He attempts to orient interpretation toward the text, but only by noting the manifold possible meanings which texts offer "through the unfolding of a surplus-of-meaning disclosed by a new question addressed to the text."¹⁶

Liberationists consciously select certain passages as normative and construe them in terms of Marxist ideology. The stories of the Exodus from Egypt lose their original significance and become stories of Marxist class struggle;¹⁷ the narratives of conquest in Joshua are interpreted as proletarian revolution.¹⁸ It comes as no surprise, then, that many others accuse Liberationists of using the Bible simply as a tool of their ideology.¹⁹

Similarly, many Feminist and Gay Liberation theologians also justify their exegetical conclusions by pointing to inevitable subjectivity in interpretation. They intentionally pick one part of Scripture over another according to the canons of liberation.²⁰ As Elizabeth Fiorenza has said, "Only the nonsexist and nonandrocentric traditions of the Bible . . . have the theological authority of revelation."²¹

When precommitments dominate hermeneutical discussions in these ways, radical forms of subjectivism follow. In fact, it is not long before interpretation becomes more a chance to expound our own beliefs rather than an opportunity to expound the text.

Descriptive Emphasis

How do these views affect hermeneutics? What difference does subjectivism make? Put simply, if we adopt a subjective model, we have little need to concentrate on rules for proper interpretation because our understanding stems mostly from the outlooks we bring to the text. Therefore, subjectivists concentrate more on describing what happens as people read texts, rather than prescribing how they should read. They are more concerned with the ways personal engagement, religious and philosophical commitments, and cultural traditions influence Biblical interpretation.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to play touch football with a group of Americans and Europeans. Although we had agreed to play football, we soon learned that the European and American conceptions of football are completely different. The biggest problem we had that afternoon was deciding whose rules to follow. Neither group wanted to impose their rules on the other. Who was to say that one way was better than the other? It was impossible to decide on the right set of rules.

Many interpreters who tend toward subjectivism think of rules for interpretation in much the same way. As far as they are concerned, exegetical methods are fundamentally conventional. One group follows one standard, and another group follows another. Westerners interpret in one way, Easterners in another; the powerful follow one set of rules, the oppressed another; men read the Bible with certain outlooks, women with others. In the end there is no way of deciding that one approach is better than another.

Gadamer, for instance, insisted that his hermeneutical reflections were not a new method.²² He suspected that rules for interpretation merely attempted to reach the unattainable goal of detached, objective knowledge; so he focused his efforts on describing *how* interpretation occurs. We could argue that Gadamer's rhetoric against method is a method itself, but we would miss his basic purpose—to describe what happens as we read.

Liberationists often come near to prescribing a methodology for interpretation when they speak of the importance of *praxis*, or the involvement in the struggle against oppression. At times hermeneutical rules can be found in many of their discussions.²³ Even so, these directions are not usually cast in terms of right or wrong; they primarily point out how Scripture *may* be read by those who are committed to certain ideologies.

While most evangelicals reject extreme subjectivity in hermeneutics, we must be careful not to throw out the insights that this orientation offers. Perhaps more than anything else, the subjective model of herme-

neutics has pointed out that preconceptions always influence our interpretation of Old Testament stories.²⁴ As we realize the impact of our presuppositions, we can be critical of them and learn to look at Scripture from a variety of perspectives.

Nevertheless, we must not be satisfied merely to learn what happens when we interpret Scripture; we must also learn from it how we *should* interpret Scripture. This need for prescriptive preparation brings us to a second major hermeneutical model.

The Objective Model

“Let the facts speak for themselves.” These words urge us to make judgments on the basis of objective facts, rather than subjective opinion. As Sergeant Friday used to say, “Just the facts, Ma’am. Just the facts.”

A similar desire for objectivity has inspired a prominent model for Biblical interpretation through the centuries: “Let the *Scriptures* speak for themselves.” This hermeneutical model turns away from subjectivity to objective knowledge of the text.

Objectivism takes many shapes in informal hermeneutics. Lay people often assume that their interpretations are simply obvious facts. “All you have to do is to be objective and read what the passage says,” we insist. “Then you will agree with me.”

In formal hermeneutics, objectivism is the tendency to follow rigorous methods of empirical science as we analyze Scripture. Detached observation, hypotheses, and testing of hypotheses form the basis of academic hermeneutics in the English-speaking world. Interpreters try to determine and express exegetical conclusions with scientific precision and detached objectivity.

In one way or another, hermeneutical objectivism treats interpretation as a process of stripping away preconceptions and applying carefully conceived techniques, so that texts may make their own impression on us. The goal is for meaning to flow from the passage to an unbiased, receptive reader.

Philosophical Background

This hermeneutical tendency has a complex philosophical development. Recently, R. Lundin has pointed to several ties to the philosophical views of René Descartes (1596–1650), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and Thomas Reid (1710–1796).²⁵

Descartes began his inquiry into human knowledge by attempting to strip away all beliefs and opinions to base his knowledge on a self-evident, objective epistemic foundation.²⁶ His desire to build knowledge on a rational foundation was the cornerstone of the Enlightenment.²⁷ By ridding ourselves of prejudices in pursuit of objective, rational certainty, human beings could gain true knowledge of themselves and the world.

Hermeneutical objectivism has also been influenced by Francis Bacon's scientific procedure. In Bacon's conception the scientific method involved three "Tables of Investigation": 1) gathering all known examples of phenomena with similar characteristics, 2) observing phenomena that contrast in some way, and 3) comparing these observations.²⁸ Through these scientific means, an observer could study the data of the world without allowing biases to shape his or her conclusions.

After the Enlightenment the tendency toward objectivism was popularized in Britain and the United States through the Common Sense Realism of Thomas Reid (1710–1796).²⁹ Scottish Common Sense Realism continued the belief that human observers are capable of objective knowledge of the world. As Lundin comments: "As an epistemological theory Common Sense Realism . . . claimed that the human mind can know some things with certainty and without need of an outside authority. . . . In short, the basic laws governing moral and physical life can be discerned by all sincere, right-thinking men and women."³⁰

Like Kant, Reid recognized that we understand the world through a conceptual grid. Yet he asserted that God had constituted the human mind in a way that corresponds to the objective world.³¹ As we use our senses and rational capacities carefully, we know the real world. As far as Reid was concerned, the philosophical questions raised against these assumptions were simply denying the first and universal principles of common sense.³²

Most of us recognize at least an element of truth in these philosophical traditions. We usually trust our senses to give us reliable knowledge. We believe our ability to reason will get us through the day. On the whole we think that we have experienced and understood the real, objective world.

Most Bible interpreters in the English-speaking world have applied this kind of thinking to Biblical hermeneutics, modeling their interpretations on rational-scientific objectivism. We strip away misconceptions and apply scientific procedures, so we can see Scriptures as they really are. From left to right on the theological spectrum, interpreters assume that proper methods can unveil the objective meaning of a text.

This tendency toward objectivism has especially influenced evangelical hermeneutics. In older works a generic objectivism prevails with little apparent self-consciousness.³³ This quest for objectivity through the grammatico-historical method prompted “a kind of ‘*tabula rasa*’ approach to exegesis.”³⁴

The same tendency continues today. Recent studies on the role of preconceptions in hermeneutics have created more sensitivity to the subjective element. No responsible interpreter thinks that every vestige of subjectivity can be eliminated. Yet evangelicals often give little more than lip service to this side of interpretation, mostly emphasizing the objective text as the locus of meaning.

Prescriptive Emphasis

Objectivism leads to a predictable emphasis. Whereas subjectivism describes what happens when we interpret, objectivism *prescribes* the way in which we should read Scripture.

A survey of evangelical works on hermeneutics demonstrates this propensity toward rules for interpretation. Consider a couple of titles: *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Berkhof) and *The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics* (Chafer).³⁵ Sometimes we are warned against reducing interpretation to a science,³⁶ but the heartbeat of evangelical hermeneutics has been developing rules and guidelines which assure us of arriving at true understanding.³⁷

Exegetical rules are valuable in preparing to read Old Testament narratives. We make many mistakes that good methodology can correct. But a focus on hermeneutical rules without careful consideration of the actual processes of interpretation can be misleading.

For example, a common interpretative principle is that the stories of Scripture must be evaluated in terms of the commands and doctrinal teachings of the Bible. No doubt this rule helps us look at one passage in light of others, but it presents only one side of the coin. If we look at what we actually do as we interpret narratives, we can see that our emphasis on didactic materials is out of balance. Narratives can help us understand the didactic portions of Scripture as well. For instance, Jesus understood the Sabbath regulations in the light of a story about David (Mark 2:23–27). We understand stealing, adultery, killing, and bearing false witness through stories involving these sins. In a word, narratives and doctrinal materials inform each other. Any hermeneutical principle that denies this reciprocity is abstract and misleading.

So it is that prescriptive preparation is valuable, if it is not divorced from thorough description. What we *should do* must always be set within the context of what we *in fact do*.

The Authority-Dialogue Model

In this study we will attempt to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism and objectivism by adopting the “Authority-Dialogue” model. This model will steer us away from relativism and rationalism in interpretation.

Dialogue has been used as a hermeneutical model by a number of writers. Heidegger and Gadamer, who tend toward subjectivism, popularized the dialogical approach to interpretation. They described the reader and the text as involved in conversational give-and-take.³⁸ While this model is helpful in many ways, it has limited application for evangelicals. When we speak of interpretation as a dialogue, we must also keep in mind the doctrine of Biblical authority.

Dialogue with an Authority

In everyday life we converse with people under our authority, with peers, and with people who have authority over us. These conversations take on very different characteristics depending on our relationship with the other person. For instance, how we feel about the other person will greatly influence the dialogue. The tone and content of a conversation with a preschooler on medical questions will be different from talking with a doctor. We speak differently with a friend about legal questions than we do with a lawyer.

In line with historical Protestant orthodoxy, evangelicals affirm the unquestionable authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and life.³⁹ We are committed to the principle of authority that Biblical writers themselves affirmed.⁴⁰ This conviction deeply influences how we dialogue with Old Testament narratives.

Dialogues with authorities contain at least two common elements. On one hand, we come with our own expectations and questions that prepare us for meaningful dialogue. On the other hand, we come fully yearning for understanding beyond our own ideas.

Once when I was trying to find my way to a small town in rural Mississippi, I missed a turn and could not find my way back. After some time I came across a service station. “They’ll know where it is!” I thought. I pulled over and went inside. “Can you tell me how to get to Duck Hill?” I asked. The attendant gave me directions. “Let me see if I

got this right,” I responded. “I go how far? I turn where?” Finally, after drawing a map, the attendant sent me on my way.

I pulled into that station with many assumptions about myself, my situation, and the station attendant: that I had taken the wrong turn, that the station attendant spoke English and could help me, that there was a way to get back to my destination. But even though I brought these and other ideas to the conversation, I needed more information. The attendant knew things I didn’t know, and if I was going to find my way, I needed to understand his directions. So I listened to his words, watched his hands, and read his map. I even repeated his instructions to make sure I grasped them.

Likewise, when we dialogue with Old Testament narratives, we come with so many expectations and assumptions we cannot even list them all. We assume, for example, that Old Testament stories can be understood to some extent and that they have something valuable to say to us. From our past experiences, we even have ideas of what the passages will say. Without these and other preconceptions, we would not be able to enter a fruitful dialogue and begin interpretation.

Even so, the Old Testament narratives themselves are our unquestionable authority. We must not read our preconceptions into them; rather we must hear what *they* have to say. We are eager to see how they can help us. Because these stories are our inerrant and infallible rule, we use every tool available to help us understand what the texts themselves say.

In many ways only the model of an authority-dialogue protects us from treating Scripture and its readers as peers. Subjectivism tends to make us equal with Scripture by bringing the text down to our level. We critique the Bible as much as it critiques us. Objectivism tends to make us peers with Scripture by raising our understanding to the level of Scripture itself. Our interpretations are identified with the teaching of the text. Only the authority-dialogue keeps the Bible supreme and the reader a servant of the text.

The authority-dialogue model stands in contrast to both subjective and objective tendencies. In contrast to objectivism, it recognizes the constant influence of preconceptions on interpretation. Hermeneutics is fundamentally a dialogue in which we pose questions and make initial proposals. In contrast to subjectivism, the authority-dialogue model recognizes the importance of having methods that allow us to hear Old Testament stories speak authoritatively to our lives. Hermeneutics is a dialogue, but it is a dialogue with an *absolute authority*. It will help to look in detail at both of these contrasts (see figure 4).

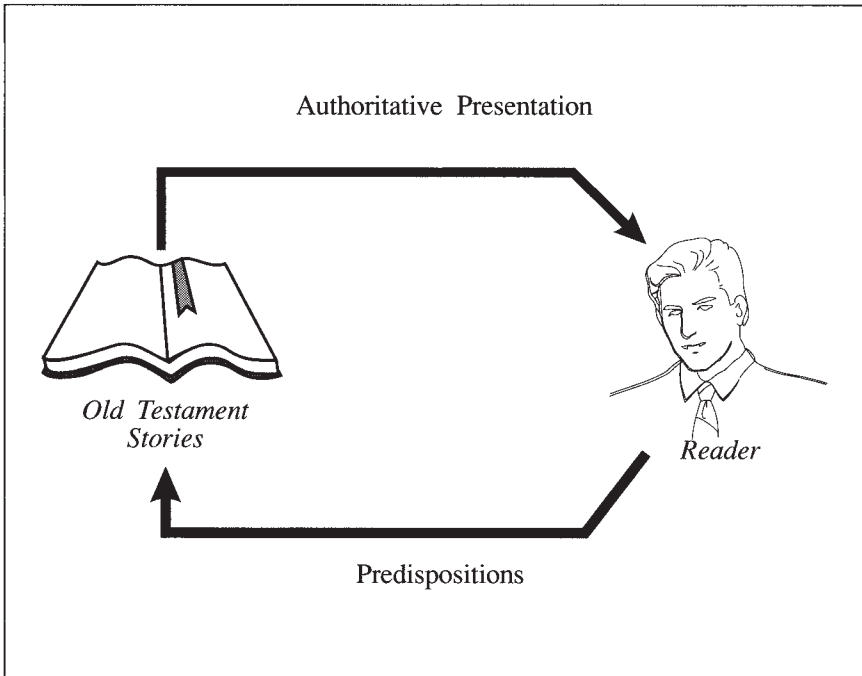


Fig. 4: *Priorities in the Authority-Dialogue Model*

Dangers in Objectivism

The goal of objectivity sounds attractive: to understand Old Testament stories *as they are*. No doubt we should try to overcome barriers to legitimate understanding, but, even so, serious problems lurk behind this attempt to rid ourselves of preconceptions.

I once visited an interdenominational Bible study led by a young man who professed, “No confession but the Bible, no creed but Christ.” He took pride in the fact that he never used a commentary. “I get my messages straight from the Bible,” he said. Sure of his own objectivity, he went on to explain what he felt was the true meaning of the passage. According to him we were merely listening to Scripture.

Toward the end of the study, however, a young woman from a different church background interrupted, “You’re not teaching the Bible! You’re teaching your denominational views!” She then proceeded to tell the group what the text really meant. As they argued back and forth, it was clear that neither person was objective at all. They both read the passage in the light of their denominational theology!

Every believer has experienced the impact of preconceptions in personal Bible reading. Think about your favorite verse. How many times have you read or recited it? Isn't it fascinating that we can read a verse, even memorize it, and still discover new insights nearly every time we come across it? It's remarkable how much more we find in passages when we return to them after a period of years. What makes the difference? The verse itself hasn't changed. Often our exegetical techniques haven't changed significantly. *We* are the variable that modifies our understanding. In His wise providence, God so orders our lives that many of our experiences, questions, and assumptions toward the text vary, creating remarkable differences in the way we understand even familiar passages.

These kinds of experiences should convince us that our interpretation of Old Testament narratives will always be influenced by our preconceptions. But sadly, evangelicals who lean toward objectivism often have the mistaken notion that they can simply read the Bible as it is. They blur the distinction between the Bible and their interpretation of the Bible.

This problem also comes up in academic hermeneutics. In contrast to their informal counterparts, formal interpreters usually admit that complete objectivity is unattainable. Yet, in practice, scholarly interpreters often overlook how much their predispositions influence their understanding. They may carefully scrutinize a few blatant misconceptions, but after some initial self-reflection, they too act as if their preconceptions are insignificant. They assume that readers are largely unbiased so long as they follow well-conceived methods. As a result they often treat their exegetical conclusions as objective statements of fact.

Ironically, this outlook often results in a backhanded subjectivism in which we allow unnoticed prejudices to ride roughshod over interpretation. Without realizing it, we read our own ideas into the text. So far as our constantly changing predispositions remain in the background of our unconscious, they remain misleading and dangerous. Our interpretations are inescapably affected by what we bring to the text.

Recent philosophical hermeneutics have influenced more evangelicals to begin questioning the objective model. The notion that readers may harness all of their influential prejudices through careful methodology has increasingly come under scrutiny.⁴¹ In the future we will see even more distance between evangelical hermeneutics and objectivism.

Dangers in Subjectivism

The authority-dialogue model also stands apart from hermeneutical subjectivism. One of the most important differences lies in the evaluation of exegetical methods.

As we have seen, interpreters who emphasize the subjective side of hermeneutics shy away from prescribing rules for interpretation. They are suspicious of the traditional emphasis on rules, which give the impression that it is possible to set aside prejudices. But the authority-dialogue model stands in opposition to this outlook. Though exegetical methods are always influenced by our backgrounds, we are not free to approach Old Testament narratives any way we want. Because these texts are our authority, we must try to use interpretative methods that allow the texts to communicate their message to us.

Once again the issue of authority is central. In many circles where subjectivism rules, Scripture and readers are considered equals. Consequently, we find little reason for bringing our interpretative methods into submission to the text. Interpreters have every right to make the Old Testament narratives play by their rules.

In contrast, evangelicals view readers as subordinate to Old Testament stories, affirming the responsibility to interpret in compliance with the phenomena of these texts. Some methods are indeed better than others. In fact, some exegetical procedures are out of accord with Old Testament narratives. There is a definite “ethic” to evangelical hermeneutics.⁴² We have not come to make Old Testament stories dance to our music; we have come to dance to their melody.

Seeking to submit ourselves to Scripture, we are concerned not only with arriving at an understanding from a particular viewpoint—whether tradition (Gadamer), some sort of life-engagement (Heidegger), or a socio-political ideology (Liberationists)—but we want our understanding to be appropriate for the way the stories of the Old Testament present themselves.

How do we decide which methods to use? On a basic level, many procedures are not difficult to discern. Even a cursory acquaintance with Scripture gives some guidelines. For example, no one would deny that Old Testament stories have literary qualities. To follow methods that ignore these features will muffle the voice of Scripture. Old Testament narratives were written with certain grammatical conventions; interpretation must observe these conventions. These texts are ancient documents; they must be handled as ancient books. To look at them as modern writings is to misconstrue them. The list of such basic rules of interpretation

goes on and on. As Tracy has said, “Every text, after all, is a structured whole. Every subject matter comes to us with a claim to serious attention in and through its form and structure.”⁴³

Nevertheless, once we move beyond these basic considerations, it becomes plain that our exegetical techniques need to follow the framework of the authority-dialogue. We begin with methodological assumptions from our backgrounds and modify them as we interact with Scripture.

How do we decide the best way to understand someone in an ordinary conversation? From early childhood our conversational experiences begin to teach us many things about understanding other people. We begin our communications with a host of assumptions, but we also adjust our methods during the conversation. Someone may speak with a heavy accent, use sign language, or even seem totally incoherent. We accommodate ourselves to each situation as best we can. We ask questions, we make them repeat themselves, and we use every means available to adjust our techniques. As we continue in the dialogue, we refine our approach to match the presentation of the ones with whom we speak.

In a similar way, methods for interpreting Old Testament stories evolve through interaction with these texts. As Ricoeur put it, methodological guidelines for explanation (*Erklärung*) are helpful when we remember that they are a part of the process of understanding (*Verstehen*).⁴⁴ All attempts to establish and improve hermeneutical procedures are a part of our ongoing dialogue with Old Testament stories. Interpretative rules are not objective, fixed items. On the contrary, they are subject to improvement as our awareness of texts improves.

In contrast with tendencies toward subjectivism, the authority-dialogue model holds that we must work hard at developing methods to guide us toward legitimate understanding. Yet we must be willing to refine our methods as we become more familiar with Old Testament narratives.

Hermeneutical Progress

But doesn't the authority-dialogue model still leave us in a vicious circle? What assurance do we have that we can progress in our understanding when we develop methods and conclusions in the context of dialogue?

It is common to describe the hermeneutical process as a “hermeneutical circle,” a constant cycle back and forth between the reader and the text.⁴⁵ As many have suggested, however, this term is unfortunate.⁴⁶ I prefer to think of interpretation as a “hermeneutical spiral.”⁴⁷ This model recognizes the dialogical relationship between Scripture and its

readers, but it also indicates that there is a forward movement of the dialogue toward the goal of fuller understanding.

What generates this forward spiraling toward better understanding? As we saw in the preceding chapter, hermeneutical progress ultimately rests in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Only His illumination can move us toward truth. But recent studies have pointed out that the Spirit uses many different resources to help us in this process.

Before Schleiermacher (1768–1834)⁴⁸ it had become common to speak of specialized hermeneutics for theology, literature, and law.⁴⁹ These were viewed as separate disciplines with their own interpretative procedures. Schleiermacher, however, argued that a common “art of understanding” (*Kunst des Verstehens*) operated for all language. Schleiermacher believed that the same general process of human understanding lies behind all specializations. One effect of this view has been to set Biblical interpretation against the backdrop of human knowledge in a variety of disciplines.⁵⁰

In line with these modern interests, evangelicals must realize that Old Testament interpretation is influenced by nearly every discipline ranging from the physical sciences to the humanities.⁵¹ Linguistics, literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, archaeology—to name only a few more prominent fields—open the way for progress in interpretation.

Inevitably, some evangelicals will feel uncomfortable with depending on resources outside of the Bible. Isn't it good enough just to read the Bible? Doesn't depending on other disciplines contradict belief in “Scripture interpreting Scripture” (*Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)?⁵²

On the contrary, Scripture interpreting Scripture has to do with the notion of infallible interpretation. Over against church tradition and private judgment, the Reformers insisted that the only unquestionable guide for interpretation is the Bible itself.⁵³ Evangelical circles continue to acknowledge this basic principle.⁵⁴ The Bible is its best interpreter, and the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to help us interpret Scripture. This formula, however, does not rule out the contribution of other disciplines.

Relying on other resources fits well with belief in the interdependence of special and general revelation. Evangelicals affirm the longstanding Christian view that God has revealed Himself through Scripture (special revelation) and in all of creation (general revelation).⁵⁵ These two sources of revelation work with each other and not against each other.⁵⁶

Usually evangelicals think of the relationship between special and general revelation in only one direction. If we want insight into an as-

pect of life, we look at it through the Bible. Whatever the particular issue, the Bible is our guide to proper understanding. Historically, Protestants have emphasized Scripture as the spectacles through which we correctly understand general revelation.⁵⁷

But it works the other way as well; general revelation helps us understand special revelation. What the Spirit teaches us from resources outside the Bible also equips us to interpret Scripture.⁵⁸

The struggle between Galileo (1564–1642) and church authorities illustrates the importance of extra-Biblical resources for interpretation.⁵⁹ The church took Joshua 10:13 (“so the sun stood still”) to mean that the sun stopped revolving around the earth for a time. This interpretation seemed rather obvious in that day. Today, however, scientific investigations have established that day and night are caused by the earth spinning on its axis. Consequently, most modern evangelicals understand this passage differently from their historical counterparts. We know that daylight was miraculously extended for Joshua, but we also know that the halting of the sun was an appearance relative to Joshua’s position on earth. We now consider Joshua 10:13 as ordinary, non-scientific language much like we still speak of “sunrise” and “sunset.”⁶⁰ Improved awareness of general revelation has not caused us to reject Scripture, but it has helped us adjust our interpretation of Scripture. In this case and many others, the Holy Spirit has used general revelation to enhance our understanding of special revelation.

We must remember that many factors hamper our ability to understand both forms of revelation. As a result, Biblical studies and other disciplines often seem to conflict. When these tensions arise, the two forms of revelation are not actually at odds; general and special revelation are never contradictory since both come from God. Our *understanding* is the problem. Sometimes our awareness of the Bible needs improvement. At other times our understanding of general revelation is inadequate. Then again, our perspectives on both may be wrong.

When such conflicts arise, evangelicals favor their understanding of Scripture until the evidence of general revelation is overpowering.⁶¹ This course is the way of wisdom, but we must never go so far as to deny the value of insights from different fields. Compelling evidence from general revelation can persuade us to change our interpretation of the Bible without giving up our commitment to Biblical authority. J. I. Packer has summed up the matter nicely:

It is not for scientific theories to dictate what Scripture may and may not say, although extra-Biblical information will sometimes helpfully

expose a misinterpretation of Scripture. . . . For though exegesis must be controlled by the text itself, not shaped by extraneous considerations, the exegetical process is constantly stimulated by questioning the text as to whether it means this or that.⁶²

In the chapters that follow, we will explore how the Spirit uses both the Bible and general revelation to influence our interpretation of Old Testament narratives. These influences may be divided in many ways, but for the sake of convenience, we will separate them into three major areas: *individual Christian living*, *interaction in community*, and *exegesis of Scripture*.

Individual Christian living. First, we will see that individual Christian living impacts our reading of Scripture. The Spirit uses our personalities, experiences, and callings in life to help us to understand Old Testament narratives. Suffering makes us aware of Biblical teaching on human pain; joyous events open us to other facets of Old Testament narratives; ethical life styles confirm and flesh out the guiding principles of these texts. Every ordinary and extraordinary aspect of our lives has the potential of moving us along the hermeneutical spiral. The Holy Spirit uses our individual Christian lives to influence our interpretation of Old Testament stories.

Interaction in community. Second, we will notice that the Spirit prepares us to read Scripture by our interaction in community. This aspect of general revelation reveals how the Holy Spirit helps us interpret Scripture through other people—teachers, books, friends, family members. Interaction with others who have learned from the Spirit prepares us to examine Old Testament stories.

Exegesis of Scripture. Third, the Spirit prepares us to interpret by involving us in the exegesis of Scripture. What we gain from exposure to the Bible deeply influences us. Nothing can replace looking at special revelation itself. Exploring the Bible also moves us along the hermeneutical spiral toward better understanding. As we will see, these hermeneutical resources offer us indispensable help for interpretation (see figure 5).

Conclusion

We began this chapter with the realization that a classroom dialogue requires us to prepare to speak and listen. Reading Old Testament narratives is like a classroom discussion. We always speak and listen as we examine Old Testament stories. Yet we are not left to our own devices

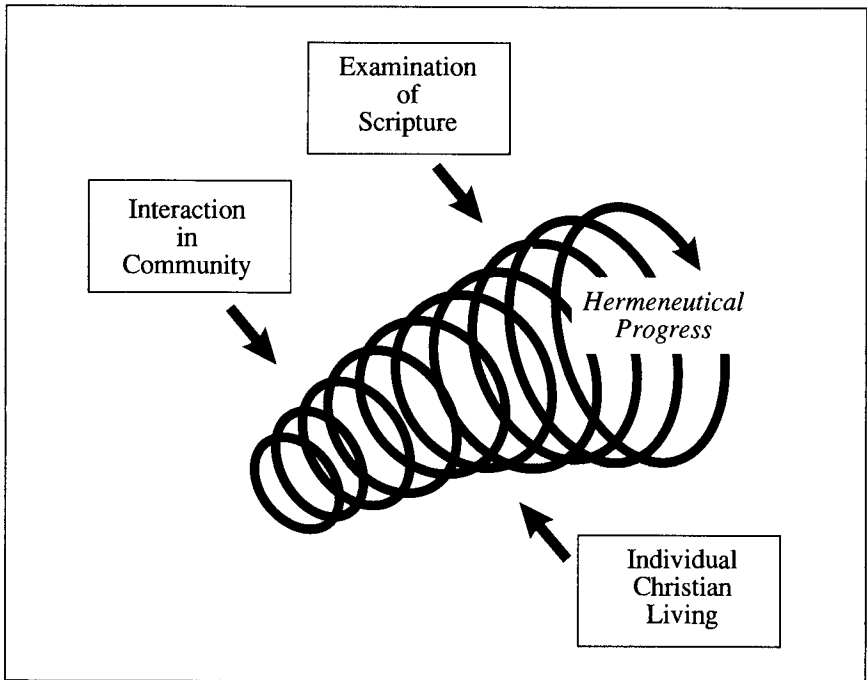


Fig. 5: Major Resources for Hermeneutical Progress

to prepare for this dialogue. The Spirit prepares us through individual Christian living, interaction in community, and examination of Scripture. By these means we are prepared to move forward on the hermeneutical spiral toward fuller understanding and appropriation of Old Testament narratives.

Review Questions

1. Describe the philosophical background of subjectivism in formal hermeneutics. Why has this outlook led to a descriptive emphasis? What are some dangers of subjectivism?
2. Describe the philosophical background of objectivism in formal hermeneutics. Why has this outlook led to a prescriptive emphasis? What are some dangers of objectivism?
3. What is an “authority-dialogue model” for Old Testament hermeneutics? How does it differ from subjectivism and objectivism? How may we hope for progress in understanding with this model?

Study Exercises

1. Read 2 Chronicles 12:1–12. Make a list of five theological conclusions you may draw from this passage. Now evaluate your list. How have your precommitments influenced your interpretation of this passage?
2. Examine and compare an old and modern commentary on 2 Chronicles 12:1–12. How are their comments different? What influences from the commentators' predispositions can you discern?
3. Ask a friend to read 2 Chronicles 12:1–12 and to list five theological implications of the passage. Compare his or her list with your list from exercise one. How are they similar? How are they different? Why?