

**A RESPONDENT SPARK:  
THE BASICS OF BIBLE STUDY**

**Second Edition**

**Chuck Fager**



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My family has been remarkably patient with me during (and after) the many late nights I put into finishing this book. My children, Annika, Molly, Gulielma and Asa, are used to seeing me sitting at the typewriter, or in this more recent case, at the word processor; and I hope that in the fullness of time, this book will be of use to them, and show that these hours were spent with them in mind as well.

Lastly, I must include a greeting to Mr. William B. Eerdmans, Jr., of Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bill, this is all your fault –you bought me that first study Bible back in 1967, when I wasn't even interested. I still have it, of course, and I think the battered leather cover and the well-thumbed, much scribbled-upon pages attest to the fact that you chose wisely and made a good investment. I don't know how much of the theology in these pages you will agree with, but if it isn't much, there's always hope. I have thanked you for the gift of the Scriptures before; let me do it again here, in public.

## INTRODUCTION: LEARNING HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE ON YOUR OWN

### Is This the Book For You?

This brief handbook is for certain kinds of people:

First, people who don't know much about the bible, but think they would like to.

Second, it is for people who are independent-minded, and prefer to form their own judgments rather than simply accept the pronouncements of a traditional authority, no matter how venerable.

Third, it is for those who have a high tolerance for ambiguity because, as we shall see, one thing the Bible doesn't offer is easy, automatic, simple answers.

This book is also for people who want a practical approach. There is, of course, much more to this subject than could possibly fit into these few pages; but it is my hope that when you have finished it, and become familiar with the tools it describes, you will be able to pick up the Bible, begin to make sense of what you read, know where to get more information about it, and not be afraid of following your leadings about its meaning wherever they may lead.

Beyond the personal benefits it offers, the ability to find your way around in the Bible is of particular value these days, when groups who claim to have the exclusive, true understanding of Scripture are running around attempting to impose their understanding on everyone else, or else.

I happen to think that these groups are mostly wrong, especially about what the Bible means. But I don't think their efforts can be effectively blunted except by people prepared to meet them on their own ground, that is on the basis of knowing something about what the Bible says and how to figure out what the text means.

If you too are worried about such groups, here's your chance to start getting ready to stand up to them, and deny them their most powerful and dangerous weapon –their misuse of the Bible.

### Building on a Quaker Perspective

It is fitting that a study like this is built on a Quaker perspective, because the independence of mind it presumes was a central aspect of the early witness of the Quaker movement, and remains a characteristic of Quakerism at its best today.

Indeed, reading some of the writings of early Friends on the Bible can be an illuminating, not to say astonishing experience. That is because much of their approach to Scripture, as well as many of their specific interpretations, sound remarkably contemporary, even though they were written more than 300 years ago.

Take, for instance, two related ideas: First, that the biblical texts we read contain errors and even contradictions, which make ridiculous the notion of treating the Bible as an all-purpose, authoritative answer book about religion, ancient history and even science; and Second, that a genuine and vigorous religious faith can nonetheless be nurtured and deepened by study of the biblical witness, contradictions and all. (Several striking quotes from early Quakers on the proper place and use of the Scriptures are included in the Appendix; see also Barclay, p.56ff.)

Today these propositions are taken for granted by many profound Bible students and scholars. Yet when they were presented by a great early Quaker theologian named Robert Barclay in his 1676 book **The Apology**, they were unheard of, and caused a ferocious uproar. Barclay's Quaker ideas were widely and bitterly denounced as infidel heresies destructive of true biblical faith and deserving only to be crushed, by force if necessary. And persecuted the early Friends indeed were, by the thousands.

The Quakers stuck to their beliefs, however, including this pioneering approach to Scripture. From it they drew some practical conclusions which were likewise far ahead of their time. One early conviction was that women had as much right to participate in ministry as men.

The Quaker case for female equality was made as early as 1666 by Margaret Fell, one of the central figures of the first generation of Friends, in her fiery pamphlet, **Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures....** Fell based her argument almost completely on Biblical texts interpreted in the Quaker manner.

Reading her impassioned broadside today, it is amazing to see how closely her 320 year-old arguments prefigure the current, ongoing debate over the place of women now raging in many conservative Christian denominations. Even most of the biblical verses she cites are the same, and there is but little improvement made upon her argument even by the best of her modern imitators, a good many of whom very likely never heard of her. (See, for instance, Swartley, Chapter Four.) And don't miss Appendix Two's discussion of *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

Similar lines of Scripture-based argument led the Friends to oppose slavery about a century ahead of anyone else; and it has borne up their testimony against war since the beginning.

In more recent times, The Society of Friends, particularly in America, split into several separate groupings. Some of these groups have adopted a conventional, essentially fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, which displays little of the adventuresome approach of their forebears. Other more theologically liberal and humanist-inclined Friends have for some years largely neglected, ignored or rejected the Bible, at least what little they knew of it. But Bible studies have been making something of a comeback in recent years among these more liberal-humanist groups of Friends; and more than a few of the Evangelical Quakers are taking a fresh look at the Scripture through the more adventurous early Quaker lenses, and finding the results both refreshing and creatively unsettling. It is my hope that this book is one example of this revival of Quaker biblical study, and can make some contribution to it.

At the same time, you don't need to be a Quaker to make use of this book. I have tried to write it in such a way that it can equip readers from many denominational

backgrounds, or none, to find their way around in the Bible and to get the most out of what they discover when they do.

That's enough introduction.

Let's get to work.

**PS for the 2018 reprinting:** This book was prepared in 1984. There has been much challenging Bible study since then. I have not attempted to update this text in light of that work; I encourage other Friends to take that up. The reader is advised to be patient with what has become dated, and look for those ideas and reflections which still have value these thirty-plus years since its initial appearance.

I have also largely left various irregularities in formatting, which reflect the text's passage through several different computers and word processing systems, largely alone. Bear with me on this.

## **PRELUDE: THREE STAGES OF BIBLE STUDY**

While Bible study methods vary widely, I have watched many people, including myself, go through three similar stages in their encounter with the Bible. Not everyone goes through these same three stages, and they are not a requirement for anyone, or for using this book, but I have seen enough persons pass through them to think the stages worth describing in some detail:

**Stage one: Detoxification.** Many readers come to the Bible with much negative baggage, ranging from unpleasant religious training as a child to experiences of actual persecution, trauma and abuse at the hands of any of the many fanatics who have used the Bible as justification or as a weapon. They know the Bible best from its dark side. Yet for whatever reason they are now curious about the book, curious enough to put some effort into understanding it.

Crucial to this stage is the finding of a permissive study environment, be it a church, a teacher or even just a non-dogmatic book or two. It must become possible to study the Bible without having to feel as if they are confronting some herald of firebreathing judgment. In this setting they can face the Dark Side of the Bible safely, name it and see if there is anything for them beyond it.

If they do, in such an atmosphere the Bible often turns out to be an intriguing, varied, and soon a fascinating store of material. There is typically a sense of discovery, and perhaps some anger at the teachers or authority figures of earlier times, for having left one with an image of Scripture as such a flat, narrow, cold and even sinister document.

Before long the process of study, in whatever haphazard form it may take, becomes a self-sustaining process, which could be summed up in the comment, "I never thought the Bible could be so interesting."

**Stage Two: Uncovering a Resource.** As study continues, a sense of the counterpoint and depth of the texts begins to emerge:

There are gripping stories here, like Jonathan and David, or David and Absalom; there is a poetry in some of the prophets that rings true and powerful even after 2500 years. There is a telling of cruel and despicable stories, as of some of the latter kings of a doomed Israel and Judah, often without whitewashing or excuses. There is a clear-eyed confrontation, in Job and Ecclesiastes, with the essential ambiguity of life and the limitations of our efforts, even with Scriptural help, to make sense of it. And there is the

persistent appeal of even such a quirky character as Paul; and even more of the enigmatic carpenter's son he came to call his Lord.

It may then become possible to begin to understand just why there are so many libraries full of books about the people, events, settings and issues involved in the Bible: Because as much as one learns, there seems to be just as much more in the texts to explore.

Furthermore, over time parallels begin to emerge between issues and stories dealt with in the text and corresponding issues and experiences in one's own life. It isn't that one can take questions to the text, flip randomly to a page and find an answer; but rather, such things as Jesus' parables, or stories like those of the mistreatment of a prophet like Jeremiah, not only by his government but by the God who had sent him out to prophesy, or any of a host of others, somehow begin to resonate with one's own experience, to illuminate it.

As the poet Coleridge once put it, "I meet that in Scripture which finds me." Another writer said, of the parables of Jesus, that we do not so much come to understand them as rather to begin to see that they understand us. Following on such a growing sense of recognition, there comes to be more than interest involved; one would say, if asked, that the Bible had now become a valuable "resource" in one's life.

**Stage Three: Godwrestling.** At some point, however, some begin to realize that the encounter with the Bible is taking on a deeper dimension. In my observation this does not typically happen quickly or dramatically; such abrupt conversions are characteristic of the literalist communities. It is more like a slow dawn, or the sprouting of a plant.

Exactly what to call this deeper involvement can be a problem, because not uncommonly there is reluctance and embarrassment to talk about God as something real. Yet their experience in Bible study is nonetheless pointing, if not toward God, then toward something in the process that rather closely resembles revelation.

It is a sense that these stories and images are freighted with meanings within meanings, layer upon layer, among which are some that seem especially directed at the student—they speak to his or her condition in a manner unlike, and deeper than, other sources of insight. Moreover, one begins to sense hints of purpose behind them as well, maybe not even a single purpose, and certainly not a purpose that is well understood, but just the same one more and more strongly perceived.

Against the background of this growing perception, the idea proposed in the last chapter of regarding all of Scripture as "inspired" in the way 2Tim. 3:16 describes it, makes more and more sense. Again, the Bible has not become an answer book, but rather an arena of ultimate engagement, even struggle, as well as a source of comfort and reassurance.

Furthermore, such formulations as creeds, dogmas and traditions now begin to lose some of their fearsome aspect, at least to the extent that they can begin to be seen as faltering human efforts to make some preliminary sense of these Purposes and their mysterious Source. Their weaknesses and abuses can be judged more calmly as well, balanced against the usefulness they also had in expressing, if only provisionally, something of these purposes and their meaning for people.

This stage represents a qualitative change in one's relationship to the Bible. Scripture would now be described as revelation, or some equivalent term.

A Jewish writer, Arthur Waskow, is my teacher and mentor, through his writing, in its crucial aspect of the work. Through the 1960s, he had built a career as a leftist, secular Jewish writer and scholar. But then he took a turn, and wrote vividly of his own journey in a March 1, 1973 article in WIN Magazine:

"In the spring of 1968," he recalled, "I began an encounter with Judaism, Yiddishkeit; in the winter of 1972, that encounter deepened into one with God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—especially the God of Jacob, who became Israel, the God-wrestler." (Waskow, 1973.) This image comes out of a story in Genesis 32, which we will look at more closely later. For Waskow the encounter took the form of learning Hebrew and studying the Jewish Scriptures.

How did Waskow know when he had made this transition? He knew because he began doing something he had never done before in his career as an academic and intellectual activist: "I knew how sharp a turning it was," he wrote, "when I realized that for the first time in my life, I was writing poetry."

And this was not greeting card verse, either. Consider these lines from one of his earliest poems (Waskow, WIN, *Ibid.*):

"Wrestling feels a lot like making love."  
Why did Jacob wrestle with God, why did the others talk?  
God surely enjoyed that all-night fling with Jacob:  
Told him he'd won,  
Renamed him and us the Godwrestler,  
Even left him with a limp to be sure he'd remember it all.  
But ever since, we've talked.  
Did something peculiar happen that night?  
Did somebody say the next day we shouldn't wrestle? Who?  
We should wrestle again with our Comrade sometime soon.  
Wrestling feels a lot like making love."

This, then, was what one man could say as a result of his own passage through these stages. He soon published a book with a one word title: *Godwrestling*. We will look more closely at this book and its title image after some preliminary work.

To reiterate, not everyone who begins Bible study goes through these same stages (or turns into a poet). But as you begin your own course of Bible study, George Fox's challenge will remain: what, as a result of encounter with the Scriptures canst Thou say?

If, as I have argued, there is something in them that can strike a respondent spark in the human soul, then you will no doubt find out what you can say; and when the time comes, you will say it.

My hope is that this amateur study can be of help in that.

## CHAPTER ONE: GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE BIBLE

The Bible is not one book, but a collection. While the first book, Genesis, begins at the beginning –of everything –and the last book, Revelation, ends with the end of everything, the Bible does not move from beginning to end like a modern narrative or novel. Instead, along the way there are many different types of writings, among them the following (Don't try to look up these texts yet, though; we will get to that in a moment):

History (cf. 1K 15:1-2)  
Law (Cf. Lev 11:1-8)  
Legend (Gen 5:25-27)  
Letters (Gal 1:1-6, and 6:11)  
Hymns (Ps 101:1-2)  
Poetry, the rhyme of ideas (Ps 27:1-3)  
Wise sayings (Pr 6:6-11)  
Prophecy (Am 2:4-5)  
Visions (Ezk 1:1-11)  
Love poetry (SS 1:1-4)  
Biography (Lk 1:1-4)

### **Finding Your Way Around**

There are 66 books in the Bible we will be using, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Each book is divided into chapters, and in each chapter each thought or sentence is numbered and called a “verse.”

Most Bibles have a list of all the books, and the page number where each begins, near the front. Even more useful is a list of the books in **alphabetical order**; a Bible without such a list is hard to use unless you are already very familiar with the texts. Such a list will also usually have next to the name of each book the **abbreviation for it** commonly used in references, like those listed above.

It is a good idea to become familiar with these book names and abbreviations, and to practice using the listing to find your way around in the Bible.

### **Practice**

Look up the texts mentioned above, using the list of books and abbreviations in your Bible.

## Arrangement of Books in the Bible

There are, first of all, two main parts to the Bible, what has long been called by Christian writers the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is a series of books selected by the Jews; it is more properly known as the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament is a series of books added to it by the Christian community. (Some denominations have additional books: for instance, the Catholic Bible includes a series of books which emerged in the period of history between the Old and New Testaments, books which are rejected by most Protestant groups, but retained by Catholic Bibles.)

In the **Jewish or Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament)**, there are **four main sections**:

**First comes The Torah**, also called the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch, which include the first five books in the Bible;

**Next are the Former Prophets**, a series of six historical books in which a succession of prophets figures prominently;

**Third are The Writings**, a collection of 13 books on a variety of topics, such as Psalms, Proverbs and Job;

**Finally, The Latter Prophets**, a group of 15 books which are mainly collections of messages, or oracles, delivered by various prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

There are a few books, such as Ruth and Daniel, which are considered to be in one category, the Writings, but are placed in other categories.

In the **Christian Scriptures (aka the New Testament)**, there are also four main sections or types of books:

**First** are the four Gospels, which describe the career and messages of Jesus;

**Next is a book of early church history**, the Acts of the Apostles;

Third is a collection of 21 letters, or epistles, many by Paul and several by unknown authors;

**Finally, there is the Book of Revelation**, also called The Apocalypse, a series of visions about the end of history.

## The “Bible” and the “Testaments”

The word “Bible” comes from the Greek word “biblos,” meaning simply “the books.” It refers to a time when the Jewish scriptures were in fact a loose collection of scrolls, or books, kept in their synagogues and used in worship services.

The word “Testament” is taken from the Latin word “testamentum,” which means the same as the Greek word for **covenant**. In the terms “New Testament” and “Old Testament,” they refer to the Christian belief that the Jewish scriptures describe an “old” relationship, or covenant, between God and the Jews, which had been superseded by a “new” relationship or covenant, between God and all people, based on the life and work of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament.

## How The Bible Was Assembled

There were many other religious “books” (actually long scrolls rolled up for storage and unrolled for reading or recitation) written and circulated among the Jewish and early Christian communities besides the ones we find in our present Bible. The process by which some of these books were set apart as “scripture” was a long and complicated one.

The Torah, for instance, was generally regarded as sacred as early as 400 B.C. But the place of some books in the Jewish scriptures was still being debated in Jesus' day. (Both Jesus and Paul, for instance, quote as scripture writings which are not found anywhere in the Old Testament or in other known ancient writings. Cf. John 7:38, and 1 Cor 2:09.) But the list of books in the Hebrew scriptures became final by the end of the first century, perhaps at a gathering of rabbis and scholars called the Council of Jamnia, which took place around 90 A.D. One major criterion for inclusion was how long and widely a particular book had been used in worship by the community.

Among Christians, bishops and patriarchs gathered in various councils during the first three centuries and argued over exactly **which** of the many books in circulation ought to be considered “inspired by God” and thus set apart as sacred. Some books, like the four Gospels, were easy to agree on. Others, like Revelation, various letters, and some of the Old Testament books included among The Writings, were debated for much longer, and were accepted only much later, if at all. Even then, the Eastern Orthodox and the Syriac Christian Churches both adopted versions of the Bible that differ significantly from the version familiar to non-Catholics in the West.

The selection process in the West was largely concluded by 367 A.D., when a bishop named Athanasius issued a list of Christian scriptures corresponding to the present list. Seventeen years later, in 382 A.D., St. Jerome began translating the Bible into Latin, using this same list of books. Jerome's version, called the Vulgate, became a standard in western Europe for more than a thousand years. Again, this process of selection was heavily influenced by the extent to which specific books had been widely used for worship and study by various Christian communities.

The books thus chosen make up the “canon” of the Old and New Testaments. The term **canon** comes from a Greek word for a measuring rod. In other words, the books in the Bible are those which “**measure up**” to the standards of leaders in the two religious communities.

During the Reformation, the question of the Canon was raised again by Luther and other reformers, and in 1534 Luther left several Old Testament books out of his edition of the Bible, publishing them separately as what have come to be called “The Apocrypha.”

Thus, just exactly what concepts and standards were used for deciding how much and what kind of “inspiration” enabled a book to “measure up” for inclusion in the canon, and what those concepts and standards might mean for readers today, are questions still very much open to discussion and debate. We will talk about some of these issues later on, when we consider the meaning of “revelation” and “inspiration.”

## CHAPTER TWO: THE WORD AND THE WORDS

Most of the problems and most of the satisfactions of Bible study have to do with words. Let's look briefly at why this is the case.

### **Many Different Texts, Many Different Versions**

Think for a minute about the process by which the texts of, say, the first few books of the Old Testament came to us. Here's how most scholars think it happened:

First there was a **set of stories**, passed down from generation to generation by telling –this could have begun as much as 3500 years ago;

Then a **scribe wrote down** some of these stories on long parchment scrolls (parchment was then made from sheepsins from which the wool had been removed; each sheet was hand-stitched to the next, and the whole was rolled up. The scribes often seemed to try to edit together several different versions, along with his own perspective on their meaning –this could have been 2-3000 years ago.

The scrolls on which these stories and laws were written had to be **laboriously copied by hand**; they were also probably revised as the outlook of the scribes and priests changed. In addition, many errors crept in through mistakes in copying, which were then passed on by the next generation of copyists.

Such copying was the only way of reproduction until the fifteenth century A.D., two or more millenia after some of the texts had first been committed to written form. It is no wonder then, that once printing was introduced and efforts were made to produce a “standard” or authoritative edition of the Bible, that scholars had a great many texts to work with, texts which were different in many respects. (The oldest existing biblical texts of any length go back only to the fourth to the eighth century A.D. That's at least 400 years or more after the latest events they record took place.)

Scholars have worked with printed texts for 500 years, and while considerable progress has been made in eliminating scribal errors, there are still many **versions** of Scripture, and it seems likely there will continue to be many versions.

### **A Difference of Language, A Difference of Culture**

Consider next the fact that the English Bible we use, in whatever version, was translated out of not one but three different languages –ancient Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New. Today, even the best translations of modern works are never exact; and in these ancient languages, as in our own, words often had more than one distinct definition, plus numerous shades of meaning.

Add to this the distance in time and culture between the ancient Near East and modern industrial civilization, and you can begin to glimpse why biblical interpretation more often than not centers around explorations into –and disputes over –**the meaning of words**. (To take a trivial example, in 1 Chron 26:18 and in 2 Kin 23:11 there is a reference to a thing or a place called **Parbar**. No one now knows what Parbar was, or what it was used for. It might have been a building attached to the Temple, or an area nearby. While this uncertainty is unimportant, there are also many important examples, such as what is meant by the title “Son of Man,” or “the Kingdom of God,” “eternal life,” or even “God.”)

### **Where to Get Help With Words**

This linguistic complexity and richness has meant that if you want to become a full-fledged, professional Bible interpreter, you need to study classical Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, as many seminary students still do. Such a study involves a big investment of time and effort.

But for the rest of us, it is still possible to do useful and satisfying exploring into the meanings of these ancient terms. That's because many reference books have been written by top scholars for readers who don't know the languages first-hand. Let's look at three kinds of such word reference books:

First there are **Concordances**, which help you find words in the text. A concordance is simply a long list of words found in the Bible alphabetically, with references to each place where a given word turns up in the 66 books. Concordances can run from a few dozen pages in the back of a Bible, to large-size volumes of 2000+ pages. A concordance is easy to use, and is extremely helpful in study. It is worth paying more for a Bible which includes a good concordance.

Next there are **Interlinear translations**, which feature parallel lines of the text, one in the original Hebrew or Greek, with the most literal possible English translation directly under each word; then under that there is the modern translation. An interlinear translation allows you to see things about the words and their arrangement which are not evident in a straight translation.

Third on this list, there are **Bible word study** books. These, too, are much like dictionaries; but for each English word listed, they give the various Hebrew and Greek terms used in the Bible which are translated into that particular English word. (See the illustration.) They also usually include lists of where each various Hebrew or Greek term is used in the text.

Word study books are particularly useful in tracking down which of various possible meanings a word in a text can have. (Example: Jn 15:15.)

Related to word study books are **lexicons**. These are actual dictionaries of Hebrew and Greek words and their definitions. Many such lexicons are not easy to use, however, because at least half of each volume is alphabetized according to either the Greek or Hebrew alphabet, which most of us are not familiar with. Some lexicons get around this problem by being incorporated with concordances, and having numerical references to the Hebrew and Greek terms. *The Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible*, New American Standard Version, published by Holman, is one such volume.

NOTE for the 2018 printing: Since this book appeared, the rise of the internet has brought together many of these resources together and made them easily available to anyone with access to Google.

### **Practice –Words**

Find a Bible with a Concordance, and look up two references for each of the following words, one each in the Old and New Testament. If you have access to a word study book, look them up there too:

salvation

swear

kingdom

friend

divorce

covenant

## CHAPTER THREE: WORDS IN CONTEXT

### Words, Stories and Books

As fascinating as word studies are, there is much more to Bible study. A word's meaning and importance can be affected by such other things as:

The **passage or story** it is part of;

The **collection** of passages and stories it is part of;

The **religious outlook** of the writer or collector; and

Numerous other historical and cultural factors (e.g., class, sex, etc.) which may not be immediately obvious to a nonspecialist reader.

There are many books which attempt to lay out the specific significance of these factors for the various texts. Such books are generally called **Commentaries**. Many commentaries come in multi-volume sets, some running to many thousands of pages and almost as many volumes as there are books in the Bible.

Some commentaries are written for scholars and ministers; others are written primarily for nonspecialists, with less jargon. There are advantages and disadvantages to both:

The lay commentaries are easier to read and often quite informative. [Many are now online.] On the other hand, they can be very superficial, and often present the author's interpretations as if they were unquestionable fact, which is seldom the case.

The scholarly commentaries delve more deeply into the background of the texts and the issues they raise. On the other hand, they often get bogged down in academic minutiae and are larded with technical terms and phrases which can make them hard to understand.

To get the most from your studies, you should not depend solely on lay commentaries. To help you make your way among the more scholarly texts, a Glossary of some of the main technical terms is included in the Appendix; you don't need to know all the jargon to be able to get value from the books. You can also get help with technical terms from a book such as the **Handbook of Biblical Criticism**, which is discussed in the next chapter.

The interpretations in a commentary may be entirely the author's, or they may represent the official doctrine of a whole denomination. The most useful commentaries, however, not only set forth the authors' views of a text, but also summarize other interpretations, and explain why their views differ.

We're going to look at one particular commentary, **The Interpreter's Bible**, as a good example of the genre.

### **Looking Into a Commentary**

If you opened *The Interpreter's Bible* in the middle of any given volume, you would find the pages arranged in a very specific way, with four distinct sections. These are, reading from the top left of the page:

1. A passage of Scripture, in the King James Version; parallel to this on the right is
2. The same passage in the more recent Revised Standard Version;
3. Underneath this is a series of detailed notes explaining various points about the words and phrases of the scripture passage; this section is called the **Exegesis**;
4. Beneath this, at the bottom of the page, is a continuing series of reflections on these passages, particularly aimed at showing how they might be used in sermons; this section is called the **Exposition**.

In addition, for each book in the Bible there is an introductory essay which deals with such questions as:

- Who wrote the book, when and where, and for what purpose;
- The religious outlook represented in the book;
- A brief summary of the major interpretations of the book;
- A bibliography for further reading.

There are also general articles on the Bible, and on various aspects of the Old and New Testaments. The complete twelve-volume set covers the entire Bible, from beginning to end.

*The Interpreter's Bible* is one of the most widely-used Protestant commentaries in America; it is found, for instance, in a great many public libraries. One reason for this popularity is that its articles, while written by some of the best scholars of its time, are still understandable by most lay readers. Further, its arrangement of text and exegesis is easy to follow, which can't be said of all commentaries.

### **The Value of a Commentary**

A good commentary helps you understand the context of a particular passage. It can also give you a sense of the various ways in which the passage has been interpreted. But to get the most from this aspect of Bible study, you should be willing to look at more than one commentary. There will be tidbits of linguistic and historical information in one that you won't find in another; and as you become familiar with some of the major viewpoints on biblical interpretation, weighing one against another, you will begin to gain confidence in your ability to reach **your own** judgments and interpretations, which is what this process is all about.

### **Graphics: A Supplemental Approach**

One other very helpful way of putting Bible books in context is graphically. An excellent example of such an approach is **Bennett's Guide to the Bible**, a relatively new

work. **Bennett's Guide** puts the biblical texts in graphic and chart form, placing the events in the narrative above a time line, so readers can better understand the sequence by visualizing it. The book also illustrates the most sophisticated theories about how and when the various books were written. It also explains the basic approaches to analyzing the texts in a nontechnical style.

## CHAPTER FOUR: BIBLE STUDY TERMS –AND THE GREAT SEZ WHO?

### Another Word About Words

It's time to take our own plunge into Bible study jargon. We'll start with the word “**exegesis**,” which you will recall was the title for one section of *The Interpreter's Bible*.

In truth, **exegesis** means simply interpretation; when you are doing exegesis, you are, by whatever means, **interpreting** a text, that is, you are trying to make sense of it or explain it, either to yourself or someone else. Someone who does exegesis is called an **exegete**.

(Look out –by the power invested in the author of this book through the authority of lexicographic logic, **YOU** are hereby declared to be about to become an exegete *yourself*. Congratulations, welcome to the club, but don't let it go to your head.)

### And Don't Forget your Dictionary

Remember that you will encounter many new technical terms in the commentaries and other study resources you will be using. In addition to our Glossary, you may want to look for a full-length dictionary of the technical terms and concepts of this trade. One we are familiar with and particularly recommend is the **Handbook of Biblical Criticism**, by Richard Soulen, published by the John Knox Press. This book, while written in a somewhat technical style, can save you hours of confusion, because it includes most of the terms you're likely to run across, from **Agrapha** to **Zadokite Documents**, including biographical entries for the more famous biblical scholars whose names crop up repeatedly in learned discussions. Access to these resources or some equivalent is almost a necessity; there are far too many technical terms to try to remember, though you will pick up many as you go along.

There is, however, one more crucial word which must be defined before we go any further, and that is **Hermeneutics**, pronounced Herman-oo-ticks.

A hermeneutics is a set of rules or principles used to interpret texts which are not self-explanatory; or, in proper technical terminology, one needs a **hermeneutics** (a set of rules for interpretation) in order to do **exegesis** (actually interpreting a text).

Hermeneutics is one of the oldest, perhaps **the** oldest task of biblical studies, and one which has been the focus of more conflicts and debates than any other, debates which continue today. There are two simple but important reasons for this:

First, many if not most of the key passages of the Bible are **not** self-explanatory; to make sense they must be interpreted. This point leads logically to the

Second, namely that the principles (that is, the hermeneutics) which are used in interpreting a text (that is, doing exegesis) **play a crucial, even a determining role in what that interpretation turns out to be.**

Take, as one example, **The Song of Songs** in the Hebrew Scriptures. Many modern exegetes interpret it using a hermeneutics that goes something like this: **The “real” meaning of a text is whatever it meant to the first readers when the text was originally written down.** Thus, to make sense of the Song of Songs, which is highly poetic, they would compare the text to similar types of poetry in ancient Near East cultures, and might well conclude that the Song of Songs appears to be a revised and sacralized version of what was basically a passionate set of love songs of the day, no more and no less.

On the other hand, for centuries Catholic hermeneutics, and much Protestant interpretation afterward, heavily stressed an **allegorical approach** to hermeneutics and interpretation. From this perspective, the literal meaning of a text is of little importance, except as a vehicle for another set of meanings entirely, and these true meanings might not be apparent until centuries later.

In the case of the Song of Songs, the love poetry was interpreted as expressing the mutual love of Christ for the Church, which in Catholic symbolism was described as Christ's bride. (Note that according to this view, when the book was actually composed, several hundred years before Christ was even born, the author thus didn't really know **what** he [or she] was talking about.)

Which of these interpretations is “correct”?

This question immediately leads to another, possibly more important one: **Who is to say which is correct?**

This second question is the hook on which most of Christian history –and much of Jewish history as well –has hung for well over two thousand years.

(And The Song of Songs is a fine case in point: It is one of the shortest books in the Bible, only ten pages or so, but in one of the most respected modern commentaries, *The Anchor Bible*, the commentary on it is one of the thickest volumes of the set.)

Furthermore, it wasn't so long ago that the answers were a matter of life and death: people who questioned the right of the “official” interpreters to decide what the Bible “really” meant were considered heretics, as dangerous and subversive as communists and terrorists are in our time, liable to the rack and burning at the stake.

(Nor, for that matter, is such biblical violence only a matter of ancient history: The modern martyrs of Central America, including Oscar Romero, the four Catholic church women, the Jesuits in El Salvador, and indeed tens of thousands of others, were killed in part because of their “unorthodox” understanding and use of the Bible.)

In European history, a prime example of the hazards of independent interpretation was John Wycliffe, a key figure in the first project to translate the Bible into English. Such a project was then considered a capital crime; Pope Gregory XI condemned it and called for Wycliffe's arrest. Wycliffe managed to evade the wrath of church authorities long enough to die a natural death in 1384. However, the hierarchy was not to be denied its vengeance: In 1417 his moldy bones were dug up so **they** could be burned at the stake

and then tossed into a river, as a warning to other “heretics” who would dare make the Scriptures freely available to the common reader in his or her native tongue.

A century or so later, William Tyndale completed a similar translation project. But he was not as lucky as Wycliffe: Betrayed to church authorities, he was imprisoned, tortured for months, and finally executed in 1536.

Another example, less gruesome but more poignant, was provided in a comment by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, when he was considering the question of emancipating the slaves:

“I am approached,” he wrote, “with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the divine will....I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that, if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is, I will do it! These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree.”

Lincoln alluded to this same problem in his second inaugural address two years later, noting sadly that both sides in the ongoing civil war “read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other.”

### More About Who Decides

The question of who decides how the Bible is to be interpreted we will call the **Hermeneutical Issue of Power**, or the **HIP Question** for short. Answers to the HIP Question have varied widely, but for convenience they can be arranged in an order like a pyramid:



In this pyramid, the **P** represents the **Pope**; in the Catholic system, all such issues were ultimately settled at the top, with the Pope having the final say. The **Bs** stand for **Bishops**, who, as in the Anglican Church, replaced the Pope with an ecclesiastical aristocracy; it too decided matters of interpretation from the top down. The **Es** stand for **Elders**, or church officials as in the Presbyterian system, who decided matters in a somewhat representative manner. The **Cs** are **Congregations**, which, as in the Southern Baptist churches (at least, before the right-wing takeover in the 1980s), means such issues are decided strictly at the local church level, acknowledging no higher earthly authority.

The **Is** stand for **Individuals**, studying and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Quakers are a good example of this latter approach (although at some times in the past, and in some places in the present, they have succumbed to rule by **Es**, or **elders**.)

It should not be a surprise that church leaders have taken the HIP matter with deadly seriousness. For as the answers to the HIP question have moved down from the top of the pyramid through history, drastic social upheavals, including not a few revolutions, have usually followed. And it should also be no surprise that the perspective of this book is rooted firmly among the **Is: Individuals studying the Scriptures and seeking divine guidance themselves, forming their own judgments, for whom hermeneutical theories and church structures are resources and servants, not authorities or masters.**

One final note: It is this writer's conviction that the HIP Question stands behind many apparent conflicts over hermeneutics and exegesis. So as you study the Bible, particularly its texts and themes that are hotly debated by various major interpreters, you should ask yourself from time to time:

*Does the question I'm looking at involve only exegesis and hermeneutics, or is the HIP Question –the question of Power, of who gets to do the interpreting –the hidden agenda here?* I predict that asking this question as you go along will bring many otherwise obscure matters into clearer focus.

### **A Thumbnail sketch of Some Hermeneutic Principles**

Beyond questions of power, hermeneutics has taken many forms down through biblical and church history. We are going to list some of these major approaches, in the briefest fashion, just to get an idea of their variety and major points. There could be, and have been, who shelves of books written about each of these systems, among which are included the following:

**Self-Interpretation** –An approach championed by Martin Luther and some of his Protestant heirs, which argues that the Bible itself, as the inspired Word of God, should be its own interpreter; in practice, it means comparing one passage with another, and has been no more successful in producing a uniform body of interpretation than any other system; it is also known by a Latin phrase, *sui ipsius interpres*.

**Reinterpretation** –An approach which lays much stress on the evident efforts of successive scriptural writers to reinterpret earlier texts and experiences for the community of faith in the light of later experience and divine actions. This approach presumes that biblical faith was (and is) not a static thing, but has changed with time and what Quakers call “continuing revelation.” Thus, from this perspective, a certain ambiguity and openness in the in the Bible is seen not as a flaw, but as an essential part of the biblical message. An excellent study which explores some of the implications of this approach is **Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women**, by Mennonite scholar Willard

Swartley, published by Herald Press. Advocates of this stance tend to be suspicious of dogmatic interpretations, and interpreters.

**Allegorical** –Mentioned above, in which a text is interpreted as taking its real meaning from a parallel set of images and patterns, which are not included in the literal text, and which may or may not be known to the original author.

**Typological** –A kind of interpretation often used by Paul, in which events and persons in one part of the Bible, usually the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament), are seen as “types” or figure of events and characters in the Christian Scriptures or New Testament. These “types” foreshadow or point to things beyond themselves and the time of their writing.

**Demythologized** –This might also be called the “peach pit theory,” because it essentially argues that the true meaning of a text, particularly in the Christian Scriptures, lies within an outer shell of cultural and literary accretions, or “myths,” which can and should be cracked open and put aside. It is associated with a German theologian named Rudolf Bultmann.

**Situational** –In this view, a passage of Scripture has no single **objective** meaning; it gains meaning from the **interaction** between the text and the reader, as part of a worshipping community, all hopefully with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus the meaning of a given passage may vary from reader to reader and from situation to situation.

**Esoteric** –This term covers a wide range of interpretations, but most are built on the idea that the biblical text has some hidden, occult meaning, which one must be specially trained or enlightened to discern, under the tutelage of those already in the know. Some of the many principles of esoteric hermeneutics include numerology, special symbols, and comparative mythologies. Such exegeses have been offered by everyone from the Jewish Kabbalah to Madame Blavatsky to numerous modern channelers. For that matter, even Jesus spoke of “the **secret** of the kingdom of heaven.” (Mark 4:11) This approach is also called the **Anagogic** method.

**Literal** –Associated with fundamentalism, this notion comes down to this: Because the whole Bible, every word, was directly inspired, some say even dictated, by God through the various writers, it must therefore be literally true in every detail, because God cannot make mistakes. (As we will see in detail in the next three chapters, defenders of this outlook have trouble explaining such passages as, for example, Lev. 11:6, which describes the hare as a cud-chewing animal, which it isn't.)

**The Last Days View** –Also known as **Dispensationalism**, this approach has something in common with both the Esoteric and the Literalist schools. It is typified by writers like Hal Lindsey, author of **The Late Great Planet Earth**, one of the biggest bestsellers of the 1970s, and many others. [The turn-of-the-millennium”Left Behind”

series of novels was an even bigger sales phenomenon. And such volumes continue to roll off the press and clog up online social media.) Their exegesis of passages especially in Revelation, Daniel and Ezekiel has persuaded them that the end of the world as we know it is coming very soon. The technical term for the study of these “last things” is **eschatology**, which sounds like scatology but has nothing to do with bathroom humor.

This perspective is literalist in that its advocates believe their interpretations of certain passages are “literally” true and about to come to pass. But it is also esoteric in that the way they interpret passages written more than two thousand years ago as prophecies outlining the geopolitics of 2000+ years ahead are highly imaginative and idiosyncratic, to say the least. (People like Lindsey are unfazed by the fact that similar forecasts of an Imminent End have been made by self-appointed visionaries many, many times, as far back as the first generation of Christianity, and not a single one has **ever** come true.... Yet.

### **Picking and Choosing**

There are numerous other schools of hermeneutical thought [I’m mindful that, written in the mid-1980s, this text omits important studies that were just then emerging, such as feminist/women’s approaches. A tentative bow in that direction is in Appendix Two.] These will be enough to get you started. Before leaving this list, however, there are two important parenthetical points to be made, one about choosing an approach, and the other about hermeneutics and the analysis –as distinct from the exegesis –of texts:

The first point is that, to a reasonably unprejudiced Bible student, it will soon appear that there is something to be gained from many or even all these hermeneutical theories: There are, for instances, allegories in the Bible (cf. Eph 5:31-32); yet most of it is probably not allegorical. Similarly, there are undoubtedly coded messages in various texts (cf. Mk 13:14), and others involving numerology (cf. Rev 13:18) and other esoteric techniques; yet it is very doubtful that all the Bible fits into such a framework. For that matter, some of the Bible clearly means literally just what it says; but some of it just as clearly doesn’t; and there are other parts where it is hard to be sure which is the case, or even how to tell.

The point here is that Bible study is likely to be enriched by an openness to the potential contribution to be made by any or all of these hermeneutic efforts –and it will probably be impoverished by the dogmatic adherence to one at the expense of the rest.

### **A Note on the Higher Criticism**

The second point about hermeneutics has to do with the fact that in the twentieth century, various forms of technical analysis of the content, form, history and function of biblical texts have appeared and been highly developed. These studies, once known generally as “the Higher Criticism,” take up huge amounts of space in most modern commentaries, and often enough they can enrich your studies immensely.

Yet at the same time the relation of these types of textual criticism to hermeneutics, to the search for the meaning of (or the meaning in) the texts being thus analyzed, is highly problematical, and by no means clear.

To put it more directly, the fact seems to be that you can't get a hermeneutics out of textual analysis, as some of this method's champions once thought they could. Rather, just the opposite seems to be true: your hermeneutics is what gives form and meaning to your textual analysis.

Take, for example, a text like 1Cor 14:34: "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak..." If you approach the biblical texts as divinely-authored, authoritative pronouncements, your exegesis of its meaning will be much different than that of someone whose hermeneutics views it as a historically and culturally conditioned statement from one faction in a diverse early church community.

In short, your system of interpretation depends ultimately on your faith. This faith may interact with the text by way of elaborate textual analyses; it may be enriched or challenged by them; but it cannot be built out of them.

The "peach pit" theory of the demythologizers, which not so long ago was a leading hermeneutical approach, has proved to be an illusion: You can't finally say for sure which is the shell in a biblical text and which is the true kernel of the scripture, except by applying interpretive principles which come from outside the text.

As an old preacher's quip aptly puts it, some things you have to see to believe –but other things you have to believe to see.

This fundamental ambiguity, which seems to be built into these forms of analysis, has a bright side: It cuts the scholars down to size, which is to say, about your and my size. When it comes to finding ultimate religious meaning in the Bible, or in life, professional Bible scholars are not so far ahead of anyone else. They, like the rest of us, must as Paul put it in Php 2:12, "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling."

If our interpretations are ultimately grounded in our faith, that brings us to the central issues of the meaning of revelation and inspiration in the Bible, which are the topics of the next chapters.

## CHAPTER FIVE: REVELATION AND INSPIRATION, PART I

By now you might suspect that, as with hermeneutics, there are a number of approaches to revelation and inspiration. And you're right to do so.

At one end of the spectrum of such approaches is the Verbal Inspiration or **Inerrancy** theory, which holds that God essentially dictated the Bible to the various writers, and that the original texts were completely without error, internally consistent and religiously authoritative.

At the other end of the spectrum is the view of the Bible as no more than an especially interesting, if rather lengthy, piece of literature, “inspired” only because it contains some great poetry and noble ethical precepts, as well as some rattling good yarns.

(The range of viewpoints on this issue is well represented among Quakers. Several specimen statements on this subject by Friends old and new are included in the Appendix.)

The Literalists, despite the many difficulties their view presents, do raise an important question: If the Bible is **not** totally true, if part of it is true and part not, part “divine revelation” and part something else, art and error, **how do you tell which is which? And who gets to decide?**

Here we have another power question raising its head; let's call it the **Revelation Issue of Power, or RIP**. But we'll simply nod at the RIP Issue in passing, because the answers essentially replicate the same pyramid we laid out a few pages back.

But to get at the “how do you tell?” question, we're going to temporarily adopt the Self-Interpreting form of exegesis and look at some of the texts in the Bible itself which deal with Inspiration. This program will be at the same time both an exercise in the methods of Bible study we have already looked at, and a further exploration of the issue of inspiration.

If we start with the basic assumption of this hermeneutic approach, that the Bible is its own best interpreter, then we ask first, what does the Bible say about revelation and inspiration? From various passages that refer to this topic, we will examine three which seem particularly, pardon the expression, revealing. They are: Second Peter 1:20-21, Second Timothy 3:16, and Romans 15:4. You should look them up, but we'll also quote them here for convenience:

**1. 2Peter 1:20-21:** “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

**2. 2Timothy 3:16:** “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness....”

**3. Romans 15:4:** “For whatever was written in former days as written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

(All quotations from the Revised Standard Version.)

### **Peter: The Objectivity of Scripture**

Taking these passages in order, it seems obvious that there are some key words in **2Peter 1:20-21** that deserve a closer look, in particular “interpretation” and “moved.” Our first stop in a study of them would be with an Interlinear Translation and a word-study book.

The Interlinear Translation shows that what is rendered as “interpreted” is a phrase that literally reads “every prophecy **of own loosing is not becoming.**” In this phrase it is “own loosing” that is crucial. The message here is not that no one should ever attempt to interpret scripture; the word study book shows that kind of “interpretation” denoted by another word, which is the root of our “hermeneutics.” Rather, Peter is emphasizing his conviction that those who received prophecies were not simply expounding their own private opinions on religious matters, but were transmitting messages delivered to them by God, from outside.

As for “moved,” it literally means “being borne (along),” apparently the way a surfer is carried by the force of a big wave. Another recent translation of this phrase is “men spoke from God **as they were borne along by holy spirit.**” Others have rendered this phrase as “taught” rather than “moved.”

Next, we check in a commentary for the context of this statement. It is part of a long tirade against false teachers and their “destructive heresies” (2:1), and was apparently written in a time of considerable upheaval and controversy in the early church. Moreover verse 10 in chapter two speaks of two great sins on the part of these heretics, one that they indulge lusts, and the other that they “despise authority.”

This second jibe is in my judgment a tipoff that our old friend the HIP question is involved: the argument here is not only about doctrine itself but about who gets to determine what it is. And Peter is rather clearly on the side of the emerging church establishment. This may have something to do with the tone of earnestness with which he writes about Scripture, insisting on its objectivity.

The letter also insists that one of the worst of the false teachers' heresies was to sow doubts about the early church's belief that Christ's second coming was imminent. Considering that this letter was likely written more than a century after the crucifixion, it should not seem surprising that doubts about the second coming were by then beginning to crop up –particularly since, 1800 years later, it has still not come about despite no shortage of similar declarations that the end was just around the corner.

Even so, it is significant that the term for “moved” is a highly figurative one, since the process of revelation was, however objective, nonetheless mysterious. Peter as much as says this in 3:16, where he speaks of Paul's letters as Scripture, but admits that “there

are some things in them hard to understand....” This admission seems to me to undercut the assurance of his first declaration, and introduce a note of unadmitted ambiguity into his message. Revelation may not be the same thing as interpretation; but revelation's often mysterious character makes interpretation unavoidable. And with interpretation comes, inevitably, diversity.

It may also be worth noting that this letter had the most difficulty of any of the epistles in making it into the canon, based on uncertainty about the time and place of its writing, and the identity of the author.

### **Timothy: Inerrancy's Weak Reed**

The second passage, 2Timothy 3:16, is a favorite of those who believe in the Verbal Inspiration or Inerrancy theory. And If we look only at the first phrase, that seems to be the case: “All scripture in inspired by God....”

But here, a dip into an Interlinear Version and the word study book is very provocative. First of all, it shows that “inspired” literally means “God-breathed.” This is another figurative expression, something other than self-interpreting. This term, incidentally, is found nowhere else in the Bible, so there are no other texts to compare it with for further explication of its meaning.

The next phrase, however, makes a very definite statement about these Scriptures, but one which is quite different from a claim of inerrancy: it says all these Scriptures are “profitable.” Now the Greek term can also be rendered as “beneficial,” “advantageous,” or simply “useful.” The point here is that a text can be useful without necessarily being historically factual.

The commentaries also point out another intriguing nuance here: this verse can actually be rendered in either of two ways, with significantly different shades of meaning. Besides the one already given, the first part of the verse can be translated: “All scripture **which is inspired by God** is profitable....” The addition of which brings with it the implication that there may be “scripture” which is not “inspired by God.”

Such a view would be consistent with the view of many modern interpreters, who frankly admit that there is much in the Bible, especially in the bloodier parts of the Old Testament, which is unmistakably scriptural but hardly inspiring. One could even say that such passages can be “profitable” by showing us what to avoid as we attempt to work out the implications of biblical faith and morality.

The commentaries also indicate that this epistle, like Peter's, is concerned with the problem of false teaching. But its approach to the meaning and use of scripture is very different from Peter's. Examined closely, this second passage can be seen to provide little support for the Inerrancy theory; that is not its claim for scripture at all. Here the Bible is much more a sacred resource of a rich and likely varied character than the objectively true capstone of a hierarchically-determined orthodoxy.

### **Romans: Revelation for Hope**

The tone of the second passage becomes even more evident in the third, **Romans 15:4**.

Here Paul again starts out by describing the scriptures in almost a utilitarian way. But the utility of Scripture is more tenderly described here than in the verse from Timothy. These writings are not only for instruction, but call for steadfast attention. The word here given as “steadfastness” has also been translated as “patience” and even “endurance;” in this Paul shows sensitivity to the inner difficulties and uncertainties that can beset a religious quest.

The fruits of such steadfast exploration of the Scriptures are not described in terms of some putative objective truth; they are primarily internal, even existential. The first is simply “encouragement,” which has also been rendered “comfort,” or even “consolation.” And from this patience and encouragement we can draw something even more important, namely, **hope**, which is the ability to find meaning and promise in a situation where they had previously been lacking.

‘In this connection, our word study book says that the Greek word for hope had both an objective and subjective sense, and in this verse the sense is distinctly subjective. Moreover, the Interlinear text shows that of the three passages, this is the one where the meaning of the literal Greek is plainest and closest to the modern version. Perhaps this has something to do with why the verse seems to me to have such a contemporary ring.

After all, to many modern readers the debates over whether the entire Bible is factually inerrant probably seem largely irrelevant and even silly; we don't come to it looking for an error-free account of events more than two millenia past. Rather, what most of us in my observation come to the Bible to find is much more personal: we're seeking glimmers of light in a world which is outwardly dark and inwardly uncertain. We come, that is, in search of encouragement. We come in search of hope.

A very profound French theologian, Jacques Ellul, has argued that in our nuclear age, the form that authentic religious faith takes is that of **hope**, the ability to find and sustain a sense of meaning and promise in life, more than the acceptance of doctrine. It seems to me that Paul is offering this same insight here. Indeed, a few verses later (15:13) he speaks of God as “the God of hope” and prays that God will fill his readers with hope. This underlines the assertion that the hope one can gain from scripture is not just an emotional condition, but a gift from God; it is, one could say, recalling both Timothy and Peter, God-breathed, a “moving” of the Holy Spirit.

So here we come to a very different sense of the meaning of inspiration: The Bible is inspired to the extent that it “speaks to our condition,” and to the extent that, steadfastly explored and studied, it can bring us encouragement and hope.

### **Back to The Question: How Do You Tell?**

We looked at these three passages in order to get a handle on the question, If the Bible is not totally, unmistakably accurate, how do you figure out what in it is true and what isn't? And in these verses we found three distinguishable answers:

For Peter, the scriptures **are** totally accurate and reliable, at least as they are interpreted by church authorities, and despite troublesome ambiguities in some places. The believer's role is to accept and hang on to these orthodox interpretations, especially the belief in the Imminent Second Coming which the authorities have drawn from them.

In 2Timothy, Paul presents a very different view: the nature of the inspiration of the Scriptures is assumed but not defined; the meaning of this inspiration is what is important, which is that it makes the Bible eminently practical, “profitable” or “beneficial” for teaching and “training in righteousness.” So the answer to our question would seem to be, find what is profitable in the Bible.

In Romans, Paul gives this theme a deeper dimension: The scriptures are inspired to the extent that they are able, through the action of the holy spirit, to impart to us the spiritual gifts of encouragement and hope. That's the answer to our question in this passage. The issues of accuracy and inaccuracy are not even raised here.

There are those, of course, who would object strenuously to this view. In particular, from the Literalist perspective, to suggest that Scripture contains inaccuracy is to succumb to a terrible heresy, and to miss the Bible's meaning entirely. Trying to sort out true from false there, in this view, is a hopeless and meaningless task.

This a challenging argument, one that I think we had better look at closely before we explore this whole matter further. There is much to learn from it, even as we focus on what seem to me to be its fatal shortcomings. That is the subject of the next chapter; then we will, I think, be better able to get back to the question of how to draw meaning from Bible study.

## CHAPTER SIX: REVELATION AND INSPIRATION, PART II: THE TROUBLE WITH LITERALISM

Why bother talking about biblical literalism? Or inerrancy, verbal, or plenary inspiration, as it is also called?

It's easy to make fun of those who insist that the Bible is literally true from end to end. Indeed, such views and those who advocated them were held in rather evident contempt in mainstream American culture and religion for most of half a century, from the conclusion of the Scopes evolution trial in Tennessee in 1925 til the mid-1970s. H.L. Mencken expressed this cultivated disdain most vividly, with his diatribes against what he called “perhaps the most barbarous religion ever professed by white men in a civilized country. Its creed is a mass of childish superstitions, its practices are based on medieval intolerance, and its clergy are unanimously ignorant, often corrupt.” (Hobson, p.59.)

But since the late 1970s, the scoffers have learned better than to ignore or sneer at the legions of literalism, as these forces abandoned their cultural isolation and developed great skill in the techniques of mass medi, bigtime fundraising, and politics. Not all literalists are political conservatives, but most are. Furthermore, the movement has become all-but completely identified with a fervid right-wing political agenda, a movement which has had considerable success in recent years. In the process, biblical literalists have become a force that must be reckoned with.

As these forces have gained ground, their command of the Bible has been a crucial asset. That is due to two realities:

First, the Bible is still a very important document in our culture. You can say what you like about the spread of “secular humanism,” but many Americans still want to minimize going against what they think the Bible says, even if they do not formally accept Scripture as normative.

And secondly, too many of the literalists' opponents are unschooled in the Scripture, so they are poorly prepared to meet the literalists on their own ground. This lack of biblical knowledge by their opponents has enabled the literalists to establish their view of what the Bible is and what it says as the predominant one in the broad public consciousness. Thus, they have also set the agenda of debate on many issues.

One unfortunate effect of their success is that it has led too many liberal-minded people to conclude that “Well, if *that* is what the Bible is all about, then I want nothing to do with it.”

It ought to be evident from earlier chapters that I don't believe the Bible is like *that*, either theologically or politically. One major reason for undertaking this book was to try

to show why and how the Bible is more and better than what these literalist activists say it is.

### **Facing Literalism: The Big Test**

We won't deal much with right-wing literalist politics here, though, except as the politics illustrate their way of using the Bible. I also want to minimize political discussion because, even if literalists were not politically involved, I would still maintain that you, as a Bible student, will not have made the study process fully your own until you have come to grips with the literalist interpretation.

Why? For one thing, politics aside literalism is an important, widely-held and to some extent useful approach to Bible study, worth evaluating on its merits alone.

But more existentially, I predict that you, like most other people, will someday be confronted by one or more biblical literalists, intent on persuading you of the truth of their approach and the folly of all others, and ready with a bundle of Scriptural quotations to back up their contentions.

I think of such confrontations as like a final exam in the kind of Bible study course you have been offered here. When you can hold your own in them, defending your own views in terms of the Bible itself, and fending off the literalist challenge by turning their own scriptural texts back on them –**then** you will really have earned your spurs as a Bible student. You will have passed the acid test.

Such examinations are not regularly scheduled, however; they are more like what my old professors used to call “pop quizzes,” which come upon you by surprise. So let's turn to this theory of literalism, see what goes into it, and how to deal with it.

### **The Elements of Literalism: Inerrancy and Doctrinal Unity**

Whether it is called the doctrine of plenary inspiration, or inerrancy, literalist Bible interpretation at first blush comes on as if its basic assertion is that the whole Bible is literally true. As the compilers of **The New Scofield reference Bible**, one of the major statements of this view, put it: “Every word of Holy Scripture is inspired or ‘God-breathed’....Because the Scriptures are inspired, they are authoritative and without error in their original words, and constitute the infallible revelation of God to man.”(Scofield, p.1304)

How did this inspiration work? “Without impairing the intelligence, individuality, literary style or personal feelings of the human authors, God supernaturally directed the writing of Scripture so that they recorded in perfect accuracy His comprehensive and infallible revelation to man. If God Himself had done the writing, the written Word would be no more accurate and authoritative than it is.”(Ibid.)

This view is affirmed also by W.A. Criswell, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, in his book, **Why I Preach That The bible Is Literally True**: The writers of Scripture, he says, were but fallible men, “But however fallible and errant they may have been as men...yet by inspiration from the Holy Spirit of God this fallibility and

errancy was never under any circumstances communicated to their sacred writings.”(Criswell, p.26)

(While literalists quote a number of passages in support of this view, including Mt. 5:18, Jn. 10:35, and 2 Pet. 1:20-21, their most important Scriptural citation on its behalf is 2Tm. 3:16, a text we analyzed in some detail in Chapter Five. Here we will mention only the fact that this text rather clearly makes **no claim** that the inspiration it ascribes to Scripture guarantees infallibility or inerrancy; rather, it connects inspiration to the usefulness of Scripture. This is a point we will come back to.)

This plenary inspiration, for literalists, is said to be the basis for their other main thesis about the Bible, namely that it teaches a system of doctrine which, though revealed gradually over time, presents a single, unified, coherent salvation message, centered in and understandable only through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

As Criswell puts it with characteristic pungency (p.72), “there is a perfect harmony throughout the Scriptures from the first verse of Genesis to the last verse in Revelation.” Scofield lists seven marks of the unity of the Scriptures, of which the most important are: “(5) From beginning to end the Bible testifies to one redemption. (6) From beginning to end the Bible has one great theme –the Person and work of Christ. And (7) finally, these writers...have produced a perfect harmony of doctrine in progressive unfolding. This is, to every candid mind, the unanswerable proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible.”(ix; emphasis added.) Another literalist writer, Loraine Boettner, similarly insists that the Scriptures “contain one harmonious, consistent, and sufficiently complete system of doctrine.”(Quoted in Swartley, p.144)

## **The Challenge To Literalism**

Literalists insist that this second element, a unified doctrinal system, grows logically and inescapably out of the errorless text of the plenary inspired Bible. And this is where my critique of literalism begins. It seems evident to me that, quite to the contrary, their view of the Bible is almost wholly shaped by, and subordinate to, a preexisting set of doctrinal presumptions. These doctrinal views, furthermore, are heavily influenced by cultural and even political factors.

Why do I say this? For several reasons: because of history, because of the text, because of the doctrine, and because of the literalists' own disunity. Let's take these points one at a time.

## **The Problem of History**

When a concern first arose for finding and sticking to the plain meaning of Scripture as written, it was basically a progressive, liberating idea. This was at the start of the Reformation, and came in reaction to the Roman Catholic Church's insistence on using primarily a highly spiritualized, allegorical method of interpretation. This allegorization, over time, had served to make studying and interpreting the Bible almost an occult art, a privilege reserved for the male clergy, the priests and the hierarchy. Hence, the Bible meant only what the Church authorities said it said; and in a time of rampant

ecclesiastical corruption, the official interpretations were cleverly customized to support all sorts of hierarchical power and institutional vice. (Sound familiar?)

To the early Reformers, above all Martin Luther, a reliance on the purified text of the Bible would eliminate all such abuses, because, as he once wrote optimistically, “The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest, sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense.(Quoted in Hayes and Holladay, p.22)”

But it is no secret that it didn't turn out that way. The “plain words of Scripture, as understood by various groups of dissenters, turned out to “mean” all sorts of things, many of which Luther came to dislike almost as much as he disliked the Roman interpretations. As two recent writers put it, “The freedom granted interpreters in Protestantism led, not to the unanimity of opinion that the reformers had rather naively assumed would result, but rather to a multitude of opinions all believed to be based on sound exegesis and interpretation.(Ibid.)” The result, among other things, was a couple centuries of bloody religious warfare and persecution.

### **Literalist Interpretations Don't Add Up**

This history presents a problem for literalist interpreters of the Bible because, in line with Luther's comment, if their view of the plain, unified meaning of the text were true, this history should not have happened. Perhaps there would be some variety in practice and cultural matters, and occasional willful heresies, but Protestantism at least should be a largely monolithic institution like Catholicism, affirming and following this unified and harmonious system of doctrine based on the plain literal text and meaning of the Bible.

To use an analogy:

Suppose you had a mathematics textbook which in your judgment explained with complete clarity the theory and proofs behind the proposition that  $2+2=4$ . If you taught this text to students from varying national and language groups, even allowing for cultural and linguistic differences, they should all come out agreeing that  $2+2=4$ . If they didn't, if some insisted that  $2+2=8$ , and others that  $2+2=5$ , then something would have gone wrong.

But what? If you found that the text was translated correctly into all the languages, and that the teachers all followed it conscientiously, then the source of the diversity would have to lie in the text: its teaching that  $2+2=4$  would not have been so unmistakably clear after all. And if you were, as Scofield says, of “candid mind,” you would be obliged to admit that your belief in the clarity of the text was mistaken: its meaning might have seemed clear to **you**, but it obviously wasn't clear to others.

In the same way, the actual history of Protestant thought and development argues strongly against the literalist view of the Bible. Instead, it suggests that this view is simply one among others which have appeared within the stream of biblical religion, and one which imposes its doctrinal view on the text.

This judgment is further supported by looking at the text itself.

## The Problem of the Text

One continuing set of problems for literalist interpreters is the long list of mistakes and errors in the Bible text. These cover a broad range of matters, from the minor and even ridiculous to the central and sublime.

In the minor category are such items as Genesis 2:10, which puts the headwaters of both the Nile and Euphrates Rivers in the same spot, when in fact they are on different continents, many hundreds of miles apart; or Leviticus 11, which lists both the hare and the rock badger among cud-chewing animals, when neither species chews a cud, and describes the bat as a bird, rather than as a mammal. Or in the New Testament, the fact that the genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew (1:1-17) and Luke (3:23-38) are not the same). Then there are the quotations of Scripture by Jesus (Jn.7:38), Paul (1Cor. 2:09), and the writer of Jude (v.14) which do not appear anywhere else in the Canon at all.

On the more exalted level, there are, for instance, radical differences between the doctrinal views of the Apostle Paul that salvation was by grace only and not works, over against the view of the Epistle of James, in which works are clearly set out as a necessity of salvation.

This distinction is sharp enough that even Luther was moved to say of it, “Many sweat a lot about how they can bring James into accord with Paul... 'Faith justifies' contradicts 'Faith does not justify.' Whoever can make those rhyme together, on him I'll set my jester's cap and let him be scolded as a fool." (Quoted in Charlot, p.40)”

Luther may have been referring to such passages as Rom. 4:1-5 versus James 2:23, in which the two apostles both cite the same Old Testament passage (Gen. 15:6) but interpret it in almost exactly opposite ways in support of their conflicting theological views.

Or what about the two accounts of David's decision to take a census in Israel and Judah? In the first account, 2 Sam.24:1, it is an angry God who “incites” David to undertake the project, which was considered a terrible thing to do by the Old Testament law; but in the second version of the same incident, 1 Chron.21:1, it is Satan who incites David to do it.

Now surely God and Satan are not the same; and surely to equate them is not a minor matter; yet surely the Holy Spirit could be counted on not to confuse the two, especially in an errorless text! One recent literalist writer, Gleason Archer, in his *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, attempts to resolve this problem by simply concluding “both God and Satan were involved....” (Archer, p.188.)

The problem with this explanation is that contrary to literalist dictum, neither text says this. The literal meaning of the two verses, in which identical verb forms are used, is in flat contradiction. The liberal view that this is an example of theological evolution in Hebrew religion, in which a later writer (Chronicles) voices a different interpretation of the incident than the earlier one in Samuel, makes much more sense to me, blasphemous as it may seem to literalists.

As this example shows, faced with these and many other inconsistencies and errors, literalists resort to a variety of responses. They present complicated explanations as to how differences in doctrinal views, such as that between Paul and James, are not really

differences at all, only nuances. In some cases, they can come up with a plausible explanation; many other times they simply ignore the inconvenient texts.

Archer does this when he agrees that the rock badger and the hare do not in fact chew the cud, as Leviticus 11 says they do; but he then goes on to add, “but they do give the appearance of chewing the cud” by a reflexive motion of their jaws. This appearance could have convinced an ancient Israelite that they were cud-chewers.

One would think that the all-seeing Holy Spirit of the God who created both the hare and rock badger would not have been so easily taken in, but this explanation is sufficient for Archer. So what we have here is an admitted pair of errors that somehow are not erroneous. (Archer, p.126.)

In addition to simply ignoring errors, literalist explanations often get so sinuous that they amount to insisting that the text does not say what it says it says.

Two particularly glaring examples of this latter ploy come in the **Scofield Bible's** treatment of passages in Matthew. The first is Mt. 24:34, when Jesus is talking to his followers about the end of the world and he says, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.” On its face, this verse states that Jesus expected the end of time to come within a few decades of his pronouncement. But the editors insist to the contrary that “the word ‘generation’ (Greek *genea*), though commonly used of those living at one time, could not here mean those alive at the time of Christ, as none of ‘these things’ occurred then.” They speculate that it might instead mean either a future generation, or a “racial” group such as the nation of Israel.

Already the refusal to accept the text when it does not fit their preconceptions shows through:

The text, according to our doctrine, cannot be in error; but this passage said something would happen which did not happen, a statement which in any other context would be considered an error; therefore the text really did not say what it seemed to say; instead, it really said something else, something consistent with our doctrine.

Note also how far they this interpretation strays from the basic literalist rule as stated by Luther about the importance of the “literal, ordinary” sense of the text in question; evidently this rule does not apply when the literal meaning runs contrary to doctrine.

It might be possible to get away with this once, in the case of an isolated text. But alas for Scofield, Jesus made very similar statements not just once, but on **five** occasions in three of the four Gospels. (See Mk. 9:1, 13:30; Mt. 16:28; and Luke 9:27.)

Scofield passes over these other four verses in –perhaps embarrassed–silence, properly enough, since the rationalization would wear thin rather quickly. (Archer, incidentally, offers the same rationalization, and similarly ignores the other four passages.[Archer, p.338f.]

The other example is Mt. 13:33, where Jesus states that “the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, til it was all leavened.”

Perhaps because this verse could be associated with an evolutionist view of social progress (a major literalist bugaboo), the Scofield editors simply refuse to accept that the verse means what it says. “The use of leaven,” they declare, “...seems intended...to represent evil within the kingdom of heaven.” Pointing out that elsewhere in the Bible leaven is usually used to describe corruption, they reject the idea that Jesus was using a

metaphor in a strikingly original fashion, something he often did. “Although Biblical truth has a beneficial moral influence on the world, the mingling of leaven is not the method of divine salvation or enlargement of the kingdom....The parable is, therefore, a warning that true doctrine, represented by the meal, would be corrupted by false doctrine.” (Scofield, p.1015)

This is almost too fantastic to credit, but there it is: the meaning of the parable is **flatly reversed**, and the image used by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to represent the kingdom of heaven is pronounced to be in fact an image of corruption, because it does not fit the editors' doctrinal notion of how salvation is to be spread in society.

### **Bibliolatry Versus Hermenolatry**

Some critics of this approach to the Scriptures have called it bibliolatry, meaning that they worship the Bible, rather than the God they say inspired it. But I believe these examples show that such a description is not entirely on target. It would be more accurate, I think, to speak of it as **hermenolatry**, the worship of their hermeneutics, their doctrinal approach to the Bible. I say this because it seems clear they do not allow the text to get in the way of their doctrine.

The problems involved in applying this doctrine to the text are exacerbated when one digs under the surface a little, and turns up the even more embarrassing fact that literalists, despite their commitment to an errorless Bible which teaches a single harmonious set of doctrines, are deeply divided among themselves as to important aspects of those doctrines. And nowhere does this debunking diversity become more evident than when one looks closely at their eschatology, their view of when and how the End of the World will come.

### **A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to Armageddon**

The funny thing was, of course, that Armageddon didn't happen; at least, not yet. Building on what they call a literalist view of certain passages of Scripture, some Christians have again and again predicted the imminent end of the world and Jesus' return; the first to do so, as we have just seen, was none other than Jesus himself, followed shortly by Paul and Peter. And while modern literalists may be able to assert that Jesus really didn't say what the Bible five times says he said, such rationalization is even less convincing in the light of their own record of failed predictions, which are more reliably recorded.

It would be easy to fill several pages with examples of predictions of the End which failed to come to pass. Here are only two, one old, the other new:

### **A Hot Winter Night in Jolly London Town**

The first example occurred in London, England in 1661: After the death of Cromwell and the end of his Protectorate, the monarchy had just been restored under Charles II.

During these years there was widespread interest in the apocalyptic books of the Bible, and many people felt that the end of the world must be coming soon.

In London, one particularly fervid group of amateur eschatologists under the leadership of man named Thomas Venner had been pondering a vision in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel. This passage described the rise and fall of four fantastic beasts: “These great beasts, which are four,” Daniel wrote, “are four kings[or monarchies] who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.”(Dan. 7:17-18.)

Just exactly which historical monarchs and empires, if any, are referred to by these beast images is still speculated and argued about by students of apocalyptic writing. But Thomas Venner and his followers decided that the proper literal interpretation of the passage meant that the Fourth Kingdom was the recently restored British monarchy, and the time was ripe for the coming of a Fifth and final monarchy, that of Jesus, whenever the “saints” were prepared to “take” it by whatever means necessary. All Jesus needed, apparently, was a sign that His faithful followers were on the move; then He would come again to set up this new and everlasting kingdom.

In line with this scenario, these Fifth Monarchy Men, as they came to be called, collected a secret store of weapons in the city, and during the night of January 6, 1661, about forty of them poured out of their hiding places shouting, “King Jesus and their heads upon the gates!” They terrorized London for several days, while trying to overthrow the government, confident that they would have Divine help when the climax came.

Of course they didn't; local troops soon put them down, Venner and his surviving henchmen were quickly hung, and the Fifth Monarchy Uprising ended up as little more than a footnote in the history books. The only reason I know about it is because the government's response to the conspiracy produced a nationwide dragnet of religious dissenters of all stripes, in which more than 4000 Quakers were rounded up and jailed.

Even though the peaceful Quakers had had nothing to do with the plot (Venner even said so publicly before his execution), thousands of them suffered long imprisonment and loss of their possessions because of the mischief of these twoscore biblical interpreters who, like so many others down the centuries, were sure they had found the “literal” meaning of these obscure and difficult texts. (Braithwaite, p.9.)

### **An Eschatological Dirty Dozen**

The second example is a sampling of predictions offered in 1973 by one Salem Kirban, who is among the more prolific of current eschatologists, making a veritable cottage industry of the end of the world from his home base in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania.

The book we will glance at was modestly entitled, **20 Reasons Why This Present Earth May Not last Another 20 Years**. In it Kirban, while cautioning that “I am no prophet...nor am I a sensationalist,” nonetheless explains that he “scrutinizes thousands

of daily, weekly and monthly publications from all over the world...through the magnifying glass of Bible prophecy.

“And what I see,” he declares, “in one sense, frightens me. The present earth system is coming to the point of no return. The time of the Rapture(when Christians will suddenly be caught up with Christ) is rapidly approaching. The world will soon be at the doorstep of Armageddon. Yet...many of us cannot discern the...’signs of the times...”

Very well, here are twelve of Kirban's predictions in this book, taken from a much longer list, which exemplify his discernment of these signs in the light of his reading of “Bible prophecy”:

1. By 1975: “Red China will take over Taiwan. A war will break out in Korea.” (P. 145.)
2. By 1977: “Marijuana will be legalized and sold through cigarette companies.” (P.57.)
3. By 1978: “Russia will completely dominate Middle East oil.” (P.105.)
4. By 1979: “Churches will be taxed. There will be a merger between the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Church.” (P. 99.)
5. By 1980: “Violence will force the adoption of U.S. policies which will employ stringent controls of repression. The President will have unlimited 'emergency' powers.” (P.115.)
6. By 1981: “Pregnancy in many countries will be by permit. Individuals will be vaccinated at an early age to prevent pregnancy. If one passes a mental test and a health test, a permit will be issued and an antidote administered” to permit one pregnancy. (P.39.)
7. By 1981: “A human being –born of clonal or laboratory reproduction –will appear on this earth.” (P.91.)
8. By 1982: “The federal income tax system will allow tax exemptions for only the first three children –thereby attempting to discourage larger families.”(P.9.)
9. By 1982: “Terrorists will explode a nuclear bomb.” (P.65.)
10. By 1982: “The mystery of flying saucers will be solved.” (P.161.)
- 11 By 1983: “A nuclear bomb will be exploded in a warfare situation.” (P.169.)
12. By 1984: “Most transactions will be made by a card identification system. Cash will become unpopular.” (P.127.)”

One can perhaps see why the copy on the back cover of his book first praises Kirban's “uncanny accuracy for predicting future events,” but then goes on to note that his forecasts “are based on human judgment and may or may not come true.” This is an appropriate caution, inasmuch as these twelve, after twenty years, were still 100% wrong [Though, to be fair, seen from thirty-plus years later, some of them are beginning to come to pass; credit card use has exploded, and marijuana is slowly becoming legal.]

For that matter, the Rapture hasn't happened yet, either.

## **Date-Setting and the Literalists' Dilemma**

Of course, such evidence of the silliness or danger that results from application of this method does not faze the more astute literalists. They prefer simply to insist that the End is near, often speculating in detail about how the current world situation resembles that described in biblical apocalyptic passages, but they carefully avoid setting specific dates or making predictions like Kirban's, which are so quickly shown to be false and foolish. When the scenarios are presented this way, there is of course no way of proving the matter one way or the other, short of the Rapture.

Yet the whole idea of such speculations, seen over time and in the light of so many failed prophecies, soon loses its appeal for many thoughtful persons. Indeed, if Jesus came tomorrow, it would still have been an awfully long time since he and Paul announced that the End was imminent, even without setting firm dates. Two thousand-plus years is a lot to stuff into the meaning of the word “soon,” or “this generation.” (Matt.24:34)

## **The Literal Surfeit of Diversity Among Literalists**

Nor is failed prediction The only problem with literalist eschatology. Even more difficult to explain, based on its presumptions about the Bible's unity and plainness, is the fact that among biblical literalists themselves there are numerous competing scenarios for the end times, all based on purportedly “literal” interpretations of much the same passages in Daniel, Ezekiel, First Thessalonians, Revelation, Matthew and elsewhere. Anyone who reads these favorite Dispensationalist passages will find in them teeming with vivid but highly figurative images arranged in a wide variety of fantastic situations. It is little wonder that such a welter of unrelated visions should yield no single program or scenario, but rather a whole catalog of conflicting views.

Among these contending views one could, without exhausting the list, include: Pretribulationists, Midtribulationists and Posttribulationists; Premillennialists, Postmillennialists and Amillennialists; Dispensationalists of varying stripes; plus a crowd of candidates for the role of Antichrist, among whom have been Imperial Rome, Nero, the Catholic (and Protestant) churches, followed by both Mussolini and Hitler, and more recently Henry Kissinger and Ronald Wilson Reagan (whose full name, after all, consists of three words each of six letters=666), and more.

Whole books have been filled by careful scholars simply with sketches of the varying eschatological crazy quilts which have been stitched together out of this biblical patchwork (See, for instance, Ludwigson). And the popular literature on these topics typically takes up one of the largest shelf displays in an average Christian bookstore.

## **The Two-Headed Beast: The Literalists' Dilemma**

This diversity of view in the literalists' own ranks is persistent and tenacious, and it presents them with a major dilemma. The dilemma arises from the inescapable fact that,

like the unruly diversity of early Protestant history, if their doctrinal explanation of the character of the Bible's revelation were correct, it simply should not have happened. Yet there it is.

To account for this discrepancy, consistent literalists must either:

A. Cast doubt on the authenticity of the faith of many of their most fervent, godly, Bible-believing supporters who happen to uphold the “wrong” interpretation. (Remember Scofield's comment about how persuasive his views must be for every person of “candid mind.”) In point of fact, the history of literalism and fundamentalism is a litany of one angry, hairsplitting division after another. In **The Fundamentalist Phenomenon**, editors Dobson and Hindson describe one such process, in which literalist faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary resigned in 1929 to found their own, purer Westminster Theological Seminary; but soon enough, rebels left there to form Faith Seminary, only to see it, in turn, split, with dissidents ending up in two newer schools, Covenant and Biblical Theological Seminaries.(Falwell, p.123.) Even within their current political-religious coalitions, there are plenty of strains.

The other alternative, though, is even more unpleasant:

B. It would involve admitting, however furtively, that the Biblical text, their uniform, harmonious and infallible Scripture, is less than crystal clear on this not insignificant issue of biblical reliability, so that varying interpretations could be legitimately based upon its texts. But to do this would strike at the root of their view of the Bible.

### **Clarifying the Clarity of Scripture**

Actually, a close reading of Scofield finds him and his successors making just such admissions, though rather quietly.

For instance, regarding Mt.6:13, the familiar doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.” In a footnote, the editors acknowledge that this ending is not in the “oldest and best” manuscripts, that it varies much in manuscripts which have it, and that Luke's version of the prayer (11:2-4) leaves it out. They further concede that “Eminent textual authorities believe that it was added by later hands.”

Even so, they then conclude, against all their own evidence, that “as the doxology appears in the [King James Version], however, it is not unbiblical, for its main ideas seem clearly to have been taken from a prayer of David (1Chr. 29:11)...”

Observe the reasoning here: the best manuscripts and authorities, including Luke, leave it out; but we will leave it in anyway, because it appears in the King James, and –note the double negative –it can be shown by comparison with an unrelated text hundreds of years older to be “not unbiblical.”

What on earth, one wonders, is going on here? Is this self-refuting judgment determined by the near-idolatrous regard for the King James Version shown by many in Scofield's constituency? Is it that the doxology is what is left out of the Lord's Prayer

when it is recited in Roman Catholic Churches (a communion abominated by most literalists)? Or is just because they like that old familiar reading?

Whatever the answer might be, respect for the text as literally true and authoritative can hardly be part of it.

More typically, though, literalists tend to deal with this dilemma by ignoring it, all the while debating endlessly among themselves over all the minutiae of where and when the Judgment Before the Great White Throne will take place, and how to fit the current map of Europe and the Middle East into the their multitudinous scenarios.

The self-discrediting character of this disputation is veiled by the fact that most such argument takes place in their own journals and forums, out of sight of the mainstream. Only occasionally, as when a national figure like President Ronald Reagan or former Interior Secretary James Watt lets comments about the End slip out during official utterances, as each has, does this issue come to general notice, and then usually for only a moment.

### **Fifth Monarchy Men With Nuclear Weapons?**

In such cases, even when a date is not specifically set, the memory of the Fifth Monarchy uprising ought to make us nervous when this dispensational thinking shows up among political leaders, especially those with access to nuclear weapons. President Ronald Reagan, for instance, frequently wondered out loud between 1981 and 1984 about whether the world wasn't headed toward Armageddon in this generation. *The Washington Post*, on April 8, 1984, page C1, and *The New York Times*, October 24, 1984, page 1, recount several such statements.

During the 1984 presidential campaign a group of liberal religious leaders denounced these statements and the “nuclear Armageddon” theology on which they claimed they were based. Not all Dispensational theorists make the connection between Armageddon and nuclear war, but the most popular contemporary ones have, such as Hal Lindsey, author of bestseller **The Late Great Planet Earth**, and Rev. Jerry Falwell of Moral Majority fame, a close associate of President Reagan.

Falwell denied making such a connection in a statement issued in October, 1984; but his critics backed up their contention with a quote from a Falwell interview with a *Los Angeles Times* reporter published on March 4, 1981, in which he said flatly that he expected Russia to invade Israel, “And it is at that time when I believe there will be some nuclear holocaust on this earth.”

Falwell also predicted a war with Russia in Israel in his 1983 booklet, **Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**. This scenario does not mention nuclear war by name, but the effect of the fighting amounts to the same thing. This is evident in his prediction that when Russian forces invade Israel, they will be annihilated as a result of “such bloodshed and destruction that any war up to that time will seem insignificant.” So many Soviet soldiers will be killed at Armageddon, Falwell predicts, that “Seven months will be spent in burying the dead.” [Falwell, 1983, pp.12, 22.]

When will this war take place? Falwell told the *Los Angeles Times* that he could not set a date, but “It could be 50 years. I don't think so. I don't think we have that long.” He concluded that “I don't think my children will live their full lives out, as I probably will.”

We don't want to dwell too long on the connections between nuclear Dispensationalism and policymakers in Washington, unsettling as they are, because our main point here is to emphasize the diversity of views among believers in this approach to Bible study. To repeat, not all Dispensationalists believe that nuclear war with Russia is foreordained within the next few years. And when this diversity of viewpoint in their ranks is pointed up by critics, particularly those who can show how it springs largely from the underlying diversity within Scripture, a well-equipped literalist will often attempt to turn the point aside with a comment like this from the chief editor of the revised Scofield: "As for the comparatively few [contradictions] to which there seems at present no answer, an attitude of faith manifested in suspended judgment is indicated."

It could be pointed out that this comment amounts to saying that when obliged to choose between the square peg of the actual text and the round hole of a particular literalist doctrine, one must not hesitate to choose doctrine, and that this is hermenolatry, worship of your doctrinal hermeneutics, pure and simple. Yet even then the agile literalist has still another reply ready, one based on the Theory of the Autographs.

### **The Autographs You'll Never Get**

This theory serves as a very handy escape hatch for literalists confronted with textual errors which cannot be explained away, or contradictory theological assertions in Scripture which resist their kind of harmonization. Its substance is set out by Scofield and Criswell, rather offhandedly.

Criswell: "On the **original parchment** every sentence, word, line, mark, point, pen stroke, jot and tittle were put there by inspiration of God. There is no question of anything else." (p.26; emphasis added).

Scofield: "The writers of Scripture affirm, where the subject is mentioned by them at all, that the words of their writings are divinely taught. This, of necessity, refers to the **original documents**, not to translations and versions; but the labors of competent scholars have brought our English versions to a remarkable degree of reliability, so that no essential truth of Scripture is ever under any question (p. 1234, emphasis added)."

Of course, we have already seen that such doctrines as justification by faith and the time and scenario of the end times are both very much "under question," both within the text and within literalist ranks. Furthermore, that these doctrines are considered essential by Scofield and the distinguished literalist scholars who revised his text, few careful readers of the rest of his weighty volume could deny. But we will lay that aside: if they want to call those doctrines essential on 1499 of their pages and nonessential on the 1500th, that is their privilege; we are getting accustomed to such supple and imaginative use of language by now.

More important here is the nub of these writers' point: that they are, almost imperceptibly, slipping a sizeable qualification into their assertion of Biblical infallibility by making it possible, when it becomes advisable, to limit it to the autographs, the original manuscripts.

I call this caveat an all-purpose escape hatch because as every Bible student soon discovers, no such autographs are in human possession, and it seems unlikely in the

extreme that we will ever find any, or be able to recognize one if we did. What we have, in the case of the New Testament, is several thousand extant manuscripts of all or part of it, and no two of these manuscripts are exactly alike. There are variants, changes, call them errors if you like, in every single one of them.

But paradoxically, these same errors, these things the existence of which a good literalist until now has been stoutly denying, are abruptly called into play as an unassailable fallback position, namely: when all else fails, blame any persistent discrepancies, unalterable errors or undeniable doctrinal variations on the loss of the original autographs! “If we had the autographs,” goes the response, “I’m sure all this would be cleared up.”

In this case, I am sure the literalist is right: if we had the originals, they would indeed clear up the matter of whether there are discrepancies in them as well. I am also sure that they are a resource we shall never have.

About the only retort that carries any weight against the Autograph Escape Hatch is a question:

Why would the Holy Spirit expend such painstaking care as that described by Criswell, Scofield and others on the totally inspired composition of these crystal clear, unified, harmonized, utterly errorless originals, meant as they were for the authoritative guidance of the church, only to then allow them to be so soon lost and replaced by such a plethora of error-ridden, divergent manuscript copies?

But of course there is no real answer to this question either, this side of heaven.

### **Escape Into Inerrancy: A Dead End?**

Such a question may have no objective answer, but over time its implications have been steadily gnawing like termites at the wooden ranks of literalist scholarship. More and more literalist writers have been trying to find a way of reformulating their commitment to this doctrine in order to make better, more honest sense of the text they are studying.

We have already seen how some have limited it to the lost autographs. Others have attempted to stretch the notion of “truth” contained in the doctrine to cover such ideas as the value of literary forms and conventions for conveying ideas and statements about God; thus they can say that the Bible infallibly teaches what God wants us to know about the divine nature and plan for us, but that in doing so God’s scribes may have used literary embellishment and even invention to get this message across in the Scriptures.

Thus, for instance, the story of Jonah might not need to have actually happened, in order for its message, that God loves all people, to be infallibly “true.”

But to the sharper-eyed among the literalist stalwarts, such reformulations are nothing but sellouts, however disguised by a rhetorical smoke screen of “infallibility”. As it is put in **The Ryrie Study Bible**, which emanates from Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, a fundamentalist stronghold:

“To illustrate how times have changed, not many years ago all one had to say to affirm his belief in the full inspiration of the Bible was that he believed it was ‘the Word of God.’ Then it became necessary to add ‘the inspired Word of God.’ Later he had to include ‘the verbally, inspired Word of God.’ Then to mean the same thing he had to say

‘the plenary(fully), verbally, inspired Word of God.’ Then came the necessity to say ‘the plenary, verbally, infallible, inspired Word of God.’ Today one has to say ‘the plenary, verbally, infallible, inspired and inerrant-in-the-original-manuscripts Word of God.’ And even then, he may not communicate clearly.” (Ryrie, p.1849, italics added.)

Nor, for that matter, are the defenders of true literalism ready to take such erosion lying down. For instance, in 1982 a California evangelical scholar named Robert Gundry issued a book entitled **Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art**, published by the highly regarded Eerdmans Publishing Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Gundry is one of those who maintains that he believes the Bible to be an infallible book, at least as far as instructing people in the whys and wherefores of salvation is concerned; and as such he was a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, a group which is built on a declaration of biblical infallibility and inerrancy.

However, in his book Gundry had the temerity to suggest that when Matthew told, in the Christmas story in chapter two of his Gospel, about a visit by three Magi to the infant Jesus in the stable, the Gospel writer was indulging in a bit of literary embellishment common to religious writings of his time.

In other words, Gundry was saying that Matthew made up the part about the Magi; there really weren't any. This invention was, he hastened to add, strictly a literary device, a form of embellishment or embroidery of stories common in his time, and a matter of no consequence to the essential and infallible truth of Christianity Matthew was conveying, a message which Gundry did not doubt.

Despite the fact that this comment was buried in a 600-plus page tome, Gundry's comments did not go long unnoticed by the vigilant watchers on the ramparts of literalism. They were unimpressed by Gundry's declarations of belief in his version of Biblical infallibility.

Soon numerous literalist voices were raised against him and his heretical views, from the four corners of fundamentalism. Indeed, almost the entire March, 1983 issue of the worthy **Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society** was devoted to a series of such denunciations, along with Gundry's spirited rejoinders. One of his most vociferous critics, Norman Geisler of Dallas Theological Seminary, another literalist redoubt, concluded his critique by demanding that anyone holding such obnoxious views should be obliged to forfeit his membership in the Society forthwith.

Within a few months, Geisler got his way. At a meeting of the Evangelical theological Society, held in the appropriately-named Criswell Institute of Biblical Studies at the Dallas Seminary on December 17, 1983, a motion calling on Gundry to resign was adopted by a vote of 116-41. Gundry promptly submitted his resignation, with the good grace he had maintained throughout the long ordeal.

Although the pillars of the Evangelical Theological Society may now believe that they have exorcised the diseased member from their midst, it is hard to contemplate this story without getting the feeling that while they may have won that particular battle, they are, slowly but surely, losing the war. Robert Gundry is by no means the only scholar who manages to maintain a firmly Christian perspective without thereby being obliged to lean on the weak reed of a literalist understanding of the Bible.

## Summary: The Fatal Error of Errors

A good summary of our case thus far against the literalist approach to Bible study is provided by Kenneth Foreman in the opening volume of **The Layman's Bible Commentary**: "...the efforts to defend the errors," he writes, "to show that they are actually and literally true and right, require so many over-ingenious twists and turns, that many of those who hold to an absolutely errorless Bible will not affirm that the Bible as we have it is without error....But the real reason why those Christians who cannot agree with the doctrine of inerrancy have given it up is not a theoretical reason at all. It is a very practical one: they find errors there. One single error in the Bible shatters the theory of inerrancy beyond repair." (p.26)

## Literalist Theology and Literalist Politics

Many of these same arguments should be kept in mind when confronted by politicians and literalist activists who put forward reactionary political positions as a series of slogans which all begin with **THE BIBLE SAYS** –“. Let us take a quick glance at two of these positions, and possible biblically-based responses:

1. On United States-Israel relations: Jerry Falwell, in **The Fundamentalist Phenomenon**, declares that "We believe that God in Genesis 12:1-3, very clearly promised a blessing for those who bless Israel and a curse for those who curse Israel. I take that as literally as I take John 3:16 in the New Testament." He adds: "To stand against Israel is to stand against God. We believe that." (P. 215.) This support is all but unconditional: "Any who do not support Israel are inviting the judgment of God upon themselves." (Ibid.)

Response: Any careful reading of the Old Testament will show in overwhelming detail that while Israel was indeed chosen and blessed by God, that nation also faced no more severe critic than this same God, particularly where the justice or injustice of its actions as a nation was concerned. If anything, the Biblical witness implies that the present Israeli government's actions and policies ought to be similarly evaluated by all concerned persons, Jew and gentile alike, and by other governments as well. Such a call as Falwell's to unconditional, unreflecting support of any human institution is all but idolatrous, and certainly shows no respect for the Biblical messages.

Furthermore, it seems to me that any sincere friend of Israel would be well-advised to understand that Falwell's support of that nation is part and parcel of his nuclear Armageddon scenario, in which Israel is soon to become the bloodiest battleground in human history. Furthermore, the typical Dispensationalist forecast sees this process as culminating, among other things, in the mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity. Whether "support" based on such views will be of any real long-term value to the Jewish people and their state seems to me to be open to serious question.

2. Homosexuality: Falwell, along with other prominent fundamentalist preachers, spends an inordinate amount of energy denouncing homosexuality: "God considers the

sin of homosexuality as abominable,” he says in his book, in a rather mild expression of his views. “He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their involvement in this sin. The Old Testament law is clear concerning this issue....” (Here he quotes Lev. 18:22 and Rom.1:24.26-28) Then he blasts “A bill...introduced in Congress which, if passed, would establish homosexuals in America as a bona fide minority....This is a clear indication of the moral decay of our society.” (Falwell, P.203f.)

Response: First of all, in twenty-seven further references to Sodom and its sins in the Bible, not a single one specifically mentions homosexuality as the cause of their destruction; Isaiah describes the cause as its “vain sacrifices” (Is. 1;10-11); Jeremiah denounces it for “adultery and lies” (Jr. 23:14); Ezekiel deplors its “haughtiness and abomination” (Ez. 16:49-50). The men of Sodom, as described in Genesis 19, were clearly bent on homosexual rape of the angels visiting Lot, and rape of any description is unquestionably abominable. But the extension of this story into a blanket condemnation of all homosexual activity has been shown by scholars like Tom Horner to be a much later interpretation added to this story. (Horner, Chapter Four.)

Secondly, while such passages as Lev. 18:22 and 1 Cor. 6:9-10 clearly denounce homosexual activity, the issue raised here, as in many other places, is less one of approval of specific acts as of the nature and evaluation of Biblical rules of conduct. In this matter, the truth is that Jews and Christians, working with the same biblical texts, have made and changed many rules of conduct, including rules for sexual conduct, down through the centuries.

Paul is no exception to this ambiguous practice. Indeed, he even insists, in the very same epistle, “All things are lawful to me” (6:12), and repeats it for good measure a few pages later (1 Cor. 10:23). This is not to mention the comment in Titus that “To the pure all things are pure.” (Tit.1:15.) Does this make him a libertine?

Hardly. Rather it suggests that he had to struggle with the problem of applying his faith to the ambiguities of real life just like anyone else. As a result, the plain testimony of the epistles is that his pronouncements on rules and ethics were complex, usually ad hoc, and often contradictory. For us, reading them today, his pronouncements are not to be simply accepted in isolation. Half a dozen times in these discussions, Paul tells his readers to “Judge for yourselves....” (1 Cor. 10:15, 11:13; 1 Thess. 5:21; Rom. 12:3, 14:5; 2Cor. 13:5; Gal. 6:4). We do him no honor if we do any less.

As for the Old Testament, Falwell is selective to the point of hypocrisy in his use of it: his fundamentalist creed dictates that the Old Testament law has been fulfilled and abolished in Christ, and he does not insist that his followers follow the myriad of other laws laid down in Leviticus. Furthermore, although he takes his stand on Leviticus 18:22, he pointedly refrains from advocating or even mentioning the penalty prescribed in the next chapter(Lev. 20:13) for those indulging in this “abomination,” namely death –the same penalty, incidentally, prescribed in the same chapter for children who curse their parents (Lev. 20:9; cf. also Ex. 21:15, Dt. 21:18-21).

But why not? Surely it cannot be that this believer in the literal truth of the Bible is picking and choosing his texts to fit the limits of respectable right-wing politics? (It is a fact that when a California spokesman for his Moral Majority went on to advocate literal fulfillment of this command by the execution of homosexuals, Falwell ditched him in a hurry.)

The point here is not that the Bible “really” proves homosexuality is good. It is, rather, that the Bible does not speak with one voice about how such questions are to be determined. Is Leviticus's legalism to be the only standard? How is Paul's insistence on Christian liberty (Rom. 8:21) to be balanced against his often inconsistent specific judgments? And what about Jesus' own insistence that “whatever you shall permit on earth shall be permitted in Heaven”? (Mt. 16:19; 18:18)?

The idea that faithful people can study the Scriptures and reach varying judgments, and that those judgments can change over time, is thoroughly biblical, however much Falwell dislikes it. To say otherwise is to insist on the primacy of literalist doctrine –and politics –over the text; but as we have seen, that is nothing new for literalists such as Falwell.

In fact, beyond the many internal inconsistencies and inadequacies of this approach, the ultimate criticism which can be brought against it is not so much a logical or internal one, but rather a challenge to the theological views which underlie it. It is to such a challenge that we now turn.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: INSPIRATION, PART III: REVELATION WITHOUT LITERALISM

The thrust of our theological challenge to literalism is suggested by Richard Coleman, in his excellent book **Issues of Theological Conflict**, when he says that “The real brunt of the liberal criticism [of literalism] is that revelation as it is defined...does not meet the external or empirical test of being faithful to reality and true to the everyday experience of contemporary man (p.120).”

To be sure, it is stretching the meaning of the term empirical to speak of it applying to something as amorphous as the “everyday experience of contemporary man,” or woman. Yet there is an empirical element in our judgment, based on our examination of how literalist interpreters treat the text which they claim to hold sacred. We have seen that their interpretations in fact do repeated violence to the text in order to make it fit their preconceived doctrinal positions. Given their basic assertion of Biblical infallibility and inerrancy, this very process is a damning refutation of their whole approach. It convicts literalism of the charge of hermenolatry.

Thus, literalism fails this most concrete test. And from this I conclude that some other way of defining revelation and inspiration must be found. Furthermore, any such definition must make a place for the reality of errors, inconsistencies and tensions within the text, because they have not gone away despite the literalists' most determined efforts to banish them.

As Coleman also says, literalists “only think they have gotten rid of uncertainty, pre-understanding and philosophical intrusions...”(Coleman, p.132.) In fact, however, the literalist interpreter “begins with the assumption that revelation is direct and objective, which leads to the conclusion that he has an objective and timeless standard inscribed in Scripture to test for false revelations.” A critic “finds this to be a circular argument, proving nothing.” (Coleman, p.120.) Actually, we have shown how their application of this circularity actually proves that, contrary to their assertions, they show much less respect for the sacred text than they claim.

But there is another dimension of the test to be applied here, Coleman's less easily-verified point about whether the doctrine fits the experience of contemporary men and women. And even if it is more existential than empirical, the ultimate question to be asked about the literalist view of Scripture is a personal one, to be asked by any and all students of Scripture: Is the view of life built on literalism consistent with my experience of life?

If the answer to this question is **yes**, as it clearly is for most literalists, then such things as difficulties of exposition are likely to be considered minor. That perspective would, in the Quaker phrase, “speak to the condition” of such a person. Moreover, such an internal conviction is not susceptible to empirical rebuttal –who else knows the contours of my experience the way I do?

But if, as it is for me, the answer is no, then even a perfectly harmonized literalist Bible would be unlikely to speak to my condition.

Why do I find literalism existentially inadequate? Because I have found life to be, not meaningless and random, but not entirely understandable and orderly either; it is shot through with ambiguity, with many conflicting attitudes and viewpoints, and the process of sorting them out is a difficult one. Given this experience, the fact that the Biblical text is not flawless or unambiguous, while it horrifies the literalist, rather increases Scripture's potential credibility for me. Not that ambiguity is a virtue in itself; but such a condition in the text, particularly the diversity of viewpoints and judgments encompassed within it, add verisimilitude. It enables the Bible more trenchantly to engage my attention, because it reflects, refracts and illuminates my actual human experience. To repeat, such a revelation could potentially speak to my condition.

This is not the same as saying that I want only to engage in what is called eisegesis, reading my own notions and values into the text rather than undertaking the serious exegetical work of letting the text speak to me as well. It is to argue rather that the primary shortcoming of the literalist view for me is that it leaves me facing a Bible that is essentially foreign to my life, unable to speak to me in the language of my human experience, whatever its message.

Foreman, I think, is getting at the same thing when he suggests that “it was evidently not God's intention that we should have a flawless Bible.”(Foreman, p.26.)

### **God's Purposes For a Flawed Revelation?**

But what could the point of a non-flawless Bible be? I hesitate here to speak on behalf of God, but several points have emerged from my meditations on this question.

For one thing, an ambiguous revelation, by virtue of its very ambiguity, respects the freedom which the Christian tradition teaches was one of God's most important gifts to men and women. It does this because it leaves room for, and even requires, human study and interpretation.

### **Another Kind of Plenary Inspiration**

It is important to note here that my rejection of literalism does not send me rushing into the arms of their traditional antagonists, the so-called higher critics, with their endless analyses and atomizing of the texts into ever smaller subdivisions. As was suggested in our discussion of hermeneutics in Chapter Four, these tools have had many useful results. Even so, the optimistic and rationalist worldview on which much of this work rested has been treated no less roughly by the events of this century than has literalism. These critical studies can be useful, but they are no more able to solve the

mystery of revelation than is literalism, nor are they any better able to avoid the necessity of having some belief or faith with which to give form and meaning to their results.

Indeed, at this point I think it is appropriate to rehabilitate the doctrine of plenary inspiration of the Bible, not in exactly the literalist form, but in one which owes more to it than to the higher critics: Suppose we were to regard the entire Bible the way it is described in 2Tim.3:16, as inspired by God and therefore useful.

Just such a point of view has long been taken by some of the most acute of Jewish biblical scholars. With this as a starting point, they do not have to expend their energy trying to explain away the errors and difficulties, because their view of inspiration does not insist that all the texts be literally true or logically consistent. Some, like the historical accounts of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, may indeed be reliable history; some, like Jonah and Job, may be “fictional,” stories written to convey a religious message; others may be legendary, the sacred deposits of ancient oral traditions; and some may even be, like the God who inspired them, just plain mysterious and thus far apparently impossible to understand or reconcile by finite human means. Nonetheless, all of it is considered inspired, and sooner or later, for someone else if not for you and me, it is expected to prove “useful” in religious terms.

But how does one make use of such an “inspired” text as this? It is not easy; from such a starting point, traditional interpretations may be valuable as reference points, but are not to be considered authoritative in themselves. Moreover, the answers which I or my faith community come up with at a given point in our studies, while they may be sufficient for now, may not always meet our needs, answer our questions, or speak to our condition.

### **Godwrestling –A New, but Old Paradigm**

Perhaps the best description of this process which I have seen was by a wise and vivid Jewish writer, Arthur Waskow, in a book called *Godwrestling*. Waskow was part of a Jewish renewal group in Washington, D.C. called Fabrangen, which tackled the Bible in just this way regularly in its Sabbath services. As Waskow puts it:

“...Every Shabbos morning, the Fabrangen wrestles God. Ourselves, and each other, and God. We do not simply accept the tradition, but we do not reject it either. We wrestle it: fighting it and making love to it at the same time. We try to touch it with our lives.

“When we touch the Torah with our lives, both our lives and the Torah come alive. We change our lives....What we are doing is what the people Israel is all about: ‘Israel,’ the Godwrestler.” (Waskow, p.11.)

Waskow here is referring to the story in Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with God all night, and is given a new name which means “he who wrestles with God.” The fact that the Hebrews came to be known as the Children of Israel, the Children of the Godwrestler, and even today are called the Nation of Israel, the Nation of Godwrestlers, makes this name and concept, in Waskow's view, central to Jewish religious identity:

“And touching the Torah gives it new life because the Torah was the result of such touchings in the first place. When Jacob wrestled, it was ‘with men and God’ at once, not first one and then the other, but the two at once –distinguishable but not separable. From that wrestling flew fiery drops of sweat that fell into place as the letters of the Torah. For

the Torah is struggle distilled into teaching.....Generations of Jews after Jacob have wrestled with other people and with God, and the sweat of their wrestlings too became the fiery shapes on the parchment and the paper. And it is from the very pores of our own wrestle with other human beings, in the full knowledge that every such wrestle is with God as well, that we must distill our 'theology,' our own ways of understanding God and Torah." (Ibid.)

Waskow's description of this process further clarifies one of our main objections to the literalist insistence on a clear, harmonious, unified Biblical revelation. Besides the fact that the actual Bible we have does not fit this description, such a revelation, if it existed, would be irrefutable. The main human task would then be not to think and create, and certainly not to struggle with God, but simply to obey.

Such more or less unthinking obedience is indeed the consistent underlying message I perceive in literalist interpretations. But is that the kind of destiny for humanity God has in mind? I am unable to believe it; I think it unworthy of the human character and calling. A mysterious, ambiguous revelation means we are called to exercise our own capacities to the fullest in "seeking first the kingdom of heaven." We are called upon, in the tradition of Jacob and his children, to struggle both with men and with God. While ambiguity and uncertainty have their price, the freedom they make possible is no small benefit for them to carry in return.

### **Wrestling with the Dark Side of the Bible**

Another crucial benefit of the Godwrestling image is that it brings into the open and legitimizes a task that I believe anyone who studies Scripture with their eyes open must tackle sooner or later, namely confronting the Dark Side of the Bible.

This Dark Side in my experience has at least two important aspects: one is the way Scripture has lent support to some of the most odious chapters in western history: slavery; the oppression of women; and the persecution of homosexuals, to name a few items which have found justifications in both Old and New Testaments. Then there is Christian persecution of the Jews, a bloody tradition which has long claimed the support of the New. Nor can we overlook the chilling insistence, as in Deuteronomy 13, on the destruction of heretics and "blasphemers," a passage used to justify horrible persecutions of religious dissenters.

The other facet of this Dark Side includes stories within Scripture itself in which, at God's command, people did truly evil and reprehensible things. These range from Elijah's ruthless slaughter of the Baal-worshippers in 2King 10, for which God said to him "thou hast done well...according to all that was in my heart,"(v.30) to the even more complete destruction of the city of Ai, combatants and noncombatants alike, also at God's command, in Josh 8.

Nor is it to overlook passages such as that in Ex 21:20-22, which states that if a master beats a slave so that the slave, the master will not be punished, provided the slave lingers in agony for a few days, "for he is his money." (v.21) Or that of Lev 12:1-5 which pronounces a woman unclean twice as long after she gives birth to a daughter as after she gives birth to a son. And what about God's treatment of Job?

The New Testament has its share to answer for as well: Paul's repeated putdowns of women in the church(as in 1Cor 14:34ff); his frequent advice to slaves to quietly submit to their condition(Col 3:22);or his pronouncement, in Rom 13, that civil authorities are God-ordained, a statement that has been used to defend every tyrant in two millennia whose subjects revered the Scriptures.

The list of issues and passages that are part of this Dark Side of Scripture could be much longer. Moreover, there are no easy or final answers to the questions they raise. But coming to grips with them is, I believe, part of what serious Bible study is all about. And when you do that, you will be joining a company of honest Jews and Christians who have wrestled with them for centuries; you will also find that some of the deepest, most searching of these struggles take place in Scripture itself, as in the Book of Job.

### **Ambiguity's Unambiguous Gift: Humility**

One further potential benefit of facing up to the Dark Side of the Bible is that it can help keep us humble about the lessons we draw from Scripture, the interpretations we lay on it and the uses we make of it. It should constantly remind us that God used fallible human instruments to record and transmit the written records of revelation, fallible persons through whom error, partiality and ambiguity inevitably crept into the texts. But even more important, the mysteries and darker aspects of the text partake of the mystery of the divine character and purposes, which are inherently beyond our grasp.

This same fallibility infects all our own interpretations too; as Paul admits in one of his humbler moments, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” (2Cor.4:7) Humility is called for even as we are obliged to stand up for our convictions.

In a different form, the humility incumbent on ambiguity restates another objection to literalism: it purports to have the entire scheme and meaning of human history completely laid out in its errorless text. What its advocates don't seem to realize is that this is tantamount to claiming to have captured God between the Morocco leather covers of their gilt-edged book. I do not believe it; God is bigger than any book, even the Bible.

### **A Question of Balance**

Similarly, the diversity of tradition and denomination given rise to by this ambiguous text is not only or solely the result of heresy and self-serving twisting of the Scripture(though there has been plenty of that). Too many godly men and women have given up everything –property, family, limb and life –to follow in the various directions in which their “heretical” consciences have led for me to accept such an interpretation.

No, I affirm that amid this disorderly chorus of contentious witnesses, denominations and interpretations, there are many which carry an important note of the melody, harmony and counterpoint God created us to improvise and play. I suspect that many and perhaps most of the various sects and views have a instrumental part in the divine score, a place which only the Composer understands completely. Thus it is possible both to have confidence in this transcendent balance, and at the same time to be engaged in day-to-day struggle with other groups over actual claims and programs –as I have been engaged here in struggle with my literalist brothers and sisters.

Furthermore, another advantage of this diversity is that it creates the potential for balance: it makes possible the mutual testing and threshing of insights and interpretations among different groups on a basis of equality. Given the persistent human tendency toward dominance and power –nowhere more nakedly in evidence than in church history –this is not a small thing. Such a testing, almost experimental process, I believe, is necessary to human progress.

One even almost inclines to the proposition that, given the fact of diversity and conflict both in Scripture and throughout church history, these factors, costly though they have been, must be serving some part of the divine purpose for humankind. If such a conclusion were taken as a warrant for creating strife, I would regret it very much. Yet it is a constant in both experience and the Bible.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: THE INTERIOR SIDE OF BIBLE STUDY

One major purpose of these extended reflections on the questions of Revelation and Inspiration have been aimed at preparing the way for talking briefly about the actual process of Bible study. To do that, I'll describe how we did that in the workshops for which this book was prepared. First, though, I need to point out that explorations can be summed up in a series of assertions or theses. These theses cannot, of course, be proven; yet they form much of the foundation for this whole book, and their importance to it, I hope, can now be better understood:

### **Four Theses on The Bible and Bible Study**

1. God is revealed in the Bible, but remains an ultimate mystery.
2. To at least some extent, the ambiguity of the biblical messages reflects and even partakes of this ultimate mystery.
3. Furthermore, the interaction between an individual, the Bible and God is also at bottom not only a private but also a mysterious thing –an encounter for which the term Godwrestling seems not only a fitting but a biblically based image.
4. Finally, the responsibility for this process is ultimately carried by each person who is engaged in it; churches, traditions and doctrines may help prepare you for it, they may support you in it, but they cannot do your wrestling for you, or guarantee the outcome.

When we come to speak of this interior part of the process, we are confronting a challenge which for Quakers was best posed by George Fox more than three hundred years ago: “You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles saith this,” he declared, “but **what canst thou say?**” (Christian Faith and Practice, #20.)

This question can be paraphrased in our terms somewhat like this: In dealing with a particular passage or book, we can see that the commentaries say this, and the word studies and the form critics say that, and the Dispensationalist literalists say something else– but then what, based on our own study and wrestling, can **we** say about the Bible texts?

This question is important because once we are familiar with the resources described in earlier sections, and with them become more comfortable in Bible study, we should be

able to see even more clearly that what these tools do in the end is enable us to ask more intelligent and informed questions; what they don't provide is the answers.

### **Some Aspects of Biblical Exploration**

The process of Bible study that has been laid out so far goes something like this:

Pick a text you want to study. Read it. Then re-read it, consulting as you do such resources as Interlinear Translations, word study books and commentaries, in order to put the words, the passage and the book into the context of language, culture and theology as best you can, weighing various traditional and doctrinal views against each other, using the work of experts as a resource and not a substitute for your own independent judgment.

But then what? Here's where the outward resources leave off and your inward resources and individual style come into play. And as we move into this phase, there are no surefire recipes:

No doubt it helps to **think** about the text and its context.

Maybe you would like to **discuss** the text with others who are interested in it, or in you.

Probably a more intuitive process of reflection and meditation on it, individually or in a group, would be beneficial, too.

You should also **pray** about it, if prayer is meaningful to you.

Then perhaps you **wait** (remember “steadfastness” in Rom 15:4?) or repeat all the above.

Or maybe you **don't**.

Who is to say what combination of these steps will enable you to find what you are looking for in your study of Scripture. All these subjective steps have been helpful to me at one time or another, but not always all of them and not always in the same combination.

Who, for that matter, can even say what you should be looking for? As the three texts we examined in the last chapter show, even biblical writers have varying goals: Peter looked to the scriptures for absolute assurance about his orthodox doctrinal views, and insisted that the community cling to them with utter loyalty til The End, which wouldn't be long. Paul saw the Scriptures differently, as a resource, the study of which could be “profitable,” both for instruction and as a source of hope and meaning in a seemingly hopeless and meaningless world. We could find other values expressed in other passages.

The inescapable inwardness of the process of finding meaning in Bible studies is also shown by the scriptural writers' continual use of figurative and metaphoric terms, like “God-breathed” and “borne along” to describe the process of inspiration. Scholars have been arguing for more than two thousand years over just what sort of internal process or processes these terms described, and the matter is nowhere near being settled now.

But if the centrality of subjectivity to the outcome of Bible study seems unsettling or even unnerving, consider the other side of the coin: it also means there is room in the

scriptures for a free mind to roam, to learn and even to create. It is not the case that, as in Euclidean geometry, all the theorems, even the most abstruse, were figured out long ago, and the student's task is simply to master a fixed, ancient body of knowledge. No, the Bible has shown itself to be a perennial source of stimulating reflection on and new insight into almost all aspects of life; that is why people still study it.

This can be true even for people who are not conventionally religious. I once interviewed the famous radical journalist I.F. Stone, who described himself as an atheist, but who also admitted that he took great pleasure in reading Old Testament prophets in the original Hebrew on his annual vacations. It “inspired” him even though he didn't think of it as “inspired.” In this way as in so many others, I suspect Stone was a rare breed.

### Some Useful Recipes

If you find organized study useful, however, several different methods for individual or small group study are described in detail in the book *Reclaiming a Resource*, which is a collection of papers from the Friends Bible Conference in 1989. The “recipes” in the book are all presented from a Quaker perspective, but one need not be a Quaker to use them.

One such method, known as Friendly Bible Study, can be used either on your own or in a group. It centers around reflecting on and answering five questions about whatever passage of Scripture you are working with. The questions are:

1. What is the Main Point of this passage?
2. What “new light” have I gained on this passage in this reading?
3. Is this passage true to my experience?
4. What are the implications of this passage for my life?
5. What problems do I have with this passage?

Notice that this approach requires neither an authoritative leader nor a common set of beliefs about the Bible. Further, it is not designed to point you toward a set of “right” answers. These features are part of what makes it “Friendly” Bible study.

### **How we did it: A Case Study**

During the five-session workshops where I used this book, I built up a bit of creative tension by telling participants that they were learning fast, and that was good, because on the last day we would have a “Final Exam.”

This was meant as a joke: I was giving no credits, or handing out grades; still, a few, who had had too much formal schooling, experienced considerable exam anxiety.

Nevertheless, on the final day, I told them it was time for the exam, and because they had showed that they were learning so fast, they were ready for the exam, and it would consist of analyzing and interpreting an **entire book** of the Bible, using any of the resources we had examined, plus trusting their own responses, and they would do it in teams of four.

Again, there some widened eyes and sweaty brows: a **WHOLE Book!**

They relaxed when I said the selected text was The Book of Jonah.

Jonah is one of the shortest Bible texts: barely a thousand words, and takes up a total of four (count 'em!) pages in most Bibles. Yet Jonah is a complete “story,” with a beginning, middle and an end, plus vivid characters, wild adventures and plot twists.

We started by reading it aloud, which took about ten minutes, and then I turned them loose.

It worked very well: the discussion was animated, occasionally even raucous, yet earnest and searching. After an hour or so I asked the groups to report, summarizing how it went. Most indicated they could have talked much longer, and few final conclusions were reached. But they agreed that there was a lot packed into Jonah’s thousand words.

I told them they did great, and if anyone wanted a “grade,” I peremptorily gave everyone an A-plus.

And they deserved it: after all, the point of the workshop was to detoxify the Bible enough so they could dig into it, use study resources without anxiety, wrestle with the text, come to their own conclusions (which could also be re-examined), and see that they could continue this process indefinitely, on their own or in groups. They did it all.

FINALLY....

So this is it. If you have stuck with me this far, you should be ready to strike out on your own as a student of the Bible.

So collect your Study Bible, word books, Interlinear translations, commentaries, lexicons and whatever else is helpful, and dig into the Bible.

I don't think you'll regret it.

## APPENDIX ONE: A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO STUDY BIBLES

So far in this book, it's been suggested that the important tools for Bible study include, besides the Bible itself: a Concordance, word study books, interlinear translations and one or more good commentaries.

Considering the libraries full of books about the Bible, this is not a large number. But on the other hand, they make a pretty heavy armload to carry around to worship or to class. The alternative to this collection, or at least the best substitute when space and weight are at a premium, is a Study Bible, a text which includes several of these tools, and perhaps others, between the covers of a single volume.

If you go to a religious bookstore to get one, though, you'll soon discover that there are many study Bibles on the market. This should not be surprising, considering that the Bible is the single best-selling book of them all, year after year. Just to list the multitude of editions, versions, formats and bindings sold in American bookstores takes most of a 450-page catalog, and there are many other versions being sold directly to readers.

Furthermore, a glance into a wholesale catalog, such as that of the Riverside Book and Bible House of Iowa Falls, Iowa, shows how the Scriptures have come in many places to serve not just as a religious text but also as a status symbol, depending particularly on the brightness of its gleaming, gilt-edged pages and the quality and flexibility of its binding. The "Word of God" may be free of charge, but you can pay \$250 or more for the packaging.

### **"Whatever You Shall Bind on Earth...."**

Speaking of bindings, both appearances and names thereof can be confusing, not to say misleading.

For instance, the term "Morocco leather" suggests a high-quality, imported material. But do you know which of the following is the highest quality material: Morocco, French Morocco, Pin Seal Morocco, Natural Morocco, Persian Morocco, or Moroccoette?

If you suspected that Moroccoette is an imitation, you're correct. But what about the rest? According to a list in the Bible catalog, the best are both "Pin Seal" and "Natural Morocco," because both names refer to the same material. Next comes just plain "Morocco", with Persian Morocco close behind. "French Morocco," so-called, is the poorest quality; it is a glossy but short-lived mix of cow and pigskin, which in other incarnations goes by such names as "Genuine Leather," "sheepskin," or even "skiver."

(We could also pause to puzzle over the five kinds of calfskin Bible bindings: Water Buffalo, India, East India, English and regular old Calf; but we won't, because it will take us too much farther afield from what lies between these and other kinds of covers on Study Bibles.)

### **The Basics of Study Bibles**

Even within the narrow limits of this subcategory, there are many editions to choose from. I found 18 different Study Bibles in a single Christian bookstore of middling size, and with a few phone calls learned of several more. To provide a quick bird's eye view of what they are like, consult the chart which follows.

**[NOTE: Several internet Bible sites have now brought together many translations of the full Bible, along with various study helps, and make them available free. Most such sites have a strong evangelical perspective, but the texts and translations are still useful, and the price is right.]**

The chart shows that most of what are called Study Bibles have a number of features in common: a concordance, cross- references between verses in the text, notes indicating variant readings in textual sources, and maps of the Holy Land and the Mediterranean area at various points in biblical history. Most also have various other features, which may include a Harmony of the Gospels, lists of Jesus' miracles, teachings and parables, charts of various prophecies, doctrinal summaries, outlines of Paul's missionary journeys, extensive topical reference systems, indexes, outlines, introductions, built-in commentaries and even color-highlighting of passages according to the editors' understanding of the text's underlying themes.

The question of which features are most valuable and which Study Bible the most useful are, as you might expect in so crowded and competitive a field, hotly-contested. Take, for instance, just the matter of where cross-references should be placed in relation to the text; there are at least *five* different ways it is done: down the center of each page between columns of text; along the outer margins; at the bottom; in the text itself; and in headings at the beginning of each passage.

Which is best? Who is to say; check out several at a bookstore, and suit yourself.

The recommendations which follow, growing out of my personal studies and research, are no less subjective than anyone else's, and will need to be tested against your own experience and preferences; but they are disinterested to the extent that I am not a Bible publisher trying to sell you a version of my own.

Let's consider the matter of features first. There are five which in my opinion have proven to be most useful. They are:

1. A sizeable concordance (96 pages is a bare minimum).
2. Cross-references, the more the better; some study Bibles have more than 70,000.
3. An alphabetical list of books of the Bible in the front matter.
4. Notes pointing out where texts vary or are uncertain. And
5. Maps.

These features have one important characteristic in common, namely that they are relatively independent of doctrinal bias (though theological fingerprints often show through references and notes if you know how to look for them). This relative independence helps make them of prime value to independent-minded readers like you; they assist you neutrally in searching out texts to reflect on and compare with others in the course of answering your own questions about Scripture, rather than directing you to somebody else's version of what the correct answers must be.

### **You Get What You Pay For – If You Pay Attention**

In much the same way that bindings vary in quality and price, there is a ladder of quality and cost in study helps. (**Note: all prices mentioned here were suggested retail for clothbound editions in the mid-1980s, and have doubtless changed, and some editions have gone out of print. And many Bibles are available online for free**)

At the bottom rung are **text Bibles**. A text Bible contains just what it says: The text, the whole text, and nothing but the text. Naturally, if you want to study the Bible, you will need some supplementary materials. Text Bibles range in price from nothing to five dollars or so.

Moving up one rung, you can get a Bible with a small Concordance, 30 to 60 pages or so, for about five dollars. Such small Concordances are not much good, as far as I can see; to do any serious searching and comparing of texts you would have to have access to a larger one.

For about three dollars more, however, there is the **Holy Bible with Concordance**, published by the American Bible Society. Its Concordance is huge, several hundred unnumbered pages; I didn't count them, but the Concordance is thicker than the entire New Testament. This section sets this Bible apart from its class in terms of usefulness; but, disappointingly, it lacks an alphabetical list of biblical books, which would make learning to use its concordance that much easier.

At the next step, in the \$10 to \$15 range, you find what are called Reference Bibles. Among the good values in this group are the **Personal Reference Bible** by World, and Oxford's **New Emerald Reference Bible**, both of which have respectable Concordances, cross-references and a few maps.

When the price tag increases to the \$15 to \$20 range, there are reference editions with somewhat larger Concordances, perhaps more cross-references and maps, plus a few descriptive articles about Bible history, Jesus' parables and so forth. But look closely here: I found many which were not really any better than the World **Personal Reference** or Oxford's **New Emerald**, and were not worth the additional cost.

It is at the next rung that we find the full-fledged Study Bibles, which vary in price anywhere from \$20 to almost \$50. It is these in which you typically find, besides the items mentioned earlier, such features as:

1. Elaborate topical reference systems (such as the Thompson or Topical Chain Systems, etc.) which link cross-references together into scores or hundreds of categories, according to the editor's sense of their meaning;

2. More or less extensive notes in the text, explaining various concepts, doctrines and linguistic matters, or providing interpretive and devotional commentary on the text;
3. Elaborate indexes to, and dictionaries or even encyclopedias of biblical subjects; and
4. Many miscellaneous articles, such as Introductions and outlines of each book, Harmonies of the Gospels, summaries of Jesus' teaching, lists of Old and New Testament prophecies, and so forth.

There are still more rungs on this ladder, worth mentioning in passing: at the next step you are surrounded by Family Bibles, large and colorful tomes which feature family records sections, many full-color illustrations, perhaps children's stories and the like, at typically higher prices. Here and on the next rung also you encounter Pulpit Bibles, which can be even larger in size and bolder in print for reading in public worship. You can pay as much as \$300 for a Bible in this category.

But I digress.

### **Sifting the Theological Wheat From the Chaff**

In almost all the many additional features you will find in the other Study Bibles, the theology of the compilers has a substantial, sometimes overwhelming influence on their shape and content. In a way this is as it should be, since no one comes to the Bible completely free of biases and interpretive baggage, least of all those people ready to invest years of their lives into translating and interpreting it for others. Still, doctrinal stance is a factor to be taken into account when you prepare to plunk down the \$25 to \$50 dollars which any of these various volumes will cost. And it leads me to repeat an admonition from Chapter Three, that while some of these volumes are much better than others, you should not become dependent on any single Study Bible, anymore than you should depend on the views in a single commentary. The matter of theological orientation points up another observation: It was soon evident in surveying the field that the evangelicals and fundamentalists, who uphold what they call a "high view of Scripture," buy more Bibles than do theological liberals. As a result, there are more Study Bibles published with them and their views in mind than there are for students at the other end of the spectrum.

In fact, among the 21 or so I examined which had a definite orientation, the score was 18 on the conservative side to a mere three which could be called liberal; and of the 18, close to half were of a rather pronounced fundamentalist-dispensationalist slant. Furthermore, one of the most liberal of these texts, the **New Oxford Annotated Bible**, was among the least useful on its own, lacking a Concordance and maps.

Only in the late 1980s did a full-featured Study Bible with a liberal theology appear; it is The New Catholic Study Bible, from an affiliate of Nelson. And it was Catholics who produced one of the most provocative new versions, the Christian Community Bible. This edition is a product of what is called Liberation Theology, and

has been widely used in the Philippines and Central America. It is also a volume that has gotten people killed, in a modern-day demonstration of the subversive and hazardous character of scripture and its study.

These fascinating exceptions notwithstanding, the lopsided character of the Study Bible marketplace seems to bear out one of the evangelicals' familiar criticisms of liberal theologians and their followers, namely that having demythologized and dissected the Bible, too many of them seem to have largely abandoned it as a religious resource. As I have said before, I think this is too bad, and I hope this book among others can begin to make some contribution to redressing that balance.

One earlier exception to the evangelical trend in study Bibles is one I find very interesting, **The Dartmouth Bible**. Published in 1950 by Houghton Mifflin, it was prepared by a pair of liberal scholars assisted by a distinguished team of advisors. Its format was adventurous, its perspective progressive, and its notes extensive. Although it was greeted with much enthusiasm when it appeared and was reprinted several times, it has now unfortunately gone out of print. If you want a copy, you will have to search for it in secondhand bookstores, as I did.

In many of the volumes on the chart that follows, the theological orientation is clearly that of the prominent individual whose name is on it: Scofield, Rice, Lindsell, Ryrie, Criswell, etc. —evangelicals, inerrantists and/or fundamentalists all, some rather stridently so. In others, the overall doctrinal slant is somewhat softened by the presence of numerous contributors, whose various approaches cannot help but provide a modicum of balance, as in the **Master Study Bible**. But numbers are no guarantee: the committee, for instance, which produced **The New Scofield Reference Bible** is monolithic and unswerving in its literalist- dispensationalist viewpoint.

In still other books, these views show up also in their study tools, such as the various topical or chain reference systems. These systems can be useful in finding some passages, but at the same time, the identification of topics and themes in Scripture is an interpretive venture through and through.

The question for a student-consumer then becomes: in using a particular volume, which will I learn more about, the Bible, or the editor's doctrines? The answers vary considerably.

In fact, the more I look at these Bibles, the more it seems that there is no single volume which stands clearly above the rest. Rather, they seem to me to fall into three categories of usefulness, indicated on the chart on the next page by stars.

Note: Since this book first appeared, there have been scores —more like hundreds —of new study Bibles published, far too many to keep up with, including a whole new genre of finely segmented editions (e.g., The Parenting Bible; The Teen Study Bible; The Recovery Bible; Bibles for women in orchid leather bindings; Bibles on computer disks, etc., etc.) So the chart which follows is in one sense obsolete, as it is not up to the minute. On the other hand, I believe most of the new versions are what I call “gimmick Bibles,” owing more to market research than to new scholarship or theology. Thus the overall picture of features and perspectives in the chart should still be useful as an overall sketch of the field. But if you don't see what you want there, don't give up: maybe the kind of Bible you need is just around the corner.

## SOME WIDELY-USED STUDY BIBLES: A COMPARISON

Explanation of Symbols:

Ratings: \*\*\* =Most useful; \*\* =less useful; \* =least useful

For Doctrinal slant: **F**=Fundamentalist; **D**=Dispensationalist; **I**=Inerrantist; **L**=Liberal; **N**=none or little.

An added plus (+) means doctrinal slant is **strongly felt**.

LIST

Christian Community Bible, Claretian	Note: Not a typical study Bible; extensive text notes which reflect a Catholic Liberation Theology perspective	L **
The Companion Bible	Zondervan	F+ *
The Comparative Study Bible, Zondervan	NOTE: This edition contains no helps other than a few short textual notes. But it does feature four translations in parallel columns: KJV, NASB, NIV and The Amplified Bible; the Amplified Text includes various shades of meaning for Biblical terms in the text where they occur.	N **
The Criswell Study Bible,		F++ *
Harper Study Bible, Zondervan		F **
Holy Bible with Concordance, Am.Bible Society		N **
Holman Study Bible, Holman		I **

Lindsell Study  
uses Living Bible  
paraphrase text

I+ \*

**SOME WIDELY-USED STUDY BIBLES: A COMPARISON**, continued –

Explanation of Symbols: \*\*\* =Most useful; \*\* =less useful; \* =least useful

For Doctrinal slant: **F**=Fundamentalist; **D**=Dispensationalist; **I**=Inerrantist; **L**=Liberal; **N**=none or little. An added plus (+) means doctrinal slant is **strongly felt**.

Master Study	I ***
Nave's Study	F+ **
New American Standard	I *
New Catholic Study Bible	L ***
New English Bible Oxford Study Ed.,	L *
New Oxford Annotated Bible,	L *
New Scofield Ref. Bible,	F++ *
The Open Bible	I **
The Open Bible, Expanded Ed.	I **
The Oxford Scofield	D++ *
The Pilgrim Study Bible,	D **
The Rice Reference Bible,	F+D+ “
The Ryrie Study Bible,	F+ *
Thompson Chain-Reference Bible	I **
The Topical Chain Study Bible,	F *

At the top of this listing, in the Three Star (\*\*\*) category, I would place **The Master Study Bible** by Holman and **The New Catholic Study Bible** by the Catholic Bible Press (Nelson). They seem to me to pack the most usable information between their covers.

The **Master Study Bible's** 500+-page encyclopedia looks particularly well-done and accessible. While both are conservative in their theological orientation, they are not nearly as heavy-handed about it as several others.

At the bottom, marked with only a single star (\*), I would place most of the other Study Bibles bearing an individual's name: Criswell, Lindsell, Nave's, Rice, Ryrie and Scofield. This is for several reasons: for one thing, all six are very tendentious in their theological views, to the point where they are mainly useful for studying the schools of thought they represent, rather than the Bible itself.

The **Lindsell Study Bible** has the additional serious drawback of using the text of **The Living Bible**. The Living Bible is not a translation but a paraphrase, done by one person, Kenneth Taylor, according to what he describes as a “rigid evangelical position.” Although it has sold many millions of copies, The Living Bible has been roundly criticized, even by eminent conservative scholars, as having taken unjustified liberties with the text in many, many cases, to the point where very few respectable scholars, except Lindsell and a few others, would recommend it as a resource for serious Bible study. (There is no little irony in the fact that the study Bible marketed by Lindsell, a leading advocate of biblical “inerrancy,” would use as its text the version held in lowest repute by textual scholars; but that is another story, and business is business.)

But lest I be charged with prejudice here, I hasten to note that also falling into the Single Star (\*), least useful category are two of the most liberal volumes theologically, **The New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition, and The New Oxford Annotated Bible**. This is not for theological but technical reasons: neither has a Concordance, which I consider essential, although you can buy a small, less than adequate one separately for the Annotated edition.

This ranking of most and least useful still leaves a wide range in between. But I want to caution readers about taking this list too seriously, for two reasons: one, my preferences may not be the same as yours; and two, once this list gets into print, it will soon be obsolete. Editions will be revised; new volumes will be coming out; and others may go out of print. Think of it instead as a snapshot of a fast-moving field. For guidance in making a buying decision, I would suggest you measure whatever Study Bibles you look at against the items in the following questionnaire:

## STUDY BIBLE BUYER'S QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. Does it have the Basics:

- A. A Concordance of at least 96 pages?
- B. Alphabetical List of books of the Bible?
- C. Cross-references in text?
- D. Notes re: textual variants?
- E. Maps?

2. Is the print large enough to read easily?

3. What is its doctrinal perspective?

4. How intrusive is this perspective in the study helps and text?

5. What special features does it have?

6. Are the reference systems easy to understand & use?

7. Do the special helps deal with issues I am interested in?

8. Is it compact enough to be portable?

9. How durable is its binding?

10. What is its price?

APPENDIX TWO: *THE WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY*  
[A Review of the First Edition, 1992]

Suppose you could make a list of all the people who have been officially authorized to interpret the Bible for Jews or Christians down through the centuries. Until just a few years ago, despite the great variety of denominations and cultures represented, practically everyone on such a list has had one characteristic in common: Almost all of them were men.

Has this male monopoly made a difference? A reminder: whenever the meaning of a biblical text has been disputed, behind the issue of what it "really" means lies a more fundamental question: **Who gets to decide** what it "really" means?

Who gets to decide the "real" meaning is, you will recall from Chapter Four, the Hermeneutical Issue of Power, or what I have called **The HIP Question**. Down the centuries, the answers to it have often been a matter of life and death. In the last generation more and more women have gained advanced degrees in biblical studies, and many of them say that having only men providing the answers is no longer acceptable: Hence we now have *The Women's Bible Commentary* (WBC for short).

*The Women's Bible Commentary* (Westminster/John Knox, 416 pages, cloth, \$19.95), is an undeniable landmark in the 3000-plus year history of Judeo-Christian religion: It is the first all-female scholarly commentary on the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments plus the Apocrypha. The last time such an undertaking was attempted was more than a century ago, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a small committee of pioneer feminists (including at least one Friend) issued *The Woman's Bible* in 1895. (*The Woman's Bible* is a fascinating but little-known tome; women were scarce in the theological guilds then, and few dared be associated with such extremism, so its commentary is perforce sketchy and uneven. But Stanton persevered, and acerbically summed up the results of her group's work thus: "*The Old Testament makes woman a mere afterthought in creation; the author of evil; cursed in her maternity; a subject in marriage; and all female life, animal and human, unclean. The Church in all ages has taught these doctrines and acted on them, claiming divine authority therefor.... This idea of woman's subordination is reiterated times without number, from Genesis to Revelations; and this is the basis of all church action.*")

The editors of the *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, seminary professors in Atlanta and Washington respectively, pay tribute to Stanton, but they are somewhat less sweeping in their verdict. Their starting point is the more

moderate, or perhaps merely understated thesis that “the power of the Bible in women's lives has been at best ambivalent....”

They acknowledge that many feminists, including some of their 41 contributors, confronted by the near-total androcentricity of the biblical text, are tempted to toss the entire cultural tradition it epitomizes aside and start over. But they are obliquely dubious about such efforts, insisting that, “for good or ill, the Bible is a book that has shaped and continues to shape human lives, communities and culture....The Bible has become part of the air we breathe without our even being aware of its presence or power.” Hence it needs to be examined by women from a consciously female perspective, if only to begin to resist its negative impact on them.

And examine it these women, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and none-of-the-aboves, do. They find plenty to deplore and lament there, much of which has been ignored or even perversely celebrated in most earlier, male-dominated commentaries. This goes beyond the easy stuff, from the warrant for witchburning in Exodus 22:18, to Paul's oft-cited outburst against women speaking in church (First Corinthians 14).

Perhaps more egregious, for the WBC authors, are the repeated images, beginning with Hosea, and including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nahum and others, portraying God's relationship to Israel and humans in general as a marriage. Here God is the steadfast, longsuffering (but all-powerful & violence-prone) husband, and Israel/humankind a chronically adulterous, promiscuous whore of a spouse. The female sinner is repeatedly punished by the righteously angry Divine Husband, through the most gruesome violence imaginable: exposure, multiple rapes, the murder of her children, dismemberment, cannibalism, etc.

#### AN EVIL PATTERN EXPOSED

Once this pattern is pointed out, its pathological character almost leaps out at you. Commenting on a typical passage, Nahum 3:5 (“Behold, I am against you,” says the Lord of Hosts, ‘and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will let nations look on your nakedness...”), WBC contributor Judith Sanderson declares: “In a society where violence against women is epidemic, it is extremely dangerous to image God as involved in it in any way ....What would it mean to worship a God who is portrayed as raping women when angry?...To involve God in an image of sexual violence is, in a profound way, somehow to justify it and thereby to sanction it for human males who are for any reason angry with a woman.”

(Incidentally, a Quaker scholar, Gracia Fay Ellwood, summed up this analysis brilliantly and succinctly in her 1989 Pendle Hill Pamphlet, *Batter My Heart*.)

Nowadays, one might think, it would be hard to disagree with or ignore such attitudes. Yet a look into some other widely-used commentaries shows these images being taken in stride. This seems to be the case despite wide differences in theological perspective: *The Interpreters Bible*, probably the most widely used, is 1950s liberal Protestant in its stance, but its commentators on this and similar passages show little more sensitivity to the pattern than do the fundamentalists of *The Liberty Bible*

*Commentary*, edited by Jerry Falwell, or those in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, a moderate Catholic effort to which several women contributed.

Once exposed, however, these misogynist attitudes seem flagrant and appalling. Indeed, if one wants evidence of destructive attitudes toward women, both in the Bible itself and in the way it has been interpreted (The HIP Question again), the WBC's contributors dig it up by the wheelbarrowful. It's easy to see, after absorbing some of their work, why many thoughtful women want nothing further to do with the Bible and the religions it spawned.

Yet overall the WBC writers don't follow this path, above all because as misogynist as much of the Bible is, misogyny is not all that's in it. In fact, there's a good deal in it that is pro-women, if one knows how and where to look. (This is an old Quaker insight, about which more in a moment.)

#### A DIFFERENT LOOK AT EDEN

Take the book of Genesis for example. Eve's plucking the apple has been made the basis of Woman-as-Evil-Temptress by male interpreters for millenia. But Susan Niditch's commentary deftly deconstructs this view, showing that it is not based on the text, but is rather a later imposition by the likes of Milton and that arch-misogynist, Augustine.

"What if one notices," she inquires, "that the snake does not lie to the woman but speaks the truth when it says that the consequence of eating from the forbidden tree is gaining the capacity to distinguish good from evil, a godlike power which the divinity jealously guards...? [Eve] is no easy prey for a seducing demon, as later tradition represents her but a conscious actor choosing knowledge.... The man, on the other hand, is utterly passive." She also points out that "no weighty accusation of 'original sin' brought about by woman is found in the text. That is a later interpretation from authors with different theologies and worldviews."

For that matter, throughout the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis, the major women characters –Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hagar –are persistently more active, inventive, and interesting than the men who are ostensibly the "real" protagonists of the tales. Niditch makes it plain that there's much of value for women readers in Genesis once they have answered the HIP Question in their own way, discarding the baggage of androcentric hermeneutics.

#### SINGING A NEW SONG

Furthermore, as Gracia Fay Ellwood also pointed out in *Batter My Heart*, it is in the Hebrew canon that one finds the most strikingly pro-feminine scripture of all, the Song of Songs. This brief collection of often-sexy love poems could even serve as a veritable paradigm for "liberated" relationships, which is undoubtedly why male church authorities, both Jewish and Christian, have had so much trouble with it. (The Song is said to have been the last book admitted to the Hebrew canon by the rabbis.)

And once past the Old Testament, the figure of Jesus, and the character of the community he gathered, are also shot through with signs favorable toward women. Jesus

identifies himself with biblical Wisdom, a feminine figure; the gospels repeatedly portray Jesus treating women with unusual courtesy and affirmation. The WBC writers show that in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and John women played a central, and in many ways, equalitarian role in the community he gathered around him.

But this equalitarian aspect of early Christianity soon faded, first from its practice, and later from its writings. This backsliding into sexism was not an accident, insist the WBC scholars. They think they are able to trace with some rigor the pattern of retrenchment and growing repression in the early church. In fact, this pattern is the basis for something of an emerging Gospel According to the Feminists, which the WBC lays out in considerable detail.

The chief culprit in this process of repatriarchization (if there is such a word), at least as far as the New Testament is concerned, is not Paul (the usual prime suspect, though he does his share) but Luke, author of the Gospel and the book of Acts. WBC's Jane Schaberg opens her introduction to Luke's work with a bold headline: "Warning", and declares flatly, "The Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible."

Luke is dangerous, she argues, because he's a skillful artist, who seems to portray women frequently and positively, while in fact subtly and systematically showing them in subordinate positions and progressively downplaying their contributions, describing a community that is unmistakably and increasingly androcentric: "Women are included in Jesus' entourage and table community," she says, "but not as the equals of men."

## RETRENCHMENT AND REACTION

Once Luke gets Jesus out of the way, in Acts, Schaberg says women's role rapidly fades: "In the teachings of Jesus in Luke, women are mentioned 18 times....In Acts, in the teaching of the apostles, women are mentioned only once." According to this feminist version, the process of subordinating women Christians was driven principally by a desire for acceptance (and later, advancement) in the larger pagan culture. There equalitarian notions were considered at least perverted, probably subversive and certainly not respectable. The later epistles show the process gaining momentum; of First Timothy, and its famous edict, "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence"(2:12) Joanna Dewey says, "the author is asking women to behave in such a way as to give no offense to men in power, to conform to the values of the dominant pagan culture." Soon enough, of course, church authorities didn't just ask women to keep silence; they cited "scripture," and silenced them.

The implications of this comprehensive rethinking of the HIP Question for the biblical religions are huge, and only beginning to be fleshed out. When WBC writers try to articulate them, they frequently lapse into PC jargon, such as: "to pray with Daughter Zion is to join with the struggles of women around the globe" (on Lamentations); or to become "committed to an ever-deepening understanding of the interactions of sexism, classism, racism, militarism and nationalism..."(on Amos). Such sloganeering obscures more than it explains but is, mercifully, rare.

Nonetheless, Jewish and Christian communities which absorb the insights abounding in the WBC will undoubtedly end up being a lot different from what they are

now. My own suspicions are that the feminist gospel represented here will progressively undermine organizational hierarchy, doctrinal fixity, and received liturgical language and rituals, all of which are dear to partisans of the male status quo –and all of which will make them look more and more like the Society of Friends.

Such a development should be no surprise, nor is it, I think, mere group chauvinism. After all, the women of WBC have gone through a door that Quakers like Margaret Fell and later Lucretia Mott, helped to pry open, with their insistence that the Bible, rightly interpreted, was a tool for the liberation of women, slaves, and other oppressed people. They weren't afraid of the HIP Question, and in many ways, the WBC is just now catching up to their witness and giving it a scholarly foundation.

As was true for both Fell and Mott, the *Women's Bible Commentary* will give fits to the guardians of the male ecclesiastical status quo. This is nothing new: When William Tyndale published a clandestine English version of the Bible in the 1530s, the book was burned, and then so was he, in 1536; but his mission of making the scriptures available to those from whom the church authorities had kept them could not be stopped.

There's a similar feeling of inevitability about this volume. While the WBC is not beyond criticism, and there is certainly much more to be done in this field, its status as a landmark of church and feminist history is secure, and its interpretations will be increasingly hard to ignore. [NOTE: the WBC is in its Third Edition as of 2018; I have not reviewed that one, and am looking to hear from women Friends about it.]

All the more reason why the *Women's Bible Commentary* should be on the shelf in your meetinghouse, and within reach during your regular Bible study sessions.

What? You mean your meeting doesn't have regular Bible study sessions? Good grief! How would you explain that to Margaret Fell and Quakerism's other founding feminist foremothers?

## APPENDIX THREE: GLOSSARY

Note on abbreviations: When a word is followed by (q.v.), this indicates that there is a separate entry for that term.

**Aramaic.** The common language of Palestine in Jesus' day, undoubtedly the language he and his disciples spoke. Several Old Testament passages are in Aramaic (e.g., Ezra 4:8-6:18, Daniel 2:4-7:28). Only a few traces of Aramaic made it into the New Testament; an example is the expression “Abba” for father in Mk. 14:36.

**Armageddon.** This is both a place and an event. The place is the Mount of Megiddo in Israel, which overlooks the Plain of Esdraelon, a site of several Old Testament battles. It is here that the event, the climactic battle of the end times, is expected to take place, according to popular Eschatology (q.v.). This battle is described in highly symbolic language in Rev. 16 and 19, which in the Eschatological view is actually a detailed forecast of actual future events. Following Armageddon –although the exact sequence is widely debated among popular eschatologists –Christ's second coming will occur, to be followed in due course by the last judgment and the end of the world.

**Apocalypse.** Taken from the Greek term for revelation, an Apocalypse is a writing which purports to describe a vision of the events and meaning of the last days of the world. In the Bible, the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New are Apocalypses. There are also Apocalyptic passages in numerous other books. There were many other Apocalyptic books written and circulated in the biblical period; usually they were presented

pseudonymously, that is as the visions of someone else, typically a figure from the patriarchal past. Daniel is widely understood to be pseudonymous in this sense: it purports to tell of events that took place during the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews, but most non-literalist scholars believe it was actually written several hundred years later. See also Pseudepigrapha..

**Apocrypha, The.** A collection of writings which were included in one of the two major early versions of the Jewish Scriptures, the Greek translation, also known as the Septuagint or LXX edition (q.v.). As the LXX version became favored by Christians, it lost popularity with Jews, who turned to the older Hebrew edition which does not include these books. But the Apocrypha were included in Jerome's Latin Vulgate edition (q.v.), which was based on the LXX and which became the standard Christian text until the Reformation. Luther and the Protestant reformers then reexamined the texts and left them out of their editions as not authentically entitled to a place in the canon (q.v.). Modern Catholic Bibles include most (but not all) of these writings, while the Orthodox Church includes some but not as many. See also **Pseudepigrapha.**

**ASV.** American Standard Version, a version published in 1901 which attempted to translate the original texts as literally as possible. See also **NASB** and **RSV**.

**AV.** Authorized Version, that is, the KJV (q.v.). See also **RSV**.

**Autograph.** The original of a text. No autographs of biblical texts are now known to exist. The most recent available copies are several hundred years or more removed from the autographs. See also **Codex, Verbal Inspiration and Bibliolatry**.

**Barth, Karl**(1886-1968). A Swiss theologian whose work is referred to as Neo-orthodox or Dialectical Theology. He emphasized the importance of the otherness of God and reliance on God's revelation, the Bible and Christ, over man's efforts to reach or understand God.

**Biblical Criticism.** See **Criticism**.

**Bibliolatry.** The worship of the Bible; applied pejoratively to the attitude of some fundamentalist literalists toward the Bible as the supreme and only source of religious truth. Biblicism is a more muted term meaning essentially the same thing. I argue in Chapter Six that the term Hermenolatry (q.v.), or worship of one's hermeneutics better describes this literalist view. See also **Verbal Inspiration**.

**Bultmann, Rudolph** (1884-1976). A German theologian who is identified with the approach to biblical interpretation called Demythologization (q.v.).

**Canon.** From the Greek word meaning rule in the sense of a measuring device(like a ruler), a collection of books which have been “measured” by a religious community according to its religious views and traditions and pronounced sacred and authoritative for that community. Different canons of Scripture exist among Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox and Syrian Christians, and Samaritans. See also **Samaritan Pentateuch** and **Peshitta**.

**Codex.** An ancient biblical manuscript, copied by hand onto vellum or papyrus. The most famous codices include the Codex Alexandrinus, from the 5th Century, now in the British Museum; the Codex Bezae, 5th century, now at Cambridge University; Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, 5th century, now in Paris; Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, now in an Orthodox monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai; and the Codex Vaticanus, 4th century, in the Vatican library.

**Conflation.** The term used to describe the process whereby a scribe or editor took two variant readings of a text and combined or conflated them into a third, new reading somewhat different from either.

**Criticism.** Biblical criticism refers to a variety of well- developed ways of applying rational and scientific analysis to Scriptural texts. It includes numerous subdisciplines,

among them: Form Criticism, analysis of the forms of biblical passages or books, such as legends, laments, hymns, etc., particularly as they were orally transmitted(See also **Oral Tradition**); Textual Criticism, which attempts to establish accurate texts; Source Criticism, Literary Criticism and Historical Criticism, which are concerned with the materials, date, place, authorship, literary contours and intentions of a work; Redaction criticism looks at the work and purposes of a text's editors or redactors. These kinds of criticism largely grew out of the spread of scientific and modernist outlooks in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of their practitioners believed rather naively that they could by these methods peel away all myth, superstition and error from the Bible and objectively establish “what really happened” and “what it all actually meant”. Such optimism has been very much tempered by the more recent realization that meaning and truth in religion are not items susceptible to scientific method and demonstration, that there is no such thing as “objectivity” in these fields. These methods are still practiced, however, and have yielded many valuable results.

**D: Deuteronomic Code.** The summary of Hebrew laws contained in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapters 12-26. In 2Kings 22-23, King Josiah is described as finding a book of the law in the Temple, and some scholars believe this code formed the bulk of that text. This code, and the influence and writing of its compiler(s), are also known in Old Testament studies simply as “**D**”. See also **J:Jahwist**; **E: Elohist**; and **P: Priestly Code**.

**Dead Sea Scrolls.** A large cache of parchment and papyrus scrolls discovered in eleven caves along the northwest coast of the Dead Sea between 1947 and 1956. These scrolls, written in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic on papyrus and parchment, have been dated between about 250 B.C. to about 70 A.D. They were apparently assembled by a sectarian Jewish group known as the Essenes, who had a community at a site now known as Khirbet Qumran. The scrolls include copies of most Old Testament books, plus many other related materials. More recently, some other scrolls from the same era and region but other sites have been included in the general meaning of the term.

**Decalogue, The.** From the Greek term for “ten words,” this is the name given to the Ten Commandments, as found in Exodus 20 and 34, and Deuteronomy 5.

**Demythologization.** An approach to biblical interpretation identified with the work of Rudolf Bultmann (q.v.). To demythologize in Bultmann's sense does not really mean to eliminate mythological elements from Scripture; instead, biblical stories and teachings taken to be mythological(e.g., the story of the Fall of Man in Genesis 3) are reinterpreted as saying something about human existence in general. The story of the Fall, from this perspective, does not tell us about something which actually happened to two historical persons in a Mesopotamian garden in 4004 B.C.; it is rather a story which describes, in the best way its authors knew how, something about the common human condition, namely that as God's creatures we are all finite and imperfect. This approach has been controversial from the time Bultmann first advanced it in the early 1940s. See also **Hermenolatry**.

**Deutero-Isaiah.** Meaning “second Isaiah,” this is the name given to chapters 40-55 in Isaiah, which many scholars believe were written by another prophet than the earlier chapters. Chapters 56-66 are ascribed by many to still another unknown prophet, called Trito-Isaiah.

**Didache, The.** An early church manual of religious instruction, also known as “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” The only existing Greek copy, discovered in a Constantinople monastery, dates from the eleventh century.

**Dispensationalism.** A hermeneutics (q.v.) based on the theory that God has divided world history into a series of eras or “dispensations,” usually seven in number. In popular Eschatology (q.v.), this is usually interpreted to mean that we are approaching the end of the current Church Dispensation, which will soon be followed by the battle of Armageddon (q.v.) and a thousand year period (see **The Millenium**) during which Christ will rule over the world from Jerusalem, and during which time also all of God's unfulfilled promises to Israel in the Old Testament will be fulfilled: the Temple will be rebuilt, sacrifices resumed, and a converted Israel will be the center of the world. Further, all the true Christians will at some point in this drama be abruptly snatched or “Raptured” (q.v.) away to heaven. At the end of the Millenium, an eternal state of bliss will begin; scenarios for this final transition vary. Among current popular eschatologists, such figures as Rev. Jerry Falwell, Hal Lindsey and Salem Kirban are prominent, and the various Scofield Bibles reflect its preeminent textual expression. For further discussion see Chapter Six.

**Domestic Codes, The.** See **Household Rules.**

**Douay Bible** (also Douai). The name given the major Catholic version of the Bible in English, taken from the French city where the Old Testament section was first published in 1609. Also known as the Douay-Rheims version, because the New testament section originated in Rheims in 1582. See also NAB.

**E: Elohist.** Based on the Hebrew term for God, this term, or just the initial, is used to describe one of the major sources from which most scholars believe the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) were composed. This name was chosen because Elohim is the name for God used in this material. Fundamentalists do not accept this division, insisting that all these books were written by Moses at God's direct command, which was the traditional view before the rise of modern scholarship. See also **J: Jahwist**; **D: Deuteronomist**; and **P: Priestly Code**.

**Eisegesis.** The term for getting what you want out of Scripture by reading into it what you are looking for. It is the opposite of honest Exegesis (q.v.), and is used generally in a pejorative sense.

**Eschatology.** Relating to “the last things,” from the Greek term for last, eschatology refers to discussions of such topics as the end of the world, the judgment and resurrection

of the dead, the coming of the Messiah, Christ's Second Coming and so forth. All Apocalyptic (q.v.) writings are eschatological, but not all eschatological writings are apocalyptic. There are many passages in the Old Testament prophets which deal with eschatological themes, but in a very different way than do the apocalyptic writings.

**Essenes, The.** One of numerous small Jewish sects which flourished around the time of Jesus. The Essenes gathered in small, separatist communities, where they developed their own interpretations of Scripture and a detailed set of Apocalyptic speculations (q.v.). Many scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls (q.v.) were collected by a group of Essenes.

**Exegesis.** The process of studying and interpreting the Bible. It is distinct from exposition, which builds on exegesis to explain and apply the meanings to the situation of a modern audience. Exposition is much like preaching. See also **Hermeneutics**.

**Exposition.** See **exegesis**.

**Form Criticism.** See **Sitz-im-Leben** and **Criticism**.

**Four Source Hypothesis.** See **The Synoptic Problem** and **Q**.

**Geschichte.** A German word meaning history, found as part of several technical terms for Bible study first developed by German-speaking scholars, for instance Heilsgeschichte (q.v.).

**Gloss.** A gloss is an addition to a text, usually by a scribe or an editor, usually intended to clarify or define terms, but also to insert ideas or “correct” the text according to the editor's beliefs. Many of the variant readings among different Scriptural texts are considered by scholars to be glosses on the original, though they often differ as to which of the various readings is the authentic original one.

**Glossolalia.** Speaking in tongues, a form of unintelligible, ecstatic speech, a phenomenon which was common in the early Christian communities(cf. 1Cor 14).

**Gnosticism.** A varied set of unorthodox systems of Christian thought against which the early church authorities struggled fiercely in the second century. While the character and practices of the groups varied widely, Gnostic religion had some common features, particularly a dualistic belief that the world and all material things were created by an evil rival to God, and that a special, secret form of divine knowledge, or Gnosis, was necessary to free a human soul from bondage to this material world. Furthermore, once received this Gnosis liberated an immortal spark of the divine in the person which was his or her “true self,” enabling it to achieve a return to God. The church's victory over Gnosticism resulted in destruction of most Gnostic texts; but 50 Gnostic manuscripts were discovered in the mid-1940s at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, greatly expanding the base of information about Gnostic faith.

**Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis.** Named after its originators, Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen, two nineteenth-century German scholars whose writings in the 1860s and 1870s formulated the thesis that several earlier documents were assembled and edited to make up the Pentateuch (q.v.). It was in their presentations that the terms J, E, D and P (q.v.) were first assigned to represent the four major strands of these materials.

**Hagiographa.** See **The Writings.**

**Halakah.** Jewish rules for conduct based on the Torah (q.v.) as interpreted by rabbinic authorities. Halakah can also refer to the texts containing these rules. See also **Midrash**, **Mishna** and **Talmud.**

**Haustafeln.** See **Household Rules.**

**Heilsgeschichte.** A German term variously translated as sacred history, redemption-salvation history, etc. It refers to a theological interpretation of the movement and meaning of history which some scholars believe they have found in various places in the Bible, particularly in Deuteronomy and Luke-Acts. According to this interpretation, Scripture is essentially the continuing saga of God's saving activity in and through history.

**Hermeneutics.** A set of principles for interpreting Scripture. There are many different approaches to Hermeneutics, probably as many as there are people attempting to interpret Scripture. (See Chapter Four for further comments on Hermeneutics.) Hermeneutics provides the principles and techniques used for Exegesis (q.v.). See also **Hermenolatry.**

**Hermenolatry.** A term introduced in this book (See Chapter Six), it refers to the worship of an approach to, or a set of doctrines used in interpreting the Bible. Since hermenolatry most often goes by the name of a "literal" interpretation of the Bible, it is an abuse to which literalist and Dispensationalist (q.v.) interpreters are preeminently prone. But it has also cropped up among liberal interpreters, some of whom believed just as strongly that their rationalist perspectives were the only way to truth. To uncover hermenolatry in a study Bible or Commentary, check for Notes and commentary on such texts as Mt. 1:1-17,6:13 and 24:34; Mk. 13:33; Lk. 3:23-38; 2Sam. 24:1. If the notes suggest that the text means something different from or contrary to its plain meaning, chances are you are looking at a specimen of hermenolatry, where the doctrines shaping interpretation of the text are more important than the text itself. When such a bias is exposed, one should take further commentary with a considerable degree of skepticism. See also **Bibliolatry**, with which it is often mistakenly confused.

**Hexateuch.** The name given the first six books of the Bible by scholars who regard them as originally having been a single collection. see also **Pentateuch.**

**Higher Criticism.** A general term covering all types of Biblical Criticism. It was originally used to distinguish Textual Criticism, considered to be "Lower Criticism,"

from all the other forms; but Textual Criticism has now been upgraded into the Higher echelons of biblical studies. See also **Criticism** and **Historical Critical Method**.

**Historical Critical Method, The.** Another general term for Biblical Criticism of all types. It was originally used in the nineteenth century as a generic term for an approach to biblical studies based on rationalistic assumptions about the ability of scholars to understand and compare the reality of biblical times to that of their own world, from which an “objective” understanding of the texts could emerge. Many of these assumptions, including the notion of achieving objectivity have largely been abandoned. See also **Criticism** and **Quest of the Historical Jesus**.

**Holiness Code.** The set of ethical and ritual prescriptions contained in Lev. 17-26, many of which are introduced or underlined with such expressions as “Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy(11:44).”

Hokhmah. The Hebrew term for “wisdom,” or skill. See Sophia.

**Household Rules, The.** Also known as the **Domestic codes**, or in German **Haustafeln**. A series of texts found in three New Testament epistles(Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:22-6:9; and 1Peter 2:13- 3:7) dealing with the relations between masters and slaves, children and parents and wives and husbands. The codes are quite patriarchal and hierarchical, and stress the need for the lower status parties to obey the higher. The codes create all sorts of difficulties for any modern reader with genuine commitments to equality of persons. Before the American Civil War they were used to defend slavery; nowadays they are favorites with those who oppose women's liberation.

**Inerrancy.** An approach to Biblical interpretation based on the premise that the Biblical text is without error. As discussed in Chapter Six, various advocates of this view make this definition more or less absolute; for instance, some apply this definition only to the original autographs, or copies of the texts, which of course we do not have. Others insist that the Bible, at least their accepted version, is wholly without error. See also **Verbal Inspiration, NIV, Bibliolatry** and **Hermenolatry**.

**Interlinear Greek New Testament.** A Greek edition of the New Testament with an English translation placed under the Greek text in the word order of the Greek text. Usually such editions have a parallel, conventional translation on facing pages for comparison.

**JEB.** The Jerusalem Bible, a translation first published in French in 1956(English 1966) and prepared by the Roman Catholic Dominican Biblical School in Jerusalem.

**J: Jahwist.** The name for one of the major sources used in preparation of the Pentateuch (q.v.), the first five books of the Bible. The name is taken from the name of God (Yahweh, or in German, Jahve) which is used in these materials. This name is usually

translated as Lord. See also **E: Elohist, D: Deuteronomist, P: Priestly Code, and Tetragrammaton.**

**Jehovah.** See **Tetragrammaton.**

**JHVH.** See **Tetragrammaton.**

**Josephus, Flavius.** A Jewish writer who lived just after Jesus, in the latter part of the first century A.D. He sided with Rome during the Jewish revolt which led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., then later wrote many books on Jewish history and religion, which are a prime resource for scholars of Jewish and early Christian history.

**Kerygma.** From the Greek term for proclamation or preaching, Kerygma is used to refer to the central message of a particular biblical person or group, e.g., the Kerygma or message of Jesus, the Kerygma of Paul and/or the early Church, even the Kerygma of prophets such as Jeremiah. Exactly what is contained in the central message or Kerygma of any one of these is, of course, subject to varying interpretation and much debate.

**KJV.** The King James Version of the Bible, published in England in 1611, also known as the Authorized Version. The most famous and widely-distributed English translation, though its text has been shown by more recent studies to contain many errors, and much of its magnificent language has been made obsolete by cultural changes. One of the few documents written by a government-sponsored committee which has proved to be worth the investment. See also **Textus Receptus.**

**Koine Greek.** The variety of Greek spoken by the common people of New Testament times, and the tongue in which the New Testament books were written. It is also called Hellenistic Greek.

**Kyrios.** A Greek term usually referring to Christ as Lord.

**Law, The.** This term has several meanings. Most narrowly, it is the first division of the Hebrew Bible, covering the first five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. More generally, it refers to the various collections of Hebrew legislation and ritual prescriptions which are concentrated in these books. Most broadly it is used to refer to the entire Hebrew canon. The term Torah (q.v.) is also used in the same three ways. See also **The Prophets** and **The Writings.**

**Lex talionis.** A Latin term referring to the “eye for an eye” code of revenge as expressed, for instance, in Exodus 21.

**Literalism.** See **Verbal Inspiration.**

**Living Bible, The.** Also published with such titles as the *Living Bible Paraphrased* or the *Living New Testament Paraphrased*, or *The Way*, or *The Book*. This is a paraphrased

revision of the King James and ASV(q.v.), written from a “rigid evangelical” theological viewpoint, one which does not hesitate to alter texts in accordance with its own doctrinal predilections, often without indicating where the changes have been made. Because of this it has been widely criticized by many eminent scholars, even very conservative ones. It is thus a very poor resource for study unless compared frequently with other, more scholarly and carefully annotated editions. See also **Hermenolatry**.

**LXX.** See **Septuagint**.

**Magnificat.** The first word in the Latin translation of the hymn of Mary in the first chapter of Luke: “My soul doth magnify the Lord...”(Lk 1:46).

**Major Prophets.** Refers to the books of Ezekiel, Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament. They are called “Major” because theirs are the longest of the prophetic books, and to distinguish them from a group of shorter prophetic books by writers known as the Minor Prophets (q.v.). See also **The Prophets**.

**Mari Tablets.** An enormous collection of royal records from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Mari, excavated in the 1930s by a French archeologist, Andre Parrot. These records, written in Akkadian, shed much light on the culture of the area and the time in which the patriarchs of the Bible are said to have lived.

**Masoretic Text.** Since classical Hebrew words were written only with consonants and not vowels, the ancient versions of the Hebrew Old Testament were also written this way. The vowels were added later, by means of dots placed under the consonantal text. These additions were made by groups of Jewish biblical authorities called Masorettes. This process was not finalized until the late middle ages. The fact that the words of the text were without vowels means among other things that the meaning of some important words was unclear, since filling in different vowels could produce different denotations. The Masoretic Text in this sense represents the long-building consensus of authoritative Jewish interpretation as to what these these meanings should be. See also **Tetragrammaton**.

**Messianic Secret.** This term refers to a series of texts, particularly in Mark, in which Jesus acts to conceal his messianic identity until near the end of his career(cf., for example, Mark 1:23-25;5:2-19). Exactly why Jesus did this, or if these incidents were added later by the gospel writers, is still subject to debate.

**Metonymy.** Much like a code, in which a word is used as a substitute for another word. Metonymy is often found in the Apocalyptic (q.v.) books.

**Midrash.** A Hebrew word for Jewish interpretations of the Scriptures; a Midrash can be either a specific interpretation of a particular text, a collection of halakah (q.v.) or rules, or an entire work of biblical commentary.

**Millenium.** In popular Eschatology (q.v.), the Millenium is a period of a thousand years during all or most of which Christ will reign personally on earth before the end of the world and the final defeat of Satan. This notion is based on an interpretation of Rev 20. There are several different versions of just what will happen during this period, known variously at Premillennialism, Postmillennialism and Amillennialism.

**Minor Prophets.** Also known as The Twelve. This is the title given to twelve books of prophecy in the Old Testament, to distinguish them from the three long prophetic works by the Major Prophets (q.v.). The term does not indicate an estimate of their religious significance; some are very powerful, while others do seem, indeed, minor in significance. The Twelve include: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

**Mishna.** A lengthy collection of rabbinic commentaries and rules or halakah (q.v.), built on detailed study of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, and finalized around 300 A.D. See also **Talmud**.

**NAB.** New American Bible, a Catholic Translation completed in 1970, as a successor to the older Douay-Rheims (q.v.) version.

**Nabi.** The Hebrew term for prophet. Plural is nebiim. In the Old Testament, a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of God, delivering a message to a person or, more often, to a whole community. Delivering the message is the critical element, regardless of its content. The idea that prophecy deals primarily with foretelling the future is a corruption of the biblical meaning of the term. Biblical prophets sometimes foretold the future and sometimes not; the key element of their work was the delivery of the Word of the Lord, whatever its purport.

**Nag Hammadi.** See **Gnosticism**.

**NASB.** New American Standard Bible. A 1963 revision of the American Standard Version (**ASV –q.v.**).

**NEB.** New English Bible, a new Protestant translation by British scholars completed in 1970.

**NIV.** The New International Version of the Bible, completed in 1978 by a committee of conservative Evangelical scholars, who had repudiated the Revised Standard Version (**RSV –q.v.**) as too liberal and misleading in many instances. Although they profess to take the Inerrancy(q.v.) of scripture as a principle, these scholars frequently revise Old Testament passages which are quoted differently in the New Testament so that the Old Testament text conforms to the New(e.g., Ps.16:10 to Acts 2:27), a questionable practice indeed. See also **Hermenolatry**.

**NJV.** The New Jewish Version of the Hebrew Scriptures, being prepared by the Jewish Publication Society, and not yet complete.

**Oracle.** A message from God to a person or persons, delivered by a prophet. See also **Navi**.

**Oral Tradition.** Stories or other materials passed on verbally from one generation to another. Most non-literalist scholars believe that the stories in Genesis and Exodus were preserved in this way for hundreds of years before being written down. Most such scholars also believe stories about and sayings of Jesus were similarly transmitted before being written, although for a shorter time. It is the major goal of Form Criticism to investigate and lay out the patterns and rules by which such traditions are developed and shaped. See also **Biblical Criticism**.

**Origen.** An Alexandrian Christian of the third century, Origen is generally regarded as the finest biblical scholar and theologian of his time, even though his views were condemned three centuries later by a Council in Constantinople in 553.

**P: Priestly Code.** The name given one of the four major sources from which most scholars believe the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, was written. The Priestly Code is widely considered to be the latest set of materials, drawn from and reflecting the views and religious interpretations of the Hebrew priesthood it represents. See also **J, E and D**.

**Palimpsest.** A parchment manuscript on which something was written, then erased and something else written over it. It is now technically possible to decipher many of the earlier, erased writings on many old palimpsest parchments.

**Parable.** A kind of teaching through storytelling, in which a metaphor is extended into a whole lesson, often with a surprising point. Parables were one of Jesus' favorite forms of discourse, and many scholars believe the parables of the New Testament offer the most authentic glimpses of his actual teachings. Two examples are the Prodigal Son, Lk. 15:11-32, and The Talents, Mt. 25:14-30. Wisdom sayings, such as those found in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, are also sometimes referred to as parables.

**Parallelism.** A major feature of Hebrew poetry, also called the rhyme of ideas, in which a similar idea is expressed in different ways in succeeding lines or verses, as in Ps. 27:1:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

“The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

There are also forms of parallelism built on contrasts between statements, or parallelism of verse forms rather than of ideas. See also **Pleonasm**.

**Paranomasia.** A stodgy biblical scholar's term which attempts to avoid facing up to the embarrassing fact that puns are obviously God's favorite form of humor, since the Bible is full of them. That's essentially what Paranomasia is—a play on words. The presence of puns is also largely concealed in most English versions of the Bible, since puns are almost automatically lost in translation. Indeed, one sign of a good study Bible is whether it points out these frequent wordplays. A few examples are: Job 3:25; Mark 5:26; and Acts 21:28.

**Parousia.** The reappearance of Christ, which was expected imminently by the early Church, and still is by such as Hal Lindsey.

**Pentateuch.** The first five books of the Bible, also known as The Torah (q.v.) by Jews. It includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

**Pericope.** A Pericope is any self-contained unit or passage of biblical text.

**Peshitta.** Also Peshitto; the name of the Syrian Christian Church's version of the Bible. This version leaves out 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation, which have not been considered canonical by the Syrian church since the fifth century. It also has a distinctive translation of some of the Old Testament books. See also **Canon**.

**Philo Judaeus.** Or Philo of Alexandria. A Jewish philosopher in Egypt, who lived in Jesus' time. Philo was a Hellenistic Jew, steeped both in Greek culture and Hebrew religion. His writings interpreted Jewish religious views as expressed in the Pentateuch (q.v.) in terms of Greek philosophy, especially through allegorical exegesis.

**Plenary Inspiration.** See **Inerrancy, Verbal Inspiration, Bibliolatry and Hermenolatry.**

**Pleonasm.** A technical term for a redundant or repetitive expression. In Hebrew poetry it is similar to Parallelism (q.v.).

**Posttribulationism.** See **Tribulation.**

**Pretribulationism.** See **Tribulation.**

**Prophecy.** See **Nabi** and **The Prophets.**

**Prophets, The.** One of the three main divisions in the Hebrew Bible. (The others are The Law, q.v., and The Writings, q.v.) It is in turn divided into two parts: the Former Prophets, including the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings; and the Latter Prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. See also **Major Prophets** and **Minor Prophets.**

**Pseudepigrapha.** The Greek original for this term means “falsely titled.” It refers to a large body of writings not included in the canon which claim to be inspired and which were ascribed by their anonymous authors to famous ancient figures such as Adam, Abraham, Jacob, etc. Most such works are Apocalyptic (q.v.) in character. The Book of Daniel is of the same genre, and its right to a place in the Hebrew canon was long debated. But because Daniel made it in, it is not formally included in the lists of Pseudepigraphic works. See also **Apocalyptic**.

**Q** From the German word Quelle, meaning source, **Q** in New Testament studies refers to a collection of Jesus' sayings which many scholars believe was used by the writers of both Matthew and Luke, based on the fact that there are many very similar passages in these two gospels, passages which are not found in Mark. While the idea of such a source makes a good deal of explanatory sense, it is strictly a hypothetical construct, since no copy of any such document has ever been found, and the actual amount of material to be included in it is a matter of some debate. **Q** is also referred to as the “sayings source.” See also the **Two Source Hypothesis** and **The Synoptic Problem**.

**Quest of the Historical Jesus, The.** A book by Albert Schweitzer published in English in 1910. Schweitzer examined critically a series of books written by rationalistic scholars of the nineteenth century who thought that application of new “scientific” methods of study to the New Testament could objectively establish what Jesus was “really” like and what he “really” taught. Schweitzer devastated these books and the assumptions underlying them by showing how their portraits of Jesus were in fact shaped by all sorts of cultural and philosophical prejudices –these scholars, one after another, “discovered” a Jesus who looked an awful lot like them, or an idealized version of their own culture heroes. Schweitzer's work was so convincing that it pretty much put an end to the attempt to reconstruct a “true” portrait of Jesus apart from the various and not altogether consistent glimpses contained in the New Testament itself. See also **Criticism**.

**Qumran.** See **Dead Sea Scrolls**.

**Rapture, The.** An eschatological (q.v.) interpretation of 1 Thess 4:17 leading to the expectation that on the return of Christ, living true believers will be suddenly “caught up” along with resurrected dead believers “to meet the Lord in the air....” The basic meaning of Rapture is to snatch; thus, at the appointed time, true believers will be “raptured” or snatched away to heaven by Jesus. It is this belief that explains the bumperstickers one sees reading “In case of the Rapture this car will be driverless.” See also **Tribulation** and **Hermenolatry**.

**Ras Shamra Texts.** A group of ancient texts found in 1929 in the ruins of the old Phoenician city of Ugarit, now called Ras Shamra on the Lebanese coast. Written in Akkadian and Ugaritic, they provide an excellent view of life and culture in the area where early Hebrew culture and religion took form.

**Realized Eschatology.** An interpretation of the work of Jesus which argues that in his person and career the end of history has in some sense come into the present; through Jesus' life and message it is to an extent realized already, though not completely or unmistakably. Another way of putting this is in the saying, "The Future is Now." The British scholar C.H. Dodd coined the term. See also **Eschatology**.

**Redaction Criticism.** A form of analysis of biblical texts which attempts to uncover and explain the theological views of a biblical author by showing how he put together the various materials in to a completed text. See also **Criticism**.

**Redactor.** One who puts together a book out of various source materials, by rearranging, editing and rewriting them; an editor/author. See **Redaction Criticism**.

**RSV.** The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, first completed in 1957. It is a revision of the ASV (q.v.), the American Standard Version of 1901. The RSV is a Protestant version which attempts to maintain as much of the grand expressiveness of the King James Version while eliminating obsolete and obscure expressions, and incorporating corrections of many errors in the King James, corrections made possible by the discovery of biblical manuscripts much older than those used by the KJV's writers. The RSV has now been published in both a Catholic edition in 1965, and a newer expanded edition which includes other materials found in the Orthodox canon of Scripture. Still another edition of the RSV's Old Testament is in preparation, from which unnecessary sexist terms are to be excised. Fundamentalists dislike the RSV; see **NIV** and **NASB**.

**Samaritan Pentateuch.** A version of the first five books of the Bible as preserved by the Samaritans, a small sect which split off from the main stream of early Judaism in biblical times. The Samaritans consider themselves the true remnant of Israel, and accept only their Pentateuch as scripture.

**Schweitzer, Albert.** Few men can claim such distinction in as many diverse fields as Schweitzer: as a theologian his work was *ground-breaking*(See *Quest of the Historical Jesus*); as a musician his work on Bach as well as his performances as an organist brought him fame; and as a medical missionary in Gabon he offered a famous example of practicing the Christianity he preached. He lived from 1875 to 1965.

**Septuagint.** The first Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, it is also known as the Old Greek version, or by the Roman numeral for seventy: LXX. Tradition says it was prepared by around 70 Jewish scholars in Egypt at the direction of Ptolemy II in the third century B.C. The Septuagint was used by the early Christians as their version of the old Testament, and in reaction the Jewish community deemphasized it in favor of Hebrew versions. See also **The Apocrypha**.

**Sitz-im-Leben.** Another German term, this one meaning life situation, and referring to the social, religious and cultural settings in which various literary forms used in biblical writings arose, and by which these forms were influenced. See also **Criticism**.

Sophia. The Greek term for Wisdom. Sophia also refers to the figure of personified Wisdom in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, particularly as she is portrayed in such passages as Proverbs 8, the Wisdom of Solomon, and various places in Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus. The figure of Sophia has become increasingly prominent in recent years, particularly for those interested in feminist Bible studies. See also Hokhmah, Wisdom and Wisdom Literature.

**Synoptic Problem, The.** The Synoptics are the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, which are considered to offer a “synopsis” of Jesus' career. The problem is how to explain the fact that much material in them is very similar, not just in content but also in arrangement. This similarity gave rise to the name Synoptic, which in Greek means with the same eye. What were the sources for these three Gospels? Which one came first? Did later writers copy the earlier ones? Why are they so similar but also quite different? There have been many proposed answers to these questions offered by scholars and theologians since early in the Christian era; many of these hypotheses are interesting and informative, but none has commanded anywhere near universal acceptance. One that is widely discussed nowadays is the Two- Source Hypothesis, which contends that there was one source for much of Mark and another, known as **Q** (q.v.) for Matthew and Luke. Still another postulates as major sources, **Q** plus one unique source for each of the three Gospels; it is known, appropriately, as the Four Source Hypothesis. Proposed answers spring from and in turn feed back into all the processes of biblical analysis and criticism. See also **Criticism**.

**Talmud, The.** The name given to the full collection of the Mishna (q.v.) and associated materials known as Gemara or commentary, built around studies of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Talmud was gathered and edited by rabbis called Amoraim, or expounders, into its present form in the third century A.D. There are two editions of the Talmud, the Babylonian and the Palestinian. The Palestinian edition, of which much was lost, is about 1500 pages long; the Babylonian version is almost 6000 pages. The Talmudic gemara, or commentaries, include a wide range of folklore, proverbs, stories, halakah (q.v.) etc. dealing with the subjects of the Mishna.

**Targum.** A Targum was a free translation or paraphrase of an Old Testament Hebrew text into Aramaic (q.v.), which was the language that many Jews of Jesus' time (and undoubtedly Jesus himself) spoke. Such paraphrased translations were originally prepared for use when the Scriptures were read during worship, to aid the hearers in understanding them. They naturally often included interpretive comments, developed in a number of variant versions in different ancient Jewish communities.

**Tetragrammaton.** The Name of God, first found in Exodus 3:14, as spelled in four Hebrew letters, which can be transliterated as YHWH, all consonants without vowels, as classical Hebrew was written. This name was the most sacred word in Hebrew religion, which was not to be spoken except on the holiest of holy days, and then only by the high priest in the innermost precincts of the temple. The rest of the time the Jews used euphemisms, such as Adonai, meaning Lord, when referring to the divine. And even

today strongly observant Jews will write G-D rather than the full, sacred name. The meaning of this Hebrew term is, however, by no means clear. It is commonly spelled out as Yahweh or Jehovah. In translating Exodus 3:14 it is usually rendered “I AM THAT I AM” (King James) or “I AM WHO I AM” (RSV). But these are guesses; in fact, the actual meaning of this, the most momentous of four letter words, is by no means clear. It could also be rendered, “I cause to happen what I cause to happen,” or one of several other formulations. At bottom, the meaning of the divine name reflects what we know of the essence of the divine author: that is it is a mystery.

**TEV.** Today's English Version of the Bible (Also know as the “Good News Version”, completed in 1976 and published by the American Bible Society. A version stressing easy readability by English-speaking lay readers, avoiding technical biblical terms (substituting, for instance, dollars and pounds for ancient forms of money and measures of weight).

**Textual Criticism.** A process of comparing and classifying ancient manuscripts of the Bible, in hopes of eliminating errors and arriving at the closest possible approximation of the lost original texts. Since there are thousands of ancient, hand- copied texts of all or part of the Scriptures, and no two are exactly the same, textual criticism is a process which has gone on since the days of the early church fathers and rabbinical authorities, with no end yet in sight. See also **Criticism** and **Autographs**.

**Textus Receptus.** From the Latin for “received text,” this is the name given to a Greek New Testament published in 1550 by Robert Stephanus. A later edition of this text was used by the translators of the KJV (q.v.).

**Torah, The.** This Hebrew term can refer to any or all of the following: The Pentateuch (the first five biblical books); the Jewish laws contained in the Pentateuch and else-where in the Old Testament; the entire Hebrew Scriptures; or most broadly, the whole body of authoritative Jewish religious teachings.

**Tribulation.** An Eschatological (q.v.) term which builds on Jesus' statements in Mt. 24 about a “great tribulation” which will precede the end of the world and culminate in Christ's return in glory. There is much debate among Tribulationists as to whether the true Christian believers will have to endure the Tribulation or not; Pretribulationists say no, they will be Raptured (q.v.) first; Posttribulationists say yes, the church will have to go through the bad times with everyone else. See also **Hermenolatry**.

**Trito-Isaiah.** See **Deutero-Isaiah**.

**Two Source Hypothesis, The.** See **The Synoptic Problem**.

**Type.** See **Typology**.

**Typology.** A kind of biblical interpretation which sees in people or events of one period, usually the Old Testament, a symbolic foreshadowing of later figures and events, normally in the New Testament. Early Christians, Paul in particular, frequently looked to the Old Testament for “types” of Christ and his significance(cf. Rom 5:14). This is not the same thing as allegory, in which the earlier events have little significance of their own, except as carriers of a later meaning.

**Ugaritic Texts.** See **Ras Shamra Texts.**

**Verbal Inspiration.** Similar to Inerrancy (q.v.), Plenary Inspiration or literalism, this interpretive position essentially insists that God directly inspired every word in the Bible, which can therefore contain no mistakes or untruths. This theory developed in the late nineteenth century in reaction against the development of historical and so-called Higher Criticism of the Bible by rationalistic liberal scholars. It is one of the “fundamentals” of fundamentalism. There are also more cautious versions of this stance, some limiting the claim of Verbal Inspiration only to the lost Autographs (q.v.) of the texts, others allowing for some possibility of minor errors within God's larger inspiration of the text. This view has to grapple with a host of difficulties in the text, and this leads to the embarrassing reality that those who believe in the literal, verbal inspiration of Scripture as God's revelation do not always agree on what that revelation is or what it means. See also **Inerrancy, Bibliolatry, and Hermenolatry.**

**Vulgate.** The Latin version of the Bible produced in the late third and early fourth centuries by St. Jerome, and accepted by the Roman Church as the official version for more than a millenium.

**Wellhausen, Julius.** See **Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis.**

**Wisdom.** In the Bible Wisdom is often described not simply as learning or insight, but more prominently as a divine person, who is always female. The figure of biblical Wisdom has been greatly neglected until recently, when many feminist scholars have looked to her as embodying the feminine aspect of God in the Canon. See also **Hokmah, Sophia, and Wisdom Literature.**

**Wisdom Literature.** Ancient texts devoted to learning about and teaching men how to understand and master life, based on experience, reflection and human insight more than an appeal to theological notions or divine revelations. In the Hebrew and Protestant versions of the Old Testament, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are Wisdom texts; in the Catholic canon additional texts, such as Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon, are included, as they were in the Septuagint (q.v.) Jewish version. Some scholars include considerably more of the Old Testament text as Wisdom Literature, but their theses are doubted by others. Recent feminist biblical scholarship is exploring the feminine figure of Personified Wisdom as a way of deepening the male figure of the biblical God, Yahweh. See also **Hokmah, Sophia, Wisdom, and The Writings.**

**The Writings.** The third section of the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Hagiographa. These books include those considered Wisdom Literature (q.v.), plus the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ruth, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles and Psalms. See also **The Pentateuch** and **The Prophets**.

**Yahweh.** The proper name of the God of the Hebrew scriptures. See **The Tetragrammaton** and YHWH.

**Yahwist.** See **J: Jahwist**.

**YHWH.** See **The Tetragrammaton** and Yahweh.

#### APPENDIX FOUR: SOME QUAKER QUOTES ON THE BIBLE

**ROBERT BARCLAY, 1676:** “In the Scriptures God has deemed it proper to give us a looking glass in which we can see the conditions and experiences of ancient believers. There we find that our experience is analogous to theirs....This is the great work of the Scriptures, and their usefulness to us. They find a respondent spark in us, and in that way we discern the stamp of God's ways and his Spirit upon them. We know this from inward acquaintance we have with the same Spirit and his work in our hearts....Nevertheless, because they are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Yet...they are and may be esteemed a secondary rule...for... according to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and principal Leader.”

–from *The Apology for the True Christian Divinity*

**JAMES NAYLER, 1653:** (Nayler was on trial.) “Justice Pearse asked, 'What sayest thou to the Scriptures? Are they the Word of God?'

“Nayler replied, ‘They are a true declaration of the word that was in them who spoke them forth.’

One Higginson asked: ‘Is there not a written word?’

Nayler: ‘Where readest thou in the Scriptures of a written Word? The Word is spiritual, not seen with carnal eyes....’”

–from *Early Quaker Writings*

**GEORGE FOX, 1671:** “And as concerning the Holy Scriptures, we do believe that they were given forth by the Holy Spirit of God, through the holy men of God, who, as the Scripture itself declares(2Pet 1:21) ‘spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.’ We believe they are to be read, believed and fulfilled–He that fulfils them is Christ–and they are ‘profitable...’ We call the Holy Scriptures, as Christ and the Apostles called them, and holy men of God called them, viz.: the ‘words of God’....”

–from *Letter to the Governor of Barbadoes*

**YORKSHIRE QUARTERLY MEETING, 1919:** “The canon of Scripture may be closed, but the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has not ceased. We believe that there is no

literature in the world where the revelation of God is given so fully as in our New Testament Scriptures; we go back to them for light and life and truth. But we feel that the life comes to us, not from the record itself, but from communion with him of whom the record tells. Through his own Spirit we commune with Him himself. In the words of Coleridge, 'I meet that in Scripture which finds me.'

—from *Christian Faith and Practice*, London [Now Britain] Yearly Meeting

**BALTIMORE YEARLY MEETING**, 1983: “Many differing attitudes toward the Bible can be found among Friends, but a few statements may find fairly general acceptance: (1) Although the word of God is found in the Bible, inspiration may also be found elsewhere, as the closing of the canon of Scripture did not signal the end of divine inspiration....(3) In the historical understanding of the Bible its meaning can be found only through careful study of the time and circumstance of the writing, and even of the revisions and translations, of its various parts....(4) In the experience of Friends the Bible can only be rightly understood in the light of the Spirit which inspired it, that same Holy Spirit which is available to all.”

—from *Provisional Faith and Practice*

**EVANGELICAL FRIENDS CHURCH, EASTERN REGION**, 1981: “With early Friends, we believe that all Scripture, both of the Old and New Testaments is given by inspiration of God, without error in all that it affirms and is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It is fully authoritative and trustworthy, fully sufficient to all believers now and always....Thus, the declarations contained in it rest on the authority of God Himself, and there can be no appeal from them to any other authority whatever....The Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scripture, must ever be its true interpreter. Whatsoever any man says or does which is contrary to the Scripture, though under profession of the guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a delusion.”

—from *Faith and Practice, The Book of Discipline*

**FRIENDS GENERAL CONFERENCE**, 1953: “The Bible means a 'library.' It contains the records of the search for God by the Hebrews(Jews); and as they grew and changed, so did their idea of God. The Bible contains myths, legends, poetry, laws, prophecies, history, biography, drama, short stories and novels, as well as the oldest riddle in the world, the oldest detective story and the oldest battle-hymn....Of course the Bible was written by many people over hundreds of years. Not all of it applies to our problems today: not all of it is about good men, but the more we read, the more fascinated we become and the more we want to read and study. If we do this intelligently, we will find the Bible truly a source of joy, help and interest all our lives and a pathway to God for each one of us.”

–from *Graphic Outline for study of The Old Testament*

**HENRY J. CADBURY**, 1953: “Further, the Bible is a training school in discriminating among alternatives. One of the most sobering facts is that it is not on the whole a peaceful book—I mean a book of peace of mind. The Bible is a deposit of a long series of controversies between rival views of religion. The sobering thing is that in nearly every case the people shown by the Bible to be wrong had every reason to think they were in the right, and like us they did so. Complacent orthodoxy is the recurrent villain in the story from first to last and the hero is the challenger, like Job, the prophets, Jesus and Paul.”

–from *A Quaker Approach to the Bible*

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