

# Hermeneutics Course Outline

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# The Question of Canon

## Introduction

The word “canon,” when used in reference to Holy Scripture, designates the boundary of the total set of writings received and recognized by Christians as inspired by God and authoritative for the Church. Three important facts must be recognized at the outset of any consideration of the biblical canon:

1. The canon is *not* the rule or criterion used to determine the shape of the set of books considered Scripture, but the books themselves, which were already *recognized* as Scripture.
2. Accordingly, no human person or institution bestowed authority or the status of canon upon the books; they were *received* and *recognized* as authoritative and inspired because they already possessed these qualities from the outset of their production, having been vested with them by God.
3. The canonical books are defined in terms of their *covenantal* quality; that is, they are covenant documents in that their central purpose is to document and explicate the covenant relationship of God to His people, those with whom He has made a covenant and who are bound to Him in this way.

The following is a review of how the books recognized as canonical came to be recognized and received, together with a rationale for the validity of the process.

## Old Testament

The three main branches of Christendom and Judaism differ among themselves as to the books they recognize as canonical (See handout). This necessitates the following questions:

1. Why are there different Old Testaments?
2. How did this situation develop, and how should it be evaluated?
3. Is the Protestant Old Testament the correct one?
4. Are the other books dangerous or harmful?

### *Where the Old Testament Originated and How It Took Shape*

1. Israel’s Scriptures were composed 1400-400 BC or 1200-200 BC, depending on the acceptance of an earlier or later dating scheme.
2. Most books have identifiable authors, but some are formally anonymous.
3. The majority of the OT was written in Hebrew, 1.2% (portions of Genesis, Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel) in Aramaic.
4. The Old Testament writings were composed parallel to the development of the Covenant in subsequent eras of redemptive history:

- Era of the Patriarchs (Genesis-Deuteronomy)
- Pre-monarchy (Joshua-Ruth)
- Monarchy (Samuel, Kings, most poetic/wisdom books)
- Exilic Era (most prophets, Esther)
- Post-exilic Restoration (Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, Haggai-Malachi)

**\*As redemption through the Covenant of Grace unfolded, God gave inspired writings to shape the covenant community; Scripture was a *progressive deposit*.\***

5. Earlier Scriptures were acknowledged in later Scriptures as divinely authoritative—this can be traced through three categories of Scripture:

a. Torah (Law)

- cited in Joshua 8:31-32 and 23:6
- narrative of Torah referenced in I Samuel 12:8
- “Law of Moses” acknowledged as divinely given Scripture in the monarchic era (I Kings 2:3; II Kings 14:67; II Chronicles 23:18)
- Psalm 119 repeatedly ascribes divine source of “law of Moses”
- lapse of usage in years before Josiah (II Kings 2:3)
- cited authoritatively in exilic/post-exilic period (Ezra 3:2; 9:9-12; Daniel 9:11-13)
- stimulated renewal during post-exilic period (Nehemiah 8:1-9:38)
- writing prophets can be understood as the preaching of Torah to the covenant people

**\*The first five books (Pentateuch) are the nucleus of the divine deposit.\***

b. Prophetic Writings

1) Former Prophets (Joshua-Kings)

- enscriptured the “words the Lord of hosts sent by His Spirit” (Zechariah 7:12)
- several portions incorporated fully into later writings (reuse of II Kings 18:13-20:11 in Isaiah 36:1-38:8 and II Kings 24:18-25:30 in Jeremiah 52)
- Chronicles repeats and uses much of Samuel and Kings
- II Chronicles 24:27 refers to commentary on I-II Kings that indicates it had been received as authoritative

**\*These writings were acknowledged very early in the life of Israel.\***

2) Latter Prophets

- Written form of “the Vision of Isaiah” referenced in II Chronicles 32:32
- Jeremiah cites Micah 3:12 in 26:16-18
- Ezra (1:1) and Daniel (9:2) cite “the Word of the God given to Jeremiah”

- Ezra 5:1 appeals to prophetic work of Haggai and Zechariah

**\*These writings were acknowledged early in the exilic and post-exilic periods.\***

c. Other Writings

- Some were not referenced within OT itself, *understandably* (due to their late date or limited scope).
- Proverbs acknowledged in I Kings 4:32.
- II Samuel 22 reuses Psalm 18.
- I Chronicles 16:8-36 stitches together 3 psalms.
- The author of Job interacts with the psalms.

**\*The overall pattern of citation is that later writers were acknowledging the authority of earlier writings very early.\***

6. Writers of Scripture were aware of other “books, annals, and records” and drew a distinction between them and sacred books. **How?** *The sacred books were marked off by being deposited in the Tabernacle/Temple:*

- The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 25:16; Deuteronomy 10:2)
- Samuel gave instruction for kings and “laid it up before the LORD” (II Samuel 10:25).
- Hilkiah discovered the book of the Law (probably Deuteronomy) in the Temple at the time of Josiah (II Kings 22:8).
- Later Jewish historians speak of this practice (e.g., *Letter of Aristeas*; I Maccabees’ mention of burning of Scriptures found in the Temple).

7. The OT writings eventually ceased. **Why?** The covenant curse of the Exile occurred and, despite a partial and typological restoration, the Exile was extended times seven (70 years to 490 years) because of the lack of true repentance. The Old Covenant promises were left unfulfilled and prophecy ceased until the New Covenant:

- Old Testament prophets indicate that the required repentance had not occurred and would not occur until the coming of a Redeemer, the Messiah (Isaiah 56:9-57:13; 58:1-5; 59:1-20; 65:1-7; the entire book of Malachi).
- After Daniel realized, from reading the book of Jeremiah, that the seventy-year span of the Exile was almost over, and that the Jews had not repented (Daniel 9:13), he prayed for God to forgive and heal (that is, grant true repentance to) His people. God responded by sending an angel to reveal to Daniel (see Daniel 9:24-27) that the time of the Exile was being multiplied by seven (in accord with Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24, 28) so that the seventy years would be extended to 490 years, after which the Lord would do six things with regard to His covenant people, including finishing [Israel’s] transgression (cf. Matthew 23:29-36), atoning for sin (cf. Romans 8:3), bringing in righteousness (cf. Romans 8:4), sealing vision and prophecy (cf. Hebrews 1:1, 2; Revelation 22:18), and “anointing the Most Holy,” which refers to the Messiah, the “Anointed One,” Jesus (cf. Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:29-34; Luke 4:18-21). The

Exile, then extended to and was only ended with the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God at the first Advent of Jesus (cf. Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). This is also borne out by the following.

- God’s Spirit never returned to the rebuilt Temple.
- The monarchy was not restored; there was no king after the Exile until Jesus.
- Malachi declared that the Law of Moses must sustain the people until prophecy returned (4:4, 5). Revelation ceased and God withdrew His Spirit from inspiring covenantal Scriptures, effectively closing the Old Testament Scriptures, when the Old Covenant was left unfulfilled and anticipated the New Covenant.
- The cessation of Spirit-inspired prophecy after 400BC is attested in several early Jewish writings (e.g., I Maccabees 4:46; Prayer of Azariah 15; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:8; *II Apocalypse of Baruch* 85:3).
- The New Testament also indicates this (Hebrews 1:1; Matthew 11:13, 14; cf. Malachi 4:4, 5).

### **How the Old Testament Deposit Was Received by the Covenant Community**

#### A. Reception by the Old Testament Jewish Community

1. The threefold shape of the Scriptures (Torah/Law, Prophets, Writings—TaNaK) was recognized in the Old Testament itself:
  - Zechariah 7:12
  - Jeremiah 18:18
  - Ezekiel 7:26

This shows the Jewish community’s awareness of the canon and its shape.

2. This awareness is also present in post-biblical writings:
  - Prologue to the Wisdom of Sirach (approx. 180 BC)—“...the *law* and the *prophets* and the *others that followed them*.”
  - Dead Sea Scrolls, “Sectarian Manifesto” (1<sup>st</sup> century BC)—“...the book of Moses, the books of the Prophets, and David (4Q397 fragments 14-21).
  - II Maccabees acknowledges the Torah and prophets (2:13; 15:9) and a “library containing “books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings.”
  - Philo and Josephus (*Against Apion* 1:38-41) speak of Law/Moses, prophets, and “hymns/psalms” in the first century AD.
  - IV Maccabees 18:10-18 mentions the law, prophets, and proverbs as part of the “Scriptures of Israel.”
  - The threefold shape of the recognized canon was formally designated as Torah, Prophets, and Writings in *Baba Batra* 14b (approx. 150-180 AD).

**\*The threefold shape of the Scripture recognized as canonical clearly goes back early in Old Testament Jewish religion.\***

3. The providential process by which the Jewish community received individual books as inspired, covenantal Scripture took time, especially for the later books (“Writings”). Some of the Writings, were debated, especially Song of Songs, Esther, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. *But overall there was substantial agreement on what constituted the threefold canon:*

- Josephus (*Against Apion* 1:38-41) and Epiphanius (citing the early Jewish writing *Jubilees*—approx. 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) speak of twenty-two books.
- IV Ezra 14:44, 45 and *Baba Batra* 14b mention twenty-four books.
- The modern Christian Old Testament has thirty-nine books.
- **These different numbers all refer to the same set of books (See the handout “Old Testament Canon—Jewish Arrangements”), just arranged differently.**

**\*The books which comprised the three-fold deposit of Scriptures was recognized early and clearly.\***

4. The Jewish community indicated their recognition of these books as inspired Scripture in a variety of corroborative ways:
  - Writers speak explicitly about their high regard for these writings (Jews in the Dead Sea area; the *Letter of Aristeas*; Josephus—*Against Apion* 1:8).
  - Apparently, in accord with evidence from, for instance, Philo and Luke 4:16-20, most Jewish communities continued Israelite tradition by storing their Scriptural books, apart from other books, in a special container in the synagogue.
  - From the earliest days of Jewish religion, the Hebrew Scriptures were used in liturgy and worship (Hallel psalms—113-118; reading of the *Megilloth* in the synagogue; use of psalms by Jews at Qumran).
  - The Jewish authors of non-scriptural writings cite the Hebrew Scriptures extensively and substantially more than other writings.
  - The books received as Scripture were handled and treated differently: copied far more frequently; copied onto more durable material; featured certain scribal patterns such as the treatment of the divine name; usually copied only on one side of the scroll; exclusively deemed worthy of commentaries; privileged in early translations into Greek and Aramaic.

**\*The evidence overwhelmingly indicates the early recognition of the divine status of these books.\***

#### B. Reception by the Early New Testament Christian Church

1. Jesus and the apostolic church fully accepted the Hebrew Scriptures familiar to them from their Jewish background. There was no debate over what *constituted* Scripture, only over how it was *interpreted*.

2. Jesus and His early followers clearly accepted *old Covenant* documentation as divinely authoritative (e.g., Romans 1:2; 3:2; I Corinthians 15:3, 4; I Peter 1:10, 11, 24, 25; Luke 24:44-46).
3. The same three steps as those seen in the reception of the OT Scriptures by the Jewish covenant community marked the reception by the early New Testament Church. First, the threefold shape of the OT was recognized:
  - John 1:45 and Luke 24:25 the same Torah and N/Prophets categories above.
  - Both Jesus and Peter indicate that the numerous psalms had been collected into a “book of Psalms” attributed to David (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20).
  - Jesus listed “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” as “the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44, 45). His acknowledgement of Daniel (Mark 13:14) points to His use of “Psalms” as a shorthand for all the K/Writings received as Scripture at that time. At a minimum, Jesus recognized the TaNaK threefold shape as valid.
  - Similar references are found in post-apostolic writings (Clement of Rome; Eusebius, citing Melito of Sardis; Jerome).

**\*The evidence cumulatively indicates that Jesus, the apostles, and the early Church quite clearly acknowledged a three-part OT collection of writings.\***

4. Second, the early NT Church indicated which books it recognized as belonging to the threefold structure:
  - Some early Christians endorsed the 24-book listing (Jerome); others followed the 22-book listing (Origen).
  - Early attempts to list the OT canon demonstrate extensive agreement, but at the margins certain books not received by the Jews were deemed Scriptural by some Christians (See the handout—“Old Testament Canon—Christian Arrangements”).

**\*There was substantial agreement on the books which were to be included in the OT Canon among early Christians, with some minor disagreements.\***

5. Third, early Christians did several things that indicated that they received the OT Scriptures as given by God and authoritative:
  - They, including the apostles, explicitly affirmed the divine inspiration and authority of the OT (e.g., II Peter 1:21).
  - The apostles preached and taught from the OT in corporate worship from the earliest days (Acts 2).
  - There are NT citations and allusions to almost every OT book.
  - Although there are citations of or indirect use of books not received in the Jewish canon, citation does *not* establish that a book is canonical. However, the OT Scriptures influence the NT writers substantially more than any other writings, clearly indicating the trajectory of biblical authority.
  - Christian manuscripts treated OT writings with high regard, by: preserving extensive numbers of individual copies; following such protocols as how the

divine name was handled; giving OT quotations in NT manuscripts special scribal markings.

**\*The early Christians from Jesus and the apostles onward appear united around a threefold deposit of writings recognized as divinely authoritative over the New Covenant community. However, there were debates at the margins whereby some early Christians accepted some books as Scripture not passed down from the Jews.\***

### ***What about those other Books?***

Although the inspiration of sacred, authoritative Scripture ceased with the Exile until the coming of the Messiah (Christ) and the establishment of the New Covenant and restoration of the Kingdom of God, *there was not a cessation of literary activity among the Jews*. In fact, the literary output between 400 BC and AD 300 far exceeded the quantity of the received Scriptures. Much of this literature was widely read, and some of it was respected enough to appear alongside the recognized and received Old Testament Scriptures in books and copies of the Scriptures, especially the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and collections of the Old Testament Scriptures used by the early Church and Christians. This fact did not indicate a reception of these writings as Scripture by the covenant community, any more than the inclusion of doctrinal confessions and creeds or notes and commentary in bound copies of Bibles today indicates that Christians regard this material as inspired Scripture. There was a mixture of opinion among members of the covenant community regarding a small minority of these writings, which continues to this day. This should not obscure the fact that, with respect to the Old Testament, there is unanimous agreement about this group of books as to their canonicity. The other writings fall into three basic groups (see below). Any assessment of the canonical status of these writings must fundamentally take into account the definition of Scripture: ***a divine deposit, immediately inspired by the Spirit of God, inherently possessing divine authority, and given by God to be covenant documentation***. This definition generates three criteria for assessment:

- indication of *inspiration*,
- significant *recognition* of divine authority, and
- link(s) in purpose to the *covenant* experience of the people of God.

Following is such an assessment of the canonical status of the books in each of these groups.

#### **A. The Apocrypha** (See the handout “The Apocrypha”)

1. Dates of composition: 300s BC to 100s AD
2. Important facts:
  - subject of longstanding debates about canonical status
  - passed on in Greek; some originally composed in Hebrew/Aramaic and later translated
  - some found in some early Christian “canon lists”



- different ones present in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles

3. *Jewish* attitudes toward these writings:

- Discovery of Hebrew/Aramaic versions of Tobit, Sirach, and Epistle of Jeremiah among Dead Sea Scrolls indicate that some non-Greek Jews were reading them.
- Judith and I Maccabees highly valued due to association with Hanukkah.
- Sirach was the only one seriously considered a possibility for canonical status; however, the author himself distinguishes it from the threefold canon.
- little to no evidence that any substantial group of early Jews regarded these books as Scripture, as demonstrated from the following points.
- Philo, a classic Hellenistic Jew, paid them little attention.
- Josephus, another Hellenistic Jew, used I Maccabees and I Esdras for historical information, but excluded them from his 22-book list of Scriptures.
- Jewish translators Aquila and Symmachus ignored the apocrypha altogether.
- By the time of the early rabbis, the distinction between the twenty-four books of Scripture and the “seventy” that were merely “useful” (as described in the book of IV Ezra) had become standard understanding.
- Rabbinic writings recorded that “Ben Sira and all books written from that point on” were ultimately rejected.

4. *Christian* attitudes toward these writings:

- Some early “canon lists” include select apocryphal writings.
- Some famous Christian codices (bound Scriptures) include various combinations of apocrypha alongside Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, though they include different groups and in different sequences.
- Early quotations of apocrypha are frequent.
- The Church Father Origen advocated receiving these books on the basis of Church usage.
- The Church Father Augustine considered them as having the same authority as the Old Testament Scriptures, as part of the “prophetical books,” as having “attained recognition as being authoritative. He argued that the Church should receive all the books contained in the Greek Old Testament translation (the Septuagint), including most of the apocrypha not received by the Jews, because “the same Spirit of God speaks in them.”
- Another Church Father, Jerome, denied that the apocrypha were scriptural, although he sometimes cited them without distinction. His view was that the apocryphal books were to be read for edification (much as modern Christian books are today), but not to be used to establish Christian doctrine.
- Later Christian writers and councils tended to follow either Augustine or Jerome.
- The Eastern Orthodox branch followed Jerome in accepting all of the books received by Augustine.
- Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant branches followed Jerome, but eventually in different ways.

- The views of Reformed and Protestants developed over time. Wycliffe, Andreas Karlstadt, and Luther followed the distinction formulated by Jerome, and sandwiched the apocrypha between the OT and NT. Calvin rejected the apocrypha outright. The Synod of Dordt and the Westminster Assembly considered the books helpful and commended their reading, but disavowed their reception as Scripture.
  - The King James version of the Bible relegated the apocrypha to an appendix.
  - Later Protestant Bibles excluded the apocrypha altogether.
  - The major Roman Catholic scholars at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, including Nicolas de Lyra, Cajetus, and Cardinal Ximenes, adopted Jerome's distinction and agreed with the Protestants on the secondary status of the apocrypha, *until the Council of Trent*.
  - At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church mandated Jerome's Vulgate Latin translation as the official Scripture of the Church, but ignored Jerome's distinction between the Old and New Testaments as Scripture and the apocrypha as an appendix of helpful but non-canonical writings. The Council declared the apocrypha to be "deuterocanonical" and *equally authoritative* to the OT and NT. This was undoubtedly because the Roman Catholic Church needed the apocryphal writings to validate some of their heterodox teachings, such as purgatory and justification by works.
  - Among Protestants, today, only the Anglican (American = Episcopal) Church makes any real use of the apocrypha, although there are official doctrinal statements asserting its secondary status. Most congregants are unaware of them.
5. Conclusion & Assessment: These books should be read for their historical information and varying degrees of devotional value, but they should not be regarded as canonical or the inspired Word of God, and therefore not authoritative, for the following reasons:
- They fail the test of *inspiration*. First, the Old and New Testaments (which are inspired and authoritative), not to mention Jewish sources, assert that God ceased inspiring prophetic writings after Malachi, which rules out all of these books. Second, some of the books contain doctrinal discrepancies with the unquestioned canon, such as teaching salvation by almsgiving, and errors, such as anachronisms, proving that they cannot have a divine source.
  - They fail the test of *recognition*. They do not receive one another progressively over time in the way that the Hebrew Scriptures do, nor are they received or validated by those Scriptures. Even more important, neither Jesus nor the apostles cite any of these books authoritatively, and Jesus not at all.
  - They fail the test of *covenantal relevance*. The Jewish community after Malachi was in a condition of covenantal cursing, still waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises, so these books could not serve as covenant documentation, and did not, as their contents make clear.

## **B. The Pseudepigrapha (See the handout “The Pseudepigrapha”)**

1. Dates of composition: 200s BC to 200s AD
2. Important facts:
  - The term which refers to them means “falsely attributed,” because their names imply that their authors were famous biblical characters, which is spurious since they were unknown before the 200s BC.
  - They were composed/translated in numerous languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Greek, Slavonic, and Latin.
  - Many of them barely survived so as to be known by modern readers.
  - They are largely Jewish historical fiction that elaborate on biblical stories and themes, prominently featuring key biblical characters such as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Jacob, and Elijah.
3. Jewish/Christian attitudes toward these writings:
  - Few received serious attention by Jews or early Christians.
  - *I Enoch* is the only book in this category that received sustained attention, probably because it is quoted in Jude 14, 15, which caused some early Christians (the author of *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen) to show high regard for it.
  - Other pseudepigrapha occasionally receive attention in early writings, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apostolic Fathers, etc.
  - They were, on the whole, seen as additional writings from Jewish communities about biblical things.
  - They were never given or received as possessing any divine authority.
4. Conclusion & Assessment: These books are interesting, but definitely not canonical or even historically reliable or accurate. They fail all three tests for canonical Scripture.

## **C. Desert discoveries**

1. Dates of composition: 200s BC to 100s AD
2. Important facts:
  - Most were composed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic.
  - Discovered in various parts of Palestine and Egypt.
  - Most famous collection is the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered at Qumran.
  - These writings contain biblical scrolls, copies of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books, and other writings specific to various Jewish communities or sects.
  - They are extremely important sources of information regarding the religious ideas and social-cultural practices of Jews and the Greco-Roman world leading up to the time of Jesus.

3. Jewish/Christian attitudes toward these writings: With respect to those writings in addition to apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, there is no indication that any Jewish or Christian writers regarded them as having any divine authority or canonical status.
4. Assessment: These writings are important, but certainly have no claim to divine authority or canonical status. They fail all three canonical tests even more decisively than the other two categories above.

## **New Testament**

Unlike the Old Testament, there is complete agreement among the three branches of Christianity on the 27 books that should be included in the New Testament canon. However, there are other writings that some non-Christian sources claim should receive canonical status. So, the following questions are relevant:

1. How were the books of the New Testament received by the Church?
2. What about the other books? Why, how, and on what basis were they rejected?

### **The New Testament Documents as Covenant Documentation**

1. Jesus claimed that he was inaugurating the New Covenant in His own blood (Luke 22:20).
2. A few days later, Jesus said that the New Covenant is fulfilled in two ways in the new era of redemptive history (Luke 24:44-47):
  - His death and resurrection (the work of Christ, or the “Christ-*event*”), and
  - The proclamation of repentance/forgiveness to the ends of the earth (the resultant *expansion* of the covenant community beyond Israel to include Gentiles and every tongue, language, people, and nation, which was the original covenant promise to Abraham—Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:7-9).
3. Jesus then charged His apostles to be *witnesses* of these things (Luke 24:48). The New Testament documents were the result of the working out of this witness, in several stages.

### **Stages in the Formation of the New Testament Deposit of Scriptures**

**Stage I: The Christ-event**—The “Gospel” is presented as events: Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Everything in the Christian faith depends upon the factuality of these events (I Corinthians 15:1-14). All apostolic teaching is generated by the historicity of these events (I John 4:2; Romans 1:1-5; I Peter 3:18; Hebrews 1:3).

**Stage II: Eyewitnesses**—The apostolic band was a chosen group of eyewitnesses that verified the historical veracity of the events by their personal experience, with an accuracy guaranteed by the bestowal and work of the Holy Spirit, who jointly witnessed with and

enabled the apostles (John 14:26; 15:26, 27; 16:12-15; Acts 1:8). The New Testament itself emphasizes the importance of the apostles' verification of the events:

- The apostles proclaimed what they personally experienced through their senses (Acts 4:20; I John 1:1; 19:35; 21:24; II Peter 1:16).
- Paul points out that the resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and could be confirmed by more than 500 eyewitnesses.
- The most important plank in the apostles' argument against their opponents was the fact that they were eyewitnesses (Acts 2:32; 4:20; 6:30-32).
- One of the two defining qualifications for the status of apostleship was being an eyewitness of the risen Christ (John 20:19-23; Acts 1:21, 22; Acts 9:1).
- These eyewitnesses passed on information about Jesus (II Thessalonians 2:15; Luke 1:2; Hebrews 2:3).
- They also confirmed and testified to its accuracy when false doctrine and information was circulating (Galatians 1:8, 9; II Corinthians 11:3, 4; III John 9-12).

**Stage III: Oral and Written Records**—From the beginning, information about the life and initial doctrinal statements of Jesus were transmitted in oral and written form (notebooks, catechisms, liturgies). The following are some indications of some of these:

1. Paul incorporates into his letters several teachings of Jesus that were circulating among the early churches before most of the Gospels were recorded:
  - in the use of “Abba” in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6,
  - in dissemination of Matthew 5:44 in Romans 12:14,
  - in the distinction between Paul’s inspired opinions and explicit teaching of Jesus in I Corinthians 7:1-12, and
  - in the instructions relayed by Paul from Jesus recorded in I Thessalonians 4:2-6.
2. Paul quotes words of Jesus not found in the Gospels but passed along orally (Acts 20:35).
3. Paul includes in his letters creed-like passages that most scholars agree were already in use in the early Church (Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20; I Timothy 3:16).
4. Other “prophecies” and “predictions” of the apostles were referred to indirectly, and thus circulating, but not explicitly recorded (I Timothy 1:18; Jude 17, 18).
5. Luke might have kept a sailing journal during trips with Paul (cf. the “we sections” of Acts).
6. Many church fathers, including Papias, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and Augustine, suggest that Matthew possibly composed an initial collection of sayings of Jesus in Hebrew or Aramaic.

**Stage IV: Formal New Testament Writings**—At the proper time, God directly inspired the writing of New Covenant Scriptures, under the following circumstances:

1. The earliest writers were James, Paul, and Mark, and the last was John, the last living apostolic eyewitness.

2. The NT writings were written in Greek by a small number of Jewish and Gentile converts.
3. The writers were spread across a handful of geographical locations.
4. They wrote during a short period of time (roughly 50 to 70 AD).
5. The writers knew each other and communicated fairly efficiently with one another.
6. Similar to the pattern displayed in the Old Testament Scriptures, there is clear indication of intra-biblical reception and acknowledgment of the inspired and authoritative nature of these writings by each other and within themselves, to wit:
  - There is virtually unanimous consensus among biblical scholars that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source in the composition of their Gospels. Luke mentions prior “narratives” which he had consulted (Luke 1:1-4).
  - John gives clear signs that he not only knew the prior three Gospels, but is intentionally supplementing them (John 3:22-24/Mark 1:14, 15; interlocking of John 7:1, 2 and the chronology of the Synoptic Gospels). This is recognized as early as Clement of Alexandria.
  - Jude appears to be familiar with II Peter and to quote much of its material verbatim.
  - Paul quotes passages from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7, referring to both as “what the Scripture says.”
  - Peter acknowledges that Paul’s letters were circulating and compares them to “the *other Scriptures*” (II Peter 3:15, 16).
  - Peter echoes Romans in his writing of I Peter.
  - James appears to be familiar with some of Paul’s letters, as well as Matthew’s Gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount.
7. Although the New Testament authors were familiar with Jewish (Jude 14, 15) and secular (Acts 17:28, 29; I Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12) writings and spurious writings circulating in the early Church (II Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17), they consistently restrict ascription of divine authority to the Old Testament Scriptures and, very early, to each other’s writings, in accord with #6 above.

**Stage V: Covenant “Shaping” of the New Testament Documents**—The collection of New Covenant Scriptures quickly took shape around the two aspects of fulfillment outlined by Jesus in Luke 24:44-48, as described above:

- The Gospels bear witness to the Christ-event (life, death, resurrection, and ascension).
- Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation proclaim the implications of that event (or those events), so that the community of those who repent and believe might extend to the ends of the earth.

### **Reception of the New Testament Deposit Within Early Christianity**

The New Testament documents were received by the covenant community, the early Church, in three steps, much as the Old Testament was:

A. *Acknowledgment of the core writings* (Gospels and Pauline Epistles)—From the earliest days, the indisputable core of the New Testament consisted of the Gospels and the letters of Paul, as evidenced by the following:

1. Eusebius records the early opinion that John had already sanctioned the Synoptic Gospels and added his to the fourfold collection.
2. Although these do not necessarily establish their status as Scripture, there were numerous quotations/allusions by early church writers showing their use of the Gospels:
  - Clement of Rome (d. 99) quotes “words of the Lord” found in Matthew and/or Luke.
  - Ignatius (d. 108) quotes Matthew at least three times and alludes to narrative details of both Matthew and Luke, and uses phrases only found in John.
  - Polycarp (d. 155) quotes material from the first three Gospels numerous times.
  - *Didache* (early second century) cites “the Gospel” four times. The quotation of the Lord’s Prayer indicates Matthew is probably in view.
  - *Barnabas* (early first century) quotes Matthew 22:14 directly.
  - Celsus (ca. 160-180) and early Jewish opponent of Christianity, quotes or alludes to all four Gospels.
  - Justin Martyr (d. 165) quotes material from Matthew and Mark, Luke, and John. Theophilus of Antioch (ca. 180s) quotes from Matthew, Luke, and John.
  - After this time, quotations of the Gospels increase exponentially. For example Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) quotes the Gospels over one thousand times.
3. The early church fathers directly speak about the four Gospels in ways that indicate their unique authority, and show that from the earliest period to the mid-third century, the early Church was fully united around four, and only four, Gospels which they deemed to be divinely-given apostolic “memoirs”:
  - Papias (d. 130) emphasizes that Mark wrote his Gospel based on information received from Peter.
  - Ignatius refers to the events recorded in the Gospels as the “inviolable archives.”
  - Justin Martyr describes the Gospels as the “memoirs of the Apostles” that “came about by their agency,” either “written by the apostles or their followers.”
  - Tatian (d. 180) attempts to create a “harmony” (*Diatessaron*) out of only those deemed scriptural in his day, namely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
  - *Epistula Apostolorum* (second century) refers to the “book which Jesus Christ revealed unto his disciples” containing “the word of the Gospel.”
  - Irenaeus (d. 202) discusses at length the beauty and necessity of four, and only four, Gospels.
  - Hippolytus of Rome (d. 236) asserts that Christ watches over the church in the “fourfold saving gospel.”
  - Origen (d. 254) declares that there are four and only four Gospels, though he is aware of others.

4. It was only heretical parties (Marcionites, Valentinians, Ebionites) who rejected three and preferred only one gospel, thus presupposing that the four were accepted among the orthodox.
5. Various letters of Paul were quoted—explicitly or via clear allusions—by Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.
6. There is early confirmation of II Peter 3:15, 16 regarding a collection of Paul’s letters circulating together at an early stage:
  - Polycarp commends the Philippians to “study carefully the letters of Paul.”
  - Ignatius urges the church at Ephesus to remember Paul, “who in every letter remembers you.”
  - Irenaeus commends them as fully authoritative, asserting that “the words of the Lord are numerous” and can be found both in the and in “the epistles of the blessed apostle.”

B. *Reception of the other writings* (Acts, General Epistles, and Revelation)—These were included in the two-fold collection very early, but the details of reception was different for each of the books, with some facing more debate than others:

1. Origen wrote that “the texture of the net [of Scripture] in the Gospels and in the words of Christ through the *Apostles*” (not merely Paul).
2. Ignatius and Hippolytus asserted that the two-fold source of authority in the Church is the “gospel” and “apostles.”
3. Acts, due to its association with Luke’s Gospel, was accepted very early (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria).
4. I Peter was rarely doubted, and numerous church fathers quote it (e.g., Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria).
5. I John was recognized very early as the product of the Apostle John and thus rarely in doubt, being quoted by Polycarp, Irenaeus, and others.
6. The other books (Hebrews, James, II Peter, II-III John, Jude, Revelation) were often listed among the “disputed” or “debated” books by church fathers such as Origen and Eusebius, indicating only that *some* parts of the Church took longer to recognize their intrinsic divine Scriptural quality. A consideration of the distinct character of each makes the reasons for this clearly obvious in each case.
7. Hebrews encountered difficulty due to its anonymity, but it typically traveled with Paul’s letters in early manuscripts and is quoted as early as Polycarp.
8. II Peter is mentioned explicitly by Origen, who quotes it several times while acknowledging that some have their doubts.
9. James (probably due to a perceived but illusory contradiction with Paul’s doctrine of justification) and the shorter epistles of John (probably due to the cursory perception of a lack of spiritual depth/relevance) were not quoted extensively in the second century, and Eusebius classified them as “disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many.”



10. Revelation (due to its cryptic and apocalyptic eschatological content) was debated, but Justin Martyr, only a few decades after its composition, commends it, and Irenaeus quotes from it several times.
11. **Conclusion: Although some books on the margins were debated by some parts of the Church for some time, the evidence is clear that there was widespread agreement on a stable collection of writings given by God.**
12. By the mid-fourth century, the 27 New Covenant writings are fully acknowledged in the *Festal Letter* of Athanasius, which does not presume to select books, but instead acknowledges how the Church has become persuaded that they are God-inspired, Scriptural, delivered by eyewitnesses, handed down, and confirmed as divine.

C. *Indication by the Church of what was viewed as Scripture*—There was strong attestation of a core Scriptural collection (Gospels and Paul) from the earliest days, and around this nucleus the remaining inspired writings orbited, though it might have taken a while to reach full consensus. There were also “other” books beyond the 27 that received some attention, as displayed by the following:

1. Very early, the Church used the New Testament writings in worship (e.g., Justin Martyr writes that, when Christians in a given region gathered on Sunday, “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read” and expounded, followed by prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and offerings.
2. Early codices (bound books) including multiple NT writings were indications that the individual writings were not simply discrete literary works meant for distinct single audiences, but belonged together as covenant documentation for the entire covenant community. However, many codices included writings in addition to the 27 eventually established as canon, making it unclear whether the additional books were considered authoritative divine Scripture or merely helpful supplemental, though non-canonical, writings.
3. Various “canon lists” were produced from the 200s onward, in which various writers indicate by name the books used as Scripture [See the handout “New Testament Canon Lists”]. These lists reflect the debate and disputes mentioned above, some omitting one to a handful of books on the margins and/or including one or more of a small group of books other than the 27.
4. **The trajectory was clearly from more debate to less over time. At the Synods of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397), the earliest ecclesiastical councils to discuss canon, only the 27 books were discussed.**

### *What about the Other Books?*

The books sometimes mentioned by various parties as possibly canonical fall into two groups: those that were sometimes quoted by early Christians in ways indistinguishable from canonical writings, some of which were included in some early “canon lists” and debated as to their canonicity by some early Christians, and whose content, apart from some minor debates, was basically orthodox; and those that claimed to contain “secret knowledge,” were falsely attributed to apostles or other prominent church leaders, and/or were heterodox or heretical in their content,

when compared to the canonical Scriptures. Following is an assessment of each of these categories:

I. *Debated Books*

A. These include the following:

<i>I Clement</i>	<i>The Didache</i>	<i>Barnabas</i>
<i>Gospel of Peter</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i>	<i>Gospel of the Hebrews</i>
<i>Acts of Paul</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew</i>	<i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i>
	<i>Apocalypse of Peter</i>	

B. **Assessment:** These writings, to the extent that they have survived, provide insights into the beliefs and practices of the early Church. They were, and still can be, read with profit by the Church. But there is scant evidence that they were ever read in worship, they were explicitly rejected as canonical by important Church Fathers, and, apart from an opinion to the contrary here and there, the early Church never recognized them as given by God to be new covenant Scripture.

II. *Gnostic Writings and Other Apocalyptic Literature*

A. Examples of these include the following:

<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>	<i>Gospel of Truth</i>	<i>Gospel of the Ebionites</i>
<i>Gospel of Judas</i>	<i>Apocryphon of John</i>	<i>Protoevangelium of James</i>

B. **Assessment:** These writings cover various themes and were more like “fan-fiction” about Jesus. Many contain heretical doctrine. They were never given serious consideration by the Church as Scripture, though sometimes quoted or read. Most give allegedly “secret revelations” about Jesus (from which the word *apocrypha* is derived). While some are mentioned in the early Church, many were otherwise unknown until the discovery of the Gnostic Codices at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. Essentially all of these focus on secret knowledge and fail altogether to bear the imprint shared by all New Testament Scripture: namely, a focus on the Christ-event (death for sins, resurrection, ascension) and its transforming power (faith/repentance/forgiveness) in the life of the worldwide covenant community. The orthodox Church never acknowledged them as bearing the true witness of the apostolic circle, regardless of their clever names. They are interesting, but not spiritually helpful, and are certainly not to be regarded as Scripture.

**\*For further study, refer to the Handout “The Covenantal Nature of the Canon”\***

**Note:** The material in this document is largely drawn, often verbatim, from the booklet *A Christian’s Pocket Guide to How We Got the Bible*, by Greg Lanier, with occasional additions and modifications. It is published by Christian Focus Publications.

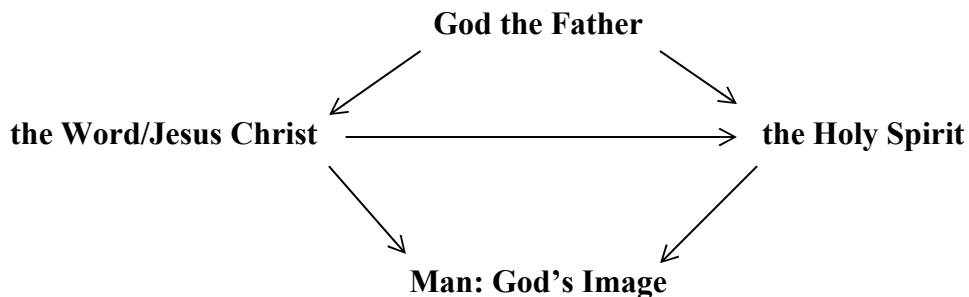
# Orientation for Involvement with Scripture

## *Introduction*

In order to interact profitably and properly with the Bible, we must orient ourselves properly to it as God's Word to His people. Such orientation involves three basic elements: understanding our goal, understanding who we are, and understanding what the Bible is. One might include as well understanding who God is, but that will be handled under the heading of what the Bible is. The following is an explanation of these three elements.

## *The Goal of Involvement with the Bible*

The question of *why* one becomes involved with the Bible is key. There is one overarching and fundamentally proper goal in this regard: *knowing God*. This refers not simply to gaining intellectual knowledge about God, though that is part of it, but also to all that is involved in *intimate communion with the living God*. Such communion is impossible apart from God's gracious self-revelation. The transcendent God would be unknowable unless He chose to reveal Himself to us His creatures. He does this in a *trinitarian* fashion, in accord with His nature, as illustrated in the following diagram:



## Essential Points:

- God the Father reveals Himself preeminently through the Son through His incarnation in Jesus Christ, the Word of God (John 1:18).
- The Father and the Son send the Spirit to illuminate the Word and speak of Christ (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15).
- Intimacy with God ("knowledge" of God) is accomplished by involvement with the *written* Word which testifies of the *divine* Word as these are illuminated by the Holy Spirit.
- The ultimate goal of involvement with the Bible can thus be summarized as *seeking God*.

## *The Identity of the Seekers*

Who we are as seekers of God through interaction with Scripture must be understood in terms of two essential components:

1. *We are sinners*—The fact of indwelling sin and the effects of the Fall make the truth of Scripture unintelligible to us in its full spiritual meaning, significance, and application apart from the work of God in us (I Corinthians 2:1-16).
2. *We have received God's grace (if we are true believers in Christ)*—This involves two elements:
  - Regeneration—We have been given spiritual life by being born again John 3:3; I Peter 1:23-25).
  - Holy Spirit Baptism—We have been anointed with the Holy Spirit, who unites us spiritually to Christ, indwells us, and instructs us in the things of God (I John 2:18-21).

### ***The Nature of the Bible***

The essence of the relationship between God and His people is a *covenant*, a fact confirmed throughout the Bible by the constant reference to it by God Himself. The Scriptures are the documentation of this covenant relationship. Thus, the fundamental feature of the nature of the Bible is that it is *covenant documentation*. Accordingly, the concept of *covenant* provides the overall framework in terms of which every significant aspect of the nature of the Bible is subsumed and to be understood. The following outline is an explication of the essential features of the Bible as they are illuminated by the definitive aspects of biblical covenants between God and man.

- I. The Aspects of Covenant—The definitive aspects of biblical covenants between God and man can be understood in a fivefold way. These aspects correspond to sections of Ancient Near Eastern (hereafter ANE) covenant documents, research into which has shed light on biblical covenants in well-known and important ways. The five aspects are:
  - A. **The Juxtaposition of Transcendence and Immanence**—The covenant provides the means by which and the structure in terms of which the transcendent, infinite, uncreated God draws near (immanent) to the human, finite, created parties to whom God binds Himself. As the transcendent party, God is completely sovereign in the establishment of the covenant, taking the initiative in the establishment of the relationship and *exclusively determining its terms and obligations*.
  - B. **Mediation/Representation/Manifestation**—God relates to the human parties in the covenant relationship indirectly, through the use of *mediators* and *mediating* entities which represent both parties to each other and *manifest* the relationship which exists in principle. History itself is one of these mediating entities, and this

aspect is reflected in the section of ANE treaty documents which records the history of the suzerain king's relationship to the vassal king and his subjects.

- C. **Stipulations**—The bond established by biblical covenants involves *obligations* of each party to the other. God binds Himself by *promises* that He extends to the human party/parties to the covenant. The human parties are bound by God's commands (His law-Word) which He imposes upon those who pledge themselves to Him in the covenant.
- D. **Sanctions**—There are consequences (*sanctions*) for both failure to comply with the obligations established by the covenant, called *curses*, and compliance with them, called blessings, and these sanctions are voluntarily agreed upon by means of a *self-maledictory oath* which is always the means of entering into the covenant, usually involving a symbolic ritual signifying the potential for both sanctions. *The relationship of the covenant is thus experienced and applied through the administration of sanctions.*
- E. **Continuity**—The covenant, which is intended by God to be a perpetual relationship, involves provision for its extension into the future, particularly in terms of the *inheritance* of both the original parties and their posterity. This is confirmed by *documentation* in the form of written records of the covenant and its features.

## II. The Nature of Scripture as the Product of the Aspects of Covenant

### A. The Structure of Scripture

- 1. The arrangement of the books and groupings of books in their canonical arrangement reflects, down to the very literary order of the aspects, a covenantal pattern. This both reflects and confirms the nature of the Bible as covenant documentation. [See the handout "Covenantal Structure of the Canon"]
- 2. The structure of individual books and passages of Scripture reflects the aspects of the covenant in similar ways similar to the canonical arrangement of the biblical books. [See the handout "Covenantal Structure of the Pentateuch"]

### B. Transcendence/Immanence

- 1. The orthodox doctrine of inspiration reflects the importance of recognizing both the *divine* (transcendent) features of Scripture as well as the equally real and important *human* features.
  - Divine: inerrancy, consistency, sufficiency, coherence, infallibility, clarity, necessity, precognition (i.e., in fulfilled prophecy), and authority.
  - Human: diversity of style and perspective, use of human language and its conventions, content flowing from and addressing specific human situations, contexts, and needs.

2. The Bible is the most obvious and the primary way that the transcendent God draws near to His people by revealing Himself and His will (Deuteronomy 4:5-8; 6:4-9; 8:5, 6; 11:13-32; Psalm 119:105; Isaiah 8:19, 20; Matthew 5:19; 7:24-27; John 17:8; 14, 17).
3. The Bible is wholly inerrant and infallible in all that it affirms to be true (including its philosophical, scientific, and historical affirmations).
4. The Bible is entirely consistent with itself; no part or passage of Scripture is contradictory to any other part or passage.
5. The Bible requires the supernatural grace of God to understand and use it adequately, correctly, and profitably (I Corinthians 2:12-16).
6. The Bible is written to provide guidance and communicate lessons and truth relevant to and instructive for specific human situations and contexts.
7. The Bible is written in ordinary human language and in accord with the ordinary conventions of such.

#### C. Mediation

1. The basis for the criteria for identification of what is Scripture and what is not is primarily *the qualifications of those through whom it is mediated* and to whom it was given to communicate and record in writing: prophets and apostles, who thus are the foundation of the covenant community of God's people, the Church (II Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 2:20).
2. A significant dimension of the contents of Scripture is the revelation of the progressive development of the *history of redemption*, which is distinct from the content related to the purposes of individual books and passages, but to which they all contribute in discrete yet complementary ways. History itself mediates the nature of God through His acts and the reactions of His people to them. The study of the progressive development of Scripture, in the context of the parallel progress of redemptive history, is known as *biblical theology*.
3. The Bible's progressive revelation is analogous to the *progressive character of its understanding* by those who read and study it. Understanding the Bible takes time and progresses over time; it is not immediate or all-at-once.
4. Mankind as the rulers over God's creation exercise this responsibility and privilege in accord with God's will and character *by applying Scripture to all of life*.

#### D. Stipulations

1. God's promises, as recorded in the Bible, are the proper object of the faith of Christians, and a primary means of equipping them to live Christian lives (II Peter 1:3, 4).
2. God's law, as recorded in Scripture, is essential for providing both the means of convicting sinners in the work of evangelism (Romans 3:20; II Corinthians 3:6-9) and indispensable necessary instruction in how to live life that is pleasing to God, and thus essential for Christian discipleship and sanctification (Matthew 5:17-20; Romans 8:3, 4; Hebrews 5:13, 14). God's

Word is virtually synonymous with His Law. The summaries of the Law (e.g., the Ten Commandments) are sometimes referred to as virtually synonymous with the Covenant (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:13).

#### D. Sanctions

1. Blessings and curses are never administered apart from their prior *proclamation*, so that those subject to cursing may be warned, and those subject to blessing may be made aware of the promises, in order to exercise both faith and hope. This proclamation is generally made through the Bible (Romans 10:14-17; II Corinthians 5:18-20; II Peter 1:3, 4).
2. The proclamation of God's Word is thus the means whereby God's people are the agents of both judgment and salvation (Psalm 149:6-9; Ephesians 6:17; II Corinthians 2:14-17; 5:18-20).

#### E. Continuity

1. The Bible's content is eternally true and relevant, not simply relevant to temporal life and circumstances (Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 24:35).
2. The Bible contains instructions not simply for this life, but for life in the eternal state (see above references).

### III. Summary of Some Implications of Covenant Theology for the Nature and Use of Scripture

- A. The *covenantal nature of the Bible* has many important implications and *is the principal factor in determining how one should relate to the Bible in interpretation and application*, as indicated from the above.
- B. The following are some of the most important implications of the nature of the Bible as covenant documentation, which together form the principal basis for formulation of the proper principles for its interpretation and application.
  1. **The primary and ultimate goal for involvement with the Bible should and must always be to seek God and to establish, experience, and develop a vital relationship to Him through Jesus Christ.**
  2. The Bible is a revelation primarily of the nature of God and of His will for mankind (See *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 3).
  3. The Bible is the means through which God exercises His authority through His Law (See *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Qs. 26, 39-42).
  4. The Bible is the primary means for the equipping of God's people to live righteous and godly lives.
  5. The Bible is the means whereby God's people are instructed for and equipped to exercise dominion over the earth in the Kingdom of God; it is the tool of dominion, especially as all genres and forms of it impose obligation on God's covenant people, and are in this sense part of His *Law*.

6. The primary and most important rule for the interpretation of Scripture is *the comparison of Scripture with itself*.
7. Every statement (including every command) of the Bible is qualified by every other statement (command) of the Bible; thus, biblical doctrine and ethics are virtually *never* established and determined by consideration of a single text.
8. The Bible cannot be adequately understood or applied apart from *submission to its authority*.
9. Every detail of every feature of every passage in the Bible is significant and contributes to the fullness of meaning intended to be communicated by that passage; there are no extraneous or unimportant details.
10. There is more truth contained in any given passage of Scripture than can be grasped in one, or even several, examinations of the passage. This truth is multi-faceted, so that the *meaning* of a given passage cannot be limited to one specific and discrete proposition.
11. The Bible is absolutely true in whatever it *affirms to be true*.
12. The Bible communicates truth at multiple conceptual levels simultaneously, including factual, historical, redemptive-historical, ethical, and spiritual.
13. Patience is necessary for interacting with the Bible in a profitable way.
14. The Bible is not written in some form of divine “code,” even in its symbolism. It is *meant to be understood* by human beings. Thus, aside from the principles necessarily flowing from the divine (transcendent) aspect of its origin, it must be interpreted according to the ordinary interpretive principles and in terms of the standard human communicative conventions applying to any book.
15. The Bible employs *all* of the literary devices and techniques used by human authors, in order to communicate God’s truth in the most effective way.
16. The Bible must be interpreted in accord with and in the light of its original historical situations, background, culture, and language.
17. The Bible’s basic message is clear and can be understood by any person of reasonable intelligence and ordinary faculties applying ordinary means.
18. The Bible is the content of the message of the Church to the world, and the means of its role in both the judgment of and salvation of the world, through the proclamation of Scripture.
19. Sanctions within the Church are administered *declaratively*, through the proclamation of the Bible (Revelation 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21).
20. Involvement with the Bible is intended *to change us*.
21. Our response to the truth of the Bible, either faith and obedience, or unbelief and rejection/rebellion, *always* carries consequences.
22. Apart from Himself through Jesus Christ, the Bible is the most precious gift God has given to mankind. Exposure to it is a privilege, not a given. Our exposure to it imposes on us the obligation to disseminate its truth to as many people in the world as possible.



## The Need for Hermeneutics

- I. **General Need**—People communicate in one of two ways: either by acting (something physically done) or through language (speaking, writing, singing). If the person receiving a message correctly understands the meaning of a language, there is communication. Language operates according to certain laws with which we become familiar as part of the natural process of learning to speak. These laws, which are the rules by which we interpret meaning, usually occur automatically and unconsciously, so that our understanding of the meaning is ordinarily spontaneous. However, when reading and interpreting anything, particularly Scripture, various factors hinder our application of these laws, and our understanding suffers. These factors include:
- A. Sin affected and darkened the understanding and *mental* ability of man (“noetic” effect of the Fall), and still exercises an influence on his conscious mental activity, *even that of a believer*. Hence, special efforts must be made to guard against error.
  - B. People differ from one another in many ways which cause them to drift apart mentally (hence, in interpretation). They differ, for instance, in:
    1. intellectual capacity, aesthetic taste, and moral quality resulting in a lack of spiritual affinity,
    2. intellectual attainment (degree of education), and
    3. nationality, with a corresponding difference in language, forms of thought, customs, and morals.
  - C. There are certain blocks to a spontaneous, automatic application of the laws of language to the Bible and hence to spontaneous understanding of it:
    1. There is a historical gap between the writers and audiences of Scripture and ourselves.
    2. There is a cultural gap.
    3. There is a linguistic (language) gap.
    4. There is a philosophical gap.
  - D. People draw false conclusions from the uniqueness of the Bible as to the principles by which it should be understood.

Since the Bible is written communication, we should apply most of the ordinary laws of language in order to understand it correctly. ***Hermeneutics is essentially a codification*** (*a conscious thinking through and setting down in*

***(More on Back)***

*written form) of the processes we normally use at an unconscious level to understand the meaning of a communication.* For the reasons stated above, it is necessary to apply the principles of hermeneutics *deliberately* and *carefully* to insure proper understanding of the Bible.

- II. ***Special Need***—Although the Bible is written communication, the fact that it is the Word of God makes it special, unlike any other written communication of earth. Therefore, there are certain special principles for interpreting and understanding it which do not apply to any other written communication. An example of how we learn these principles is looking at how New Testament writers interpret Old Testament passages. Hindrances to the application of these principles include:
- A. People do not automatically comprehend all the ways divine authorship should affect our understanding of Scripture.
  - B. Unbelieving interpretations and interpreters, which do not take these factors into account, are prevalent.

***\*Biblical hermeneutics is the setting forth of all of the principles which should be applied to the Bible in order to understand it, including those which apply from ordinary hermeneutics and those special principles derived from its unique character.***

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[This material is a supplementation and reworking of material in *Biblical Hermeneutics* by Louis Berkhof]

## Prerequisite Attitudes to Fruitful Involvement with the Bible

Fruitful and profitable involvement with the Bible, including properly understanding and applying it, demands that we approach the bible with the proper attitude. This includes two principal aspects: the right heart attitude, and the right outlook on the nature of the Scriptures. The following is a summary of the essential elements in both of these.

- I. *A proper heart attitude*—Not everyone can properly understand the Bible. Its main truth is spiritual, so only the spiritually qualified can understand it.
  - A. **A new heart** (I Corinthians 2:14)—The interpreter of God’s Word must be born again. He/she must be a genuine believer.
  - B. **A hungry heart** (I Peter 2:2)—Bible understanding does not come through casual interest and occasional reading. It is like precious ore in a mine; you can only find it if you are determined to get it and willing to *work* at it.
  - C. **An obedient heart** (Psalm 119:98-100)—To understand the Bible we must be truly willing to obey what God shows us of his will. If we are unwilling to respond to what He shows us, our hearts become closed to further understanding, and perhaps even blind to what we have already learned. This is the nature of truth and our relationship to it.
  - D. **A disciplined heart** (Matthew 7:7)—This means committing oneself to Bible study even when it is not exciting or interesting. Sometimes it will be, but many times it will not. Insights into some questions may take years to unravel. To understand the Bible adequately, one must be willing to persevere in the *commitment*, long-term, and not allow other interests to take priority, for no other reason than this is what is right.
  - E. **A teachable heart** (Isaiah 50:4)—This means wanting to learn and go on learning. It means realizing we have not “arrived,” but that we still have much more to understand. A person with such an attitude is eagerly and humbly ready to discover new truth at any time, *and from any source*. So this also means being willing to learn from others, and to admit and consider the possibility that opinions concerning the Bible and its teachings that have been previously held may be wrong, or at least *partially* wrong, that is, requiring further refinement. The fruitful Bible student is *always* refining his/her understanding of the Bible and its doctrine.

*(More on Back)*

- II. *A proper conception of the Bible itself*—This involves both a proper idea of what the Bible is and certain convictions about how to approach its study.
  - A. **The Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is God’s Word**—We must be entirely committed to the Bible our ultimate authority, believing that all that *it*

affirms (not necessarily what *we think* it says) is true and trustworthy.

- B. **The Bible can be adequately understood from the good translations—** Although study of the original languages can add to our understanding, which is one reason why we need teachers of the Word who devote their full time to such matters, the average individual, using ordinary means, can understand the basic message of the Bible without consulting the original languages.
- C. **The Bible is a unity—** We cannot properly understand or apply the Bible unless we approach it in light of the fact that it is *one* story of the redemption of *one* people by *one* God through *one* person (Christ). The heart of this unity is God's *covenant*, which is the structure of the way in which God relates to Himself and all other persons. The theme of covenant is what unites Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.
- D. **The Bible is its own interpreter—** Comparing Scripture with Scripture is basic in Bible interpretation. To understand a given doctrine, we must consider *all* that the Bible says concerning it. Further, the Bible provides models of how various parts of it are to be interpreted and applied (for instance, prophecy).
- E. **The Bible language is mainly normal human language—** It is not written in code or some special "Holy Ghost language." The principles for understanding it are thus mostly the same as for understanding any human communication.
- F. **Our understanding of the Bible must be accompanied by an honest, intelligent, and obedient response to its message—** No understanding of the Bible is simply technical and theoretical. When a truth is clear to the mind, the will must respond. Knowledge and obedience cannot be separated. We learn in order that we may do, and we have not truly learned until we do.
- G. **The Holy Spirit's teaching is necessary for understanding the Bible—** The truths of the Bible go beyond the facts and information found in it. The basic meaning of the Bible is spiritual, and to get that meaning we must be taught by the Holy Spirit. We must seek such instruction through prayer.

## General Guide for Handling a Passage

The following steps constitute the proper method in handling any passage of Scripture:

1. *Make certain your attitude is proper* (See the paper, “Prerequisite Attitudes to Fruitful Involvement with the Bible”).
2. *Pray concerning your time in God’s Word*—this includes several aspects:
  - asking God to teach you through his Holy Spirit before planning the study and before each day’s work.
  - praying whenever you come up against a difficult problem or feel confused.
  - thanking God as you are reminded of blessings or are given new understanding and insight.
  - praying for wisdom to apply the truth once you know it, seeking to know what to do.
3. *Read and reread*—get acquainted with the passage thoroughly before trying to figure out what it means.
4. *Observe*—use the principles of observation (see the paper on this), noticing very carefully as many details as you can. Do not observe quickly or carelessly. Check your observation by asking these six questions, especially when dealing with narrative passages: Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? Jot down *all* your observations in a notebook before thinking about what they mean. This step overlaps with and is inseparable from #3.
5. *Think and analyze*—meditate in the passage you have read several times and the observations you have written down; seek to get the meaning of the various facts. Write down questions or problems to which you do not get immediate answers. Some may be answered as you continue studying, and some may never become clear. God does not promise to answer all our questions now, but He does promise to give us the light we need.
6. *Interpret*—use the principles of interpretation (see the paper). Apply them as you continue studying the passage. This overlaps with and is inseparable from step #5.
7. *Apply the meaning of the passage*—use the principles of application (see the paper) to consider its relevance to your own life and to the church today. This is different from interpretation (getting the meaning of a passage and expressing it without reference to

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any certain person); application is identifying how you should personally respond. ***Remember that there is only one correct interpretation (meaning) of any given truth which is asserted in Scripture, but many applications. Also remember that a given passage communicates, either purposefully (that is, in terms of the agenda of the author) or incidentally, many truths; but these truths are never contradictory to one***

*another.*

8. *Record your thoughts about interpretation and application in a notebook.*

These are the main steps in approaching a passage in logical order, and there is value in keeping this order. You should self-consciously follow it until it becomes a habit. However, some of the steps do overlap. Sometimes you may be reading, observing, writing, and praying almost simultaneously. The important thing is to get these basic matters into your mind so that you can carry them out carefully but freely.

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This material is a condensation and reworking of pp. 39-45, *How To Understand Your Bible*, by T. Norton Sterrett (IVP).

# Principles of Observation

## I. Importance of Observation

- A. It is important to realize that you *must carefully observe* what you are reading as a deliberate, conscious step *before* you begin to interpret (decide what it means). Failure to do this is one of the most common mistakes in the superficial and careless Bible study of today. It is very easy to read without noticing, not taking in what you read. **Remember: if you do not know what is said, you cannot know what is meant.**
- B. This means that you should:
1. Read the given portion (book, passage, etc.) *several times* before you stop at all to interpret.
  2. Before you gain experience, it is best to write things down. Make notes of only observations first, taking down *everything*. Some notes will be important when you go back later to interpret and make connections. Others that are not important, you can disregard.

## II. What To Observe—here are some of the most significant examples:

### A. **General Things To Observe in All Types of Passages:**

1. The literary form (genre) of the passage—is it narrative, poetry, didactic (teaching), prophecy, etc.
2. Repeated words and phrases—this usually indicates emphasis.
3. Contrasts and comparisons between ideas, phrases or people, either stressed or implied—these give clues to the thought structure.
4. Unknown words—use a standard dictionary, except for Bible names.
5. Figurative expressions (see the handout).
6. Anything strange, unusual, or unexpected.
7. Related entities—these can be persons, things, qualities, etc.
8. The literary structure—how the story, discourse, etc. *flows*, and how it is put together (order of elements, etc.).
9. The outline of the contents—this is distinct from the above point.
10. Words or phrases with biblical-theological import, that is, that are related to themes that are developed throughout Scripture and have special meaning and significance [Note: the more familiar you become with the contents of all of Scripture, and the more experienced you are in Bible reading and interpretation, the more equipped you will be to do this and the more alert you will be to various themes.].

11. The redemptive-historical epoch relative to the original audience.
12. The canonical context of the passage (the corpus in which it is found).

## B. What To Observe in Specific Genres

### 1. Narrative

- Time words—these are found especially in narrative. Examples are: after, then, immediately, before, at evening, and one hour later.
- Location or place words.
- The factual elements listed under III. E. below.

### 2. Poetry

- The significance of literary features distinctive to poetical passages (parallelism, chiasm, acrostics, etc.)
- Hebrew idioms
- Figures of speech
- Imagery
- Symbolic expressions or words

### 3. Doctrinal/Didactic (This would be found in, for instance, epistles or discourses in the Gospels)

- The core of each sentence—main subject and verb (especially important in long, complicated sentences).
- Connectives or linking words—examples are: and, but, for, since, therefore, however, and after.
- Logical sequences—often two items in a passage have a logical connection—one being the cause of another or one giving a reason for another. Observing connective words will help you to see these.
- Grammatical elements—you must especially notice nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other parts of speech in sentences that are not clear

***There are many other features you can observe; the more you read and study the Bible and become familiar with it, the more you will be alert to them.***



## III. How To Observe—the basic steps

- A. Skim or read the passage rapidly, keeping alert to possible main themes that unite the material.
- B. Note the context in which the passage occurs—the various aspects of context include:
  - 1. *Historical*—consider the background and situation of both author and original readers—investigate this if need be, especially if it seems particularly related to your passage.
  - 2. *Immediate*—note what comes directly before and after the passage.
  - 3. *Intraliterary*—note where the passage occurs within the plan (outline) of the chapter and book in which it occurs.
  - 4. *Intrabiblical*—note how the passage fits into the framework of the history of God’s plan of redemption and its accompanying revelation.
- C. Reread the passage several times (you may want to do this in more than one translation and make special note of important differences), writing down what you observe (II above). The more times you read, the more benefit you will get.
- D. Work through the passage carefully, *noting where the main divisions of thought occur* (a Bible set in paragraphs is helpful, but remember that these paragraph divisions are the editor’s and not inspired; so don’t be *bound* to them. This may involve slightly different considerations, depending on the type of literature being examined. In narrative, it may involve dividing the passage into scenes; in epistle, it would mean discerning when the subject is changed, when a conclusion is being drawn from a series of points, etc. Try to pick up the general plan or development of the argument (letters C, F, J, N, and O under II above are helpful in this regard). Outline the passage mentally.
- E. Check your observation by asking factual questions such as these (which apply particularly to narrative passages):
  - 1. *Who* are the characters involved?
  - 2. *What* is happening?
  - 3. *Where* do the events occur?
  - 4. *When* do the events occur?
  - 5. *Why* do the events occur?
  - 6. *How* do the events occur?

[Note: see *Leading Bible Discussions* by James F. Nyquist (IVP), pp. 25-27 for further expansion of these questions.]

- F. Determine what seems to be the author's main purpose or lesson (perhaps write it down).
- G. Identify key words and words which require further study.

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This material is a rearrangement, combination, and reworking, with some additions and modifications, of the following recommended reading:

- *How to Understand Your Bible*, by T. Norton Sterrett (IVP), pp. 39-45.
- *Leading Bible Discussions*, by James F. Nyquist (IVP), pp. 24-28.

## Major Literary Genres in Scripture Worksheet

The Bible does not come to us as a chronological history or a science or systematic theology textbook, but as a collection of different types of literature. What is God's purpose in giving us His Word in the form of all of these different modes of communication? Each genre contributes a different nuance to our understanding of God's truth.

### 1) *Law*

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

### 2) *Narrative*

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

### 3) *Poetry*

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

### 4) *Wisdom*

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

### 5) *Prophecy*

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

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**6) *Gospel***

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

**7) *Epistle***

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

**8) *Doctrine***

Characteristics: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_