

APPROACHING THE BIBLE

What the Bible is

Revelation

Biblical theology forms an organic whole. This not only means that one can approach any part of the subject by beginning at any other point of the subject (though some vantage points are certainly more helpful than others), but that to treat some element of biblical theology as if it existed in splendid isolation seriously distorts the whole picture.

On few subjects is this more obviously true than with regard to one's doctrine of Scripture. In this sceptical age it is doubtful if an articulate and coherent understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to interpret it can long be sustained where there is not at the same time a grasp of the biblical view of God, of human beings, of sin, of redemption and of the rush of history towards its ultimate goal.

For instance, if it is true that the Bible tells us about God, not least what kind of God he is, it is no less true that unless God really is that sort of God it is impossible to appreciate the Bible for what it is. To approach the Bible correctly it is important to know something of the God who stands behind it.

God is both transcendent (*i.e.* he is 'above' space and time) and personal. He is the sovereign and all-powerful Creator to whom the entire universe owes its existence, yet he is the God who graciously condescends to interact with us human beings whom he has himself formed in his own image. Because we are locked in time and space, God meets us here; he is the personal God who interacts with other persons, persons he has made to glorify him and to enjoy him for ever.

In short, God has chosen to reveal himself to us, for otherwise we would know very little about him. True, his existence and power are disclosed in the created order, even though that order has been deeply scarred by human rebellion and its consequences (Gn. 3:18; Rom. 8:19-22; see Ps. 19:1-2; Rom. 1:19-20). It is also true that rather a dim image of God's moral attributes is reflected in the human conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). But this knowledge is not sufficient to lead to salvation. Moreover, human sinfulness is so ingenious that not a little energy is devoted to explaining away even such revelation as this. But in his unmeasured grace God has actively intervened in the world he made in order to reveal himself to men and

women in still more powerful ways.

This was true even before the fall. God assigned certain responsibilities to the creatures whom he made in his image (itself an act of revelation), and then met with them in the garden he had made for them. When God chose Abraham, he established a covenant with him, revealing himself as *his* God (Gn. 15; 17). When he redeemed Israel from slavery, God not only conversed with Moses but displayed himself in terrifying plagues and in the thunder and lightning of Sinai. Though the whole earth is his, he chose Israel as his covenant people and made them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6). To them he disclosed himself not only in spectacular displays of power but in his Torah (lit. 'instruction'), which included not only detailed prescriptions for daily life but entire structures of mandated religious observance (tabernacle/temple, sacrifices, priesthood).

Throughout the period covered by the OT, God revealed himself in providence (*e.g.* the arrangements that brought Joseph to Egypt, Gn. 37 - 50; 50:19-20; sleeplessness on a certain night in the life of Xerxes, Est. 6:1 ff; the decrees of Cyrus and Darius that effected the return of some Hebrews to Jerusalem after the exile), in miraculous events (*e.g.* the burning bush, Ex. 3; the fire at Mt. Carmel, 1 Ki. 18), in prophetic words (the 'word of the LORD' repeatedly 'comes' to the prophets), in poetry and songs (*e.g.* Psalms). But even while OT believers knew that God had disclosed himself to his covenant people, they were aware that he had promised more definitive revelation in the future. God promised a time when a new shoot would emerge from David's line (Is. 11), a man who would sit on David's throne but who would, nevertheless, be called the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (Is. 9). God himself would come down and usher in a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65). He would pour out his Spirit (Joel 2), introduce a new covenant (Je. 31; Ezk. 36), raise the dead (Ezk. 37), and much more.

The NT writers are convinced that the long-awaited self-disclosure of God and his salvation have been brought near in Jesus Christ, God's Son. In the past God had revealed himself primarily through the prophets, but now in

these last days he has revealed himself supremely and climactically in the Son (Heb. 1:2). The Son is the perfect image of the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3); all God's fulness dwells in him (Col. 1:19; 2:9). He is the incarnation of God's self-expression; he is God's Word made flesh (Jn. 1:1,14,18).

This Son-centred revelation is found not only in the person of Jesus but also in his deeds. Not only in his teaching, preaching and healing, but supremely in the cross and resurrection Jesus reveals God and accomplishes the divine plan of redemption. By the Spirit whom the exalted Christ has bequeathed (Jn. 14 – 16) God convicts the world (Jn. 16:7–11), assists believers in their witness (Jn. 15:27–28), and above all, manifests God to them, taking up residence in them (Jn. 14:19–26). Thus God reveals himself by the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee and downpayment of the promised inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14). One day the ultimate self-disclosure will occur, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11; *cf.* Rev. 19 – 22).

The point to emphasize is that a genuinely Christian understanding of the Bible presupposes the God of the Bible, a God who makes himself known in a wide diversity of ways so that human beings may know the purpose for which they were made – to know and love and worship God, and so delight in that relationship that God is glorified while they receive the matchless benefit of becoming all that God wants them to be. Any genuine knowledge human beings have of God depends on God first disclosing himself.

The word of God

What must not be overlooked is that this God is a talking God. Doubtless he reveals himself to us in many ways, but word is not the least of them.

In English 'revelation' can be understood actively or passively, *i.e.* as either the activity whereby God reveals himself, or the substance of that disclosure. When it refers to God's self-disclosure in speech, the active sense envisages God's making himself known in words, while the passive sense focuses on the words themselves insofar as they constitute the message God chooses to convey.

The importance of God's speech as a fundamental means of his self-disclosure cannot be overestimated. Creation itself is the product of God's speech: God speaks, and worlds leap into being (Gn.1). Many of God's most dramatic deeds of revelation would not have been understandable apart from God's accompanying speech. Moses views the burning bush as a

curiosity until the voice tells him to remove his sandals and assigns him his new responsibilities. Abraham would have had no reason to leave Ur were it not for God's revelation in words. Again and again the prophets carry the burden of 'the word of the LORD' to the people. Verbal revelation is essential even in the case of the Lord Jesus: during the days of his flesh, he was, first of all, the teacher. Moreover, apart from the explanation of the significance of his death and resurrection, preserved both in the gospels and in the letters, even these momentous events would have been unbearably and tragically obscure. So central is God's speech to his own self-disclosure that when John the evangelist casts around for an encompassing way to refer to God's ultimate self-disclosure in his Son, he chooses to refer to him as 'the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh' (Jn. 1:1,14). The horseman of Rev.19 is called 'Faithful and True He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God' (19:11,13).

Of course, to establish that God is a talking God, and that his words constitute a foundational element in his gracious manifestation of himself to us, does not itself demonstrate that the Bible is the product of that active revelation, and thus itself revelation in the passive sense. Indeed, the expression 'the word of God' in the Bible has a wide range of uses. All of them presuppose that God talks, that he is not simply an impersonal 'ground of all being' or a mysterious 'other'; but the variety of uses is noteworthy. For example, 'the word of God' or 'the word of the LORD' is frequently said to 'come' to one of his prophets (*e.g.* Je. 1:2; Ezk. 30:1; Ho. 1:1; Lk. 3:2). How this 'word' or 'message' comes is usually not explained. Clearly, however, even these instances are sufficient to demonstrate that in the Bible itself 'the word of God' is not necessarily identical with Scripture.

Some who make this observation go farther and argue that it is inappropriate to speak of Scripture as the word of God. Alternatively, they hold that if 'the word of God' is used to refer to the Bible, it must be in some vague sense: the Bible's message, what God has in general terms revealed to human witnesses, or the like. It must not be used to refer to the actual words of Scripture.

But this is surely to err on the other side. Jesus can reproach his opponents for setting their tradition above 'the word of God' (Mk. 7:13), and what he has in mind is the Scripture that has already been given. If some messages from God are cast in the most general terms, a very substantial number are cast as oracles,

utterances, from God himself. Thus the prophecy of Amos modestly begins, 'The words of Amos . . .', but oracle after oracle throughout the book is prefaced by some such expression as 'This is what the LORD says' (2:6) or 'this is what the Sovereign LORD says' (3:11). Jeremiah pictures God's revelation as coming in almost dictation fashion, so that when the initial manuscript is destroyed God graciously delivers the message again (Je.30:2; 36:27–32). David insists that 'the words [the Heb. means 'words' or 'utterances', not 'promises' as in the RSV] of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times' (Ps. 12:6). When we extend our inquiry into the NT, we find writer after writer saying that 'God says' something that is found in one or another canonical book. While NT writers frequently refer to what Moses or Isaiah or someone else says (e.g. Rom. 9:29; 10:19), they can also refer to what God himself says when he addresses the writer of the OT book (e.g. Rom. 9:15,25). Moreover, they can say that 'God says' or 'the Holy Spirit' says even when quoting passages of Scripture where the OT writer is not in fact directly addressed by God (e.g. Heb. 7:21; 10:15). Sometimes a longer formula is used, e.g. 'what the Lord had said through the prophet' (Mt. 1:22); 'the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David' (Acts 1:16).

This very brief sketch of the evidence has tried to show that God has disclosed himself in many ways, but especially in verbal revelation. We have glimpsed evidence that this is tied to Scripture itself, but we have not yet probed very far in that direction. Before proceeding, there is one related element in the biblical revelation that must be briefly mentioned.

The word of human beings

Even a cursory reading of the Bible shows it is not the product of a flat divine dictation, still less something that has been handed down from heaven on golden plates. Despite its many claims to divine revelation and authority, the Bible is an astonishingly human document – or, more precisely, sixty-six astonishingly human documents. Later writers in the canon cite the earlier human authors by name, treating many of the documents as the products of well-known historical persons without for a moment hinting that this human dimension diminishes the documents' authority. Indeed, some of the allusions to OT Scripture are made with surprising informality, e.g. 'But there is a place where someone has testified' (Heb. 2:6). If we are to think clearly about how Christians should approach the Bible, then however much we affirm that the Scriptures constitute God's Word (a point still to be pressed) this decidedly human

dimension must not be overlooked.

There are a number of important implications. The Bible did not come to us in one go, but across a period of about a millennium and a half, at the hands of many human beings, the identity of some being entirely unknown. The first implication, then, is that the Bible is deeply grounded in history. The various human authors represent concrete cultures, languages, historical events, assumptions, idioms. The obvious parallel, and one to which attention has often been drawn, is the incarnation. The eternal Son, the pre-existent Word, became incarnate. He is both God and man. The classic formulation is still the best: the eternal Son became incarnate in history, two natures, one person. Jesus Christ cannot be truly perceived and believed if either his deity or his humanity is disowned or diluted. Somewhat similarly, the Bible is both divine and human in origin. It is God's revelation, and it is a human record. The message, extending to the very words, is divine, originating with the eternal God, yet it is deeply human, written in history, one book with two natures. Of course, the analogy must not be pushed too far. Jesus Christ is himself both God and man, but no-one would affirm that the Bible is itself God and man; it is never more than an instrument in the hands of a self-disclosing God. Jesus Christ is to be worshipped; the Bible itself must not be worshipped. Nevertheless, the comparison, properly restrained, is helpful if it provides us with some categories to help us understand what the Bible is, and if it encourages us to be humble as we approach the Bible. In all our probing of Scripture, we must never discard the virtue of humility – humility before the God who has so graciously accommodated himself to our needs as to disclose himself powerfully both in the Word incarnate and in the word written.

The second implication is that the revelation preserved in the Bible is not an abstract system, whether philosophical or ethical or theological. Buddhism stands or falls as a system of thought: if it could be proved that Gautama the Buddha never lived, the religion named for him would not be jeopardized. Not so Christianity. Despite the immense literary diversity in the Bible, as a whole it tells a story, and that story takes place in time and space. Despite the best efforts of some scholars to argue that biblical faith must never be made hostage to historical research, there is a profound sense in which the nature of God's gracious self-manifestation, taking place in ordinary history (however spectacular or miraculous some elements of that revelation may be), ensures that there can be no escape from historical enquiry. If Jesus Christ never lived, Christianity is destroyed; if he never died

on the cross, Christianity is destroyed; if he never rose from the dead, Christianity is destroyed. However much the ultimate object of Christian faith is God, that faith is incoherent if it affirms faith in the God of the Bible but not in the God who according to the Bible discloses himself in history that is largely accessible and testable. In short, the elements of the large-scale biblical story are essential to the integrity of the Christian message.

Thirdly, because the Bible is so compellingly human, it includes not only God's gracious self-revelation to us, but also human witness to God. The book of Acts, for instance, relates many incidents in which the apostles boldly confronted the authorities who were trying to silence them, and the unshakable confidence of these first Christians is tied to the unassailability of their conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had seen him; indeed, according to Paul, more than five hundred witnesses had seen him (1 Cor. 15). Many of the Psalms offer moving testimony as to how those who believe in the living God react to the changing circumstances and storms of life. More broadly, many people described in Scripture or writing Scripture are deeply engaged with their contemporaries. They are not mere secretaries taking down dictation. One cannot read the passion of, say, Paul in 2 Cor. 10 – 13, or the moral indignation of Amos, or the deep hurt reflected in Lamentations or Habakkuk, or the concern of Jude in the face of theological drift, or the deeply committed witness of Matthew and John, or the transparent affection of Paul in Philippians, without recognizing that the Bible depicts and was written by real people. However much they are being used to convey God's truth to later generations, they also bear witness to their deep experience of God in their own.

These three implications come together in a fourth. The human authors of the Bible, we have seen, are deeply enmeshed in history; they tell their parts of the story; they bear witness. What we discover is that the later biblical writers not only assume the historicity of the major redemptive-historical events (such as the fall, the call of Abraham and God's covenant with him, the exodus and the giving of the law, the rise of the prophets, the onset of the Davidic monarchy, the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus), but even the biblical reports of relatively minor historical events are assumed to be trustworthy. The Queen of the South visited Solomon (Mt. 12:42; Lk. 11:31–32); David ate the consecrated bread (Mk. 2:25–26), Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert (Jn. 3:14); Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:2); eight people were saved in the ark (1 Pet. 3:20); Balaam's ass spoke (2 Pet.

2:16) – to provide but a few examples. One of the most intriguing examples is found on the lips of Jesus (Mt. 22:41–46; Mk. 12:35–37). Jesus cites Ps. 110, which, according to the superscription, is a Psalm of David. The important thing to observe is that the validity of Jesus' argument here depends utterly on the assumption that the superscription is accurate. If the psalm was not written by David, then David did not speak of the Messiah as his Lord, while still referring to the 'my Lord' to whom 'the Lord' spoke. If, say, a courtier had composed the psalm, then 'my Lord' could easily be understood to refer to David himself, or to one of the monarchs who succeeded him (as many modern critics suppose). But if, with Jesus, we take the superscription to be telling the truth, some form of Messianic interpretation of the psalm is almost inevitable. In short, the historical references are not only plentiful and interlocking, but whenever later Scripture refers back to earlier examples it never breeds a suspicion that the account is misleading, ahistorical, correct only at a theological level, or the like.

Finally, granted that the Bible was written by many people over many centuries, one cannot be surprised that it comprises many literary genres. Poetry and prose, narrative and discourse, oracle and lament, parable and fable, history and theology, genealogy and apocalyptic, proverb and psalm, gospel and letter, law and Wisdom Literature, missive and sermon, couplet and epic – the Bible is made up of all of these, and more. Covenantal patterns emerge with some likeness to Hittite treaties; tables of household duties are found with startling resemblances to codes of conduct in the Hellenistic world. And these realities, a by-product of the humanness of the Bible, necessarily affect how we must approach the Bible to interpret it aright.

Scripture and canon

If we grant that God is a talking God, that his self-disclosure includes verbal revelation, and that he has frequently used human beings as his mouthpieces, we must ask, first, how we jump from what seems to be primarily a personal and oral process to public, written Scripture (the subject of this section); and secondly, how we are to conceive of the relation between what God speaks and what his human agent speaks (the subject of the next).

It is obvious that although Scripture describes God speaking through human beings, the only access we have to such phenomena during the period of history embraced by Scripture, is found in Scripture. That is presupposed, for instance, by Jesus' rhetorical question: 'Have

you not read what God said . . . ?' (Mt. 22:31). The resulting alternatives seem to be, then, that either Scripture is nothing more than a (fallible) witness to such divine verbal revelation, or nothing other than the product of such revelation. In the former case, the interpreter must sort out, to the best of his or her ability, what parts of Scripture constitute faithful witness to the God who reveals himself in deeds and words and what parts are unfaithful or unreliable witness – and to disclose the grounds on which such decisions are based. In the latter case, the Bible must be understood to be not only a faithful witness to God's gracious self-disclosure in words and deeds, but also the very embodiment of God's verbal revelation to humankind. These alternative visions as to what Scripture is will certainly affect the way we approach Scripture.

There ought to be little doubt about the way later Scripture refers to earlier Scripture; scores and scores of passages make it plain that for these writers, whatever Scripture says, God says. Such a formulation, of course, allows for Satan and all manner of evil persons to be recorded as speaking within Scripture; the contexts invariably make clear that the purpose of recording such utterances is to form part of a larger account in which God's perspective is implicitly or explicitly drawn. However, much care must be exercised to discern exactly what genre of literature is being deployed and exactly what message is being conveyed, the result is nothing other than God's mind on the matter.

Thus in Mt. 19:5, the words of Gn. 2:24, not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, are nonetheless presented as what God 'said'. God himself spoke by the mouths of the holy prophets (e.g. Lk. 1:70). If the disciples are judged foolish for failing to believe 'all that the prophets have spoken' (Lk. 24:25), the substance of what the disciples should have grasped, and which Jesus then expounds to them, is 'what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (24:27). The gospel is nothing other than what God 'promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son' (Rom. 1:2–3). The words of Scripture and the words of God are so equated that Paul can personify Scripture: 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh' (Rom. 9:16); 'The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith' (Gal. 3:8); 'But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin' (Gal. 3:22). None of these clauses makes any sense unless Paul presupposes that what Scripture says, God says. The point comes to explicit formulation in 2 Tim. 3:16: 'All Scripture [*graphē*] is God-breathed and is useful . . .'. True, the reference in this context

is to what we call OT Scripture (note the preceding verse: Timothy had known from infancy 'the holy Scriptures' [*hiera grammata*]); moreover, nothing in this passage declares the precise limits of Scripture, establishing an agreed canon. What the passage does do, however, is affirm that if a corpus of literature is included in 'Scripture', it must be judged to be 'God-breathed' (on which more below) and treated accordingly.

The same stance, according to the gospel writers, is presupposed by the Lord Jesus himself. He insisted that 'the Scripture cannot be broken' (Jn. 10:35). When he refers to Moses, Jesus is thinking of what Moses wrote, i.e. of Scripture: 'Your accuser is Moses [he said to some of his opponents], on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?' (Jn. 5:45–47). However difficult the interpretation of Mt. 5:17–20 may be, or how disputed the exact nature of the 'fulfilment', surely it is clear that when Jesus says, 'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' (Mt. 5:18), he assumes the truthfulness and reliability of 'the Law' (which in the context refers to all of Scripture: cf. 'the Law' and 'the Prophets' in 5:17; 7:12) as it is *enshrined in Scripture*. The divine authority that both Jesus and his first followers assign to Scripture constitutes the power that is presupposed by the frequently repeated formula introducing many Scripture quotations: 'It is written' (e.g. Mt. 4:4; Rom. 9:33), they said – and that was enough.

Only a scant part of the evidence has been introduced here, but it is enough to show that for Jesus and the NT writers the Scripture already in existence was not perceived as merely written witness to God's revelation; rather, such Scripture was itself simultaneously the product of human authors and the revelation of the God who talks. What Scripture said, God said. However derived its authority, what the Bible says is stamped with God's authority, for its words are God's words.

The canon of Scripture

By itself, this discussion says nothing about the extent of Scripture. To agree on the nature of Scripture still leaves open the question as to what writings constitute Scripture. What makes up the canon of Scripture and how we know this to be the case is a complex subject on which much has been written. This briefest of summaries must suffice.

1. Many have argued that the OT Scriptures were canonized (*i.e.* recognized as a closed list of writings) in three stages: first, Torah (here understood to mean what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books); secondly, the Prophets; thirdly, the Writings. The last stage, it is often argued, was not reached until the end of the first century AD, at the Council of Jamnia. Increasingly, however, it has been recognized that, so far as the canon is concerned, Jamnia did nothing more than review arguments for two of the books in the Writings (Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs) – much as Luther would later review the arguments for James. In both cases, the inherited assumption was that the writings in question did indeed belong to the canon, and the point raised was whether or not this assumption could be sustained.

2. Indirect evidence concerning the status of OT books is derived from the NT. According to Lk. 24:44; Jesus himself referred to the Scripture as ‘the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’ – traditional designation of the three divisions of the Hebrew canon, to which reference has just been made. More broadly, the NT quotes from every section and most books of the OT and treats such quotations as ‘Scripture’. Not every ancient writing was thought of as Scripture, so to treat some books as Scripture and not others presupposes that those doing the quoting are operating with a list of ‘Scripture’ books in their minds. Thus, quotations from Cleanthes in Acts 17:28, Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33, Epimenides in Tit. 1:12, or 1 Enoch in Jude 14–15 are not introduced as Scripture. Interestingly enough, no allusion to books of the Apocrypha is treated as Scripture either. Although the copies of the Septuagint (the Greek translations of the OT) that have come down to us from the fourth and fifth centuries AD include most of the apocryphal books, it is widely recognized that these manuscripts provide little evidence of what first-century Jews in Palestine thought, and may not even provide any evidence for a larger Jewish canon maintained by Jews in, say, Alexandria.

3. Obviously one cannot approach the closing of the NT canon, *i.e.* the point at which it was universally agreed there were no more books to be added to a closed list of books of authoritative Scripture, in exactly the same way, since that would entail a still later corpus to authenticate it, and so on and on in an endless regression. Even so, it is worth noting how some later documents in the NT refer to some earlier ones as ‘Scripture’ (1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:16).

4. Most important, perhaps, are a number of passages where Christ himself is made the centre of what became the NT canon. In particular, the opening verses of Hebrews contrast how

God ‘spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways’ with the manner in which ‘in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son’ (Heb. 1:1–2). The Son himself is the apex of revelation; to use the language of John, Jesus himself, as we have seen, is the ultimate ‘Word’, God’s self-expression, the Word incarnate. Thus, any notion of a NT canon immediately becomes tied to its relation to him. Certainly Jesus prepared his small band of apostles for the increased measure of understanding that would come to them in the wake of his resurrection and the descent of the Spirit (Jn. 14:26; 16:12–15). Certainly, too, there is evidence that, although the twelve apostles and Paul could and did make mistakes (*e.g.* Gal. 2:11–14), they could on occasion be so conscious that what they were writing was nothing less than the Lord’s command that even NT prophets who questioned them at that point were to be regarded as beyond the pale (1 Cor. 14:37–38).

5. Some have given the entirely false impression that the early church took an inordinately long time to recognize the authority of the NT documents. In fact it is vital to distinguish the recognition of the authority of these documents from a universal recognition as to the content of a closed list of NT documents. The NT books were circulating a long time before the latter happened, most of them accepted everywhere as divinely authoritative, and all of them accepted in at least large parts of the church. Most of the NT documents are cited as authorities very early indeed; this includes the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline letters, 1 Peter and 1 John. Most of the rest of the contours of the NT canon were well in place by the time of Eusebius, in the early fourth century.

6. The criteria by which the early church agreed that certain books were authoritative were basically three. First, the church Fathers looked for apostolicity, *i.e.* a document had to be written by an apostle or by someone in immediate contact with the apostles. Thus Mark was understood to have the witness of Peter behind him; Luke was connected with Paul. As soon as the Fathers discussed the possibility, they rejected any document under the suspicion of pseudonymity (written by someone other than the claimed author). Secondly, a basic requirement for canonicity was conformity to the ‘rule of faith’, *i.e.* to basic, orthodox Christianity recognized as normative in the churches. Thirdly, and scarcely less important, the document had to have enjoyed widespread and continuous usage by the churches. Incidentally, this criterion requires the passage of time to be useful, and helps to explain why so much time elapsed before the ‘closing’ of the canon (*i.e.*

before the church had almost universally agreed on the status of all twenty-seven NT documents). One of the reasons Hebrews was not accepted in the West as early as some letters was that it was anonymous (not pseudonymous!), and in fact it was more quickly accepted in the East where many (wrongly) thought it to have been written by Paul.

7. Perhaps the most important thing to recognize is that although there was no ecclesiastical machinery or hierarchy, akin to the medieval papacy, to enforce decisions, eventually almost all of the universal church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books. In other words, this was not so much 'official' recognition as the people of God in many different places coming to recognize what other believers elsewhere had also found to be true. The point must be constantly emphasized. 'The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level' (Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* [Harper & Row, 1969], p. 29).

The Church, then, did not confer a certain status on documents that would otherwise have lacked it, as if the church were an institution with authority independent of the Scriptures or in tandem to the Scriptures. Rather, the NT documents were Scripture because of what God had revealed; the church, providentially led, came to wide recognition of what God had done in his climactic self-disclosure in his Son and in the documents that bore witness to and gathered up the strands of the Son-revelation.

Inspiration and authority

If the Scriptures are simultaneously God's verbal revelation and the product of human hands, we must ask for at least some account of the relation between the two. For at least the past several hundred years, the term that has been most commonly used in this connection is 'inspiration'. Like 'Trinity', the word 'inspiration' is not a biblical word but summarizes some important facets of biblical truth. Inspiration is normally defined (at least in Protestant circles)

as that supernatural work of God's Holy Spirit upon the human authors of Scripture such that what they wrote was precisely what God intended them to write in order to communicate his truth.

Some observations on this definition will clarify it, signal its usefulness and defend it against common misinterpretations.

1. The definition speaks both of God's action, by his Spirit, in the human author and of the nature of the resulting text. This double emphasis is an attempt to capture two elements demonstrably present in the Bible's summary of what is taking place. On the one hand, we are told that 'no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation' (presumably a private interpretation of the way things are); indeed, 'prophecy [clearly, in context, the prophecy that constitutes Scripture] never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet. 1:20-21). On the other hand, not only are the human authors of Scripture 'carried along by the Holy Spirit', but the resulting Scripture is 'God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3:16). The Greek expression might well be rendered 'breathed out by God'. The striking point is that it is Scripture, the text, that is so described, not the human author. If we choose to use the word 'inspired' instead of 'God-breathed', then we must say (according to this passage) that it is the text that is inspired, not the human authors. Alternatively, if we attach the term 'inspired' to the fact that the human authors were 'carried along by the Holy Spirit', then the authors of Scripture were inspired. In any case, the wording of the definition is designed to embrace both the work of the Spirit in the human author and the resulting status of the text of Scripture.

2. There is nothing in the definition that lays down a particular mode of inspiration. Doubtless inspiration may operate through some abnormal state of the human mind, e.g. a vision, a trance-like dream, hearing voices and much else. But there is nothing in the definition that requires such phenomena; indeed, judging by the text of Scripture, it is far from clear that all of the biblical writers were always self-consciously aware that what they were writing was canonical Scripture. Nor is there any reason to depreciate Luke's description of his work, characterized by research and careful sifting of sources (Lk. 1:1-4). In fact, the term 'inspiration' is not much more than a convenient label to attach to the process whereby God has brought about the existence of the Scriptures as they have been described in the previous pages: verbal revelation and historical witness, words of human beings and words of God, the truth

that God chose to communicate and the particular forms of individual human authors.

3. It is important to distinguish this use of 'inspiration' from two other uses. The first springs from the contemporary world of art. We speak of composers, writers, painters, sculptors, musicians and others being 'inspired'. If we stop to think about this usage at all, we might suppose that these people have been 'inspired' by the Muse; the more theologically inclined might assign the 'inspiration' to God's 'common grace'. Apart from such reflection, we do not mean very much more than that their work is excellent, the elite from the first class. In consequence we might conclude that their work is 'inspiring', *i.e.* it makes those who gaze at it lift their horizons a little, or attempt something new, or otherwise find themselves ennobled. Such use is not normally taken to mean that the Sovereign God has thereby communicated his truth in permanent form to his covenant people.

The second use of 'inspiration' with which our definition must not be confused is that found in the usage of the church Fathers. It has often been noticed that 'inspiration' never functions among the Fathers as a criterion for canonicity. This is not because the Fathers do not think the Scriptures are inspired, for in fact they do; rather, it is because in their usage inspiration is not something that attaches exclusively to Scripture. Thus in a sermon Eusebius attributes to Emperor Constantine (whether or not this attribution is correct), the preacher begins, 'May the mighty inspiration of the Father and of his Son . . . be with me in speaking these things'. In one of his letters to Jerome, Augustine goes so far as to say that Jerome writes under the dictation of the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa can use the same word translated 'God-breathed' ('inspired') in 2 Timothy to refer to his brother Basil's commentary on the six days of creation. In short, a number of Fathers use a variety of expressions, including 'inspiration', to lump together what many theologians today would separate into the two categories 'inspiration' and 'illumination'. The latter acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in the mind of countless believers, not least preachers, Christian writers and teachers, but denies to their thoughts and words and writings the kind of universal authority that is binding on all Christians everywhere and that is today connected with the word 'inspiration'. Implicitly, of course, the Fathers make the same sort of distinction (even if their categories are different) insofar as they recognize only certain documents as canonical, *i.e.* a closed list of Scriptures with binding authority on the entire church.

For our purposes, then, 'inspiration' will not

be used as in the world of art, or as in the Fathers, but in the theological sense it has acquired during the past several centuries.

4. A number of writers attempt to weaken 'inspiration' as here defined by pointing out, rightly, that a passage such as 2 Tim. 3:16-17 tells us the purpose of such God-breathed Scripture: it is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' If this is its purpose, they argue, then it is futile to link inspiration with truthfulness and authority. In fact, this is an error of categories. It is important to distinguish the *mode* of revelation (dream, vision, dictation *etc.*) from the *manner* of inspiration (the employment of various literary techniques and genres) from the *result* of inspiration (what Scripture says, God says) and the *purpose* of inspiration (to make us wise unto salvation).

5. Many attempt to weaken the authority of Scripture implicit in the account given here by one of several paths. Only a few can be mentioned. First, it has been argued that one must create a doctrine of Scripture not only out of passages where Scripture assesses Scripture, but out of the allegedly unyielding difficulties where Scripture actually cites Scripture in ways that on first reading are quite astonishing. Certainly the two approaches must go hand in hand. In practice, however, those who begin with the second usually do not take the first very seriously; those who begin with the first, if they are careful, usually uncover valid exegetical and theological reasons for the peculiar phenomena themselves. A variation on this argument insists that the Bible presents such different pictures of, say, God, that it is futile to speak of 'biblical' theology or 'biblical Christianity'. The Bible, according to this argument, embraces competing theologies and reflects different and mutually contradictory streams of Christianity. How can any book be said to be inspired and authoritative that forbids the wearing of clothes made from more than one kind of fabric (Lv. 19:19)? But such works, it must be gently said, while scoring well amongst popular audiences and convinced, sceptics, simply do not engage with the best confessional literature. For example, the question about the different fabrics, not uncommon in the literature, is pressed forward as if no-one has ever thought seriously about the ways in which covenantal stipulations of the OT are to be applied to believers living under a new covenant.

Secondly, many argue that a necessary result of God's gracious accommodation of himself to human speech is the introduction of error. To err is human; the biblical documents are human, therefore they must prove as unreliable as

human beings are. But not only does such an assessment of Scripture fly in the face of the conviction of Jesus and of the NT writers, it depends on a fraying logic. Doubtless it is true that this side of the fall 'to err is human'; that does not mean that to be human is necessarily to err on every occasion and in every utterance. That the sovereign, transcendent God has graciously accommodated himself to human speech is a wonderful truth. But it is this accommodated speech which is then described as the word or words of God that are 'flawless' (Ps. 12:6) and treated by Jesus himself as the Scripture that cannot be broken.

Thirdly, traditional Roman Catholics, while holding to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, deny that the Bible is sufficient as a rule of faith and practice. Before the written word came the oral tradition, and this tradition continues alongside the written word in the magisterial office of the Roman Church. The effects are substantial; a doctrine such as the immaculate conception of Mary, not taught in Scripture, can be set forth as something that all loyal Catholics must believe. Conversely, doctrines that most non-Catholics find in the Scriptures may be set aside or trimmed on the church's authority. The issues are too complex to broach here.

Fourthly, in a manner that characteristically goes beyond anything that Karl Barth, the father of neo-orthodoxy, would have espoused, some neo-orthodox theologians insist that the Bible, so far as its form is concerned, is simply one more religious book, albeit an important one, and therefore not itself immune from errors large and small. It is not truth in the sense that what it says, God says. Rather, the Bible is truth insofar as God works through it to disclose himself to individuals. It becomes the word of God whenever the Holy Spirit illumines it to the individual. Thus inspiration and illumination are again confused; or, more exactly, the former is swallowed up by the latter. Certainly neo-orthodoxy was right to protest against a dead 'word' that neither transformed nor gave life to individuals. But its solution is too drastic and ends up denying what Jesus and the earliest believers understood the Scripture to be.

Fifthly, various forms of classic liberalism simply deny any special status to the Scripture. In its most virulent form, this view denies the existence of a personal/transcendent God who invades history. Supernaturalism is assumed to be impossible; God is reduced to the proportions of deism or pantheism. The religion of the Bible must be studied in the framework of discussion about any or all other religions, and in no other framework. A thoughtful response to this vision of reality would take us far beyond

the scope of this article. What is clear, however, is that this vision quickly domesticates Scripture and ends up imposing some current ideas on the Bible. In the end, the dispute turns not simply on the nature of the Bible, but on the nature and character of God.

Finally, the rise of the 'new hermeneutic' has encouraged many thinkers simply to sidestep the debate over the locus of revelation and authority. But since this view is integrally tied to questions about how the Bible is to be interpreted, brief discussion can await the next section.

Final reflections

Some might object that this entire presentation is hopelessly circular. If we begin with our views of God, and from this perspective start to think our way towards the nature of the Bible, we must pause and admit that our views of God are (in the Christian perspective) drawn from the Bible. If we begin instead with, say, Jesus' assessment of the authority of Scripture, that assessment is itself drawn from Scripture. The entire project of constructing a doctrine of Scripture is deeply flawed.

This charge touches on some of the most complex questions about how we come to 'know' things, and whether they are 'true'. Although these questions cannot be probed very effectively here, a few comments may be helpful to some.

First, there is a profound sense in which all human thought (except perhaps that which is bounded by agreed rules of logic and built on defined values, like most branches of mathematics) is circular in some sense. We are finite creatures; without the faculty of omniscience we have no absolutely certain base on which to build. The Christian's claim is that God himself, who does enjoy perfect knowledge, provides that basis for us – but that, of course, means the basis itself must be taken (so far as finite creatures are concerned) on faith. In this view, 'faith' is not some subjectively constrained opinion to be put over against some other 'faith', but a God-given ability to perceive at least a little of God and his truth and to trust him accordingly. This is not to deny for a moment that all kinds of arguments can be advanced to justify Christian belief, including belief about God and the Bible. Rather, it is to admit that such arguments will not prove convincing to everyone.

Secondly, although we admit that the argument is in some measure circular, and insist that almost all human thought is in some measure circular, that is not to suggest that the circularity is intrinsically false. We do not turn to the Bible for certain proof about the nature of the Bible; rather, we turn to it for information. If

the Bible made no claims about the nature of the Bible, we would have less reason for holding to the doctrine of Scripture outlined here. To go further, informed Christians may want to argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of Scripture, but they will not want to argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of their doctrine of Scripture. Methodologically speaking, they proceed with the creation of a doctrine of Scripture exactly the same way they proceed with the creation of a doctrine of Christ. Both are subject to revision as more light breaks from God's gracious self-disclosure, as already given in the Scriptures.

Thirdly, thoughtful Christians will be the first to admit that there are unknowns and difficulties in the formulation of a responsible doctrine of Scripture. But this does not daunt us; the same could be said for almost any biblical doctrine: the nature of God, the heart of the atonement, the work of the Spirit, the resurrection from the dead. This does not mean that nothing true can be said about such matters; it means, rather, that since all of them have to do with a personal/transcendent God who cannot possibly be exhaustively known by finite and rebellious creatures, there will inevitably remain mysteries and areas of hiddenness.

Fourthly, we must not underestimate the impact of sin on our ability to think through these matters clearly. A substantial element in our original fall was the unbridled lust for self-sufficiency, for independent knowledge. We wanted to be the centre of the universe – and that is the heart of all idolatry. Jn. 8:45 reports Jesus addressing his opponents in these shocking words: 'Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me!' If it is the truth itself that ensures our unbelief, how deep and tragic and abominable is our lostness. Small wonder, then, that God does not present himself to us in such a way that we may feel we can control him. Those who demand signs of Jesus are firmly rebuked, for he knows that to give in to such demands would be to submit to the agenda of others. He would quickly be domesticated, nothing more than a magical, spiritual genie.

For the same reason the wisdom of the world – systems of thought that provide nicely packaged explanations of everything – cannot possibly come to grips with the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18–31). When God speaks from heaven, there will always be some who hear only thunder (Jn. 12:29). In the same way, God's gracious self-disclosure in Scripture can never be adequately assessed by those who insist on being independent knowers: for God to structure his revelation to accommodate such a desire would be to foster the sin from which the gospel frees us. God in his great mercy refuses

to pander to our unlimited lust to be gods. He has ensured that his own self-disclosure should be abundantly clear to those who by grace have eyes to see and ears to hear, but can never be as rigorously self-evident as a mathematical theorem where human beings control all the definitions and the rules of the relationships.

We walk by faith, and not by sight.

How to interpret the Bible

The changing face of hermeneutics

When Paul tells Timothy to strive to be someone who 'correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15), the assumption is that it is dangerously possible to be someone who does not correctly handle the word of truth. And that raises important questions about how to interpret the Bible. To approach the Bible wisely it is necessary not only to know what it is, but how to handle it.

'Hermeneutics' is the term that has traditionally been applied to the interpretation of texts. But hermeneutics itself has recently gone through such major changes that it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which the discipline of interpretation has changed. We may discern three stages (though all of them overlap towards the end).

First, hermeneutics was once understood to be the science and art of biblical interpretation: science, because there were some important rules and principles that could be applied to the task, and art, because there were many calls for mature judgment borne of experience and competence. The task of the interpreter was to understand what the text said, and it was assumed that if two interpreters of equal competence understood the rules of interpretation well enough, then in the overwhelming majority of cases their grasp of what a passage says would coincide. In this vision of hermeneutics, a great deal of attention is paid to grammar, parables and other literary genres, principles for studying words, how to relate biblical themes and the like.

Secondly, 'hermeneutics' was increasingly used to refer to the deployment of an array of literary-critical 'tools': source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, and, more recently, various forms of narrative criticism. Although some gains were made by such approaches, there were also losses: much of the purpose of these techniques was to reconstruct the history and belief-structure of particular believing communities behind the

text, rather than to listen to the message of the text.

Both of these approaches have largely been eclipsed in importance by a third wave, the 'new hermeneutic'. Here the important insight that human beings bring their own biases and limitations to the interpretative task is raised to a controlling pitch in the discussion. At one level this observation is entirely salutary. We inevitably bring our own interpretative 'grids' with us; there is no such thing as a totally open mind. The new hermeneutic reminds us that the authority of Scripture must not be transferred to the authority of the interpreter, that we invariably fit new pieces of information into already established 'grids' in our minds (which are mixtures of sense and nonsense), that some of what we think is true doubtless needs to be modified or corrected or abandoned, that we have more to learn, that our frameworks of understanding are separated from the human writers of Scripture by barriers of time, geography, language and culture.

But at the same time, many proponents of the new hermeneutic overstep the mark. They argue that since each person's interpretation will differ in some measure from every other person's interpretation, we cannot legitimately speak of the meaning of the text (as if it were something objective). Meaning, they argue, resides not in the text but in the readers, the interpreters, of the text. If different interpretations are legitimate, then one cannot speak of the correct interpretation or the true interpretation; such expressions, they think, dissolve into affirmations of personal preference. If no single interpretation is right, then either all interpretations are equally meaningless (which leads to the hermeneutical nihilism known as 'deconstructionism') or all are equally 'right' - *i.e.* all are good or bad insofar as they are satisfying, or meet the needs of a particular person or community or culture, or meet certain arbitrary criteria. In this vein, these proponents of the new hermeneutic foster different 'readings' of Scripture: a sub-Saharan Black African reading, a liberation theology reading, a feminist reading, a white Anglo-Saxon male Protestant reading, a 'gay' reading, and so forth. Aligned with the powerful respect contemporary western culture assigns to pluralism, this new hermeneutic rules no interpretation invalid except that one which claims it is right and that others are invalid.

The issues surrounding the new hermeneutic are so complex that they cannot satisfactorily be handled here. It is important to recognize that this approach to understanding governs much of the agenda not only in contemporary biblical interpretation but also in the disciplines of

history, literature, politics and much else beside. Despite its many valuable insights, the new hermeneutic must be challenged on many fronts. Intuitively, there is something weak about a theory that propounds the relativity of all knowledge gleaned from reading, while producing countless books that insist on the rightness of this view. To insist that all meaning lies with the knower and not with the text, and then to write texts to prove the point, is almost unimaginably self-contradictory. Worse, the theory in this form assumes that the author's intent is not reliably expressed in the text. It erects an impenetrable barrier between the author and the reader and calls it 'text'. The irony is that these ideas are written by authors who expect their readers to understand what they say, authors who write what they mean and hope that their readers will be persuaded by their reasoning. It is devoutly to be wished that such authors would extend the same courtesy to Moses, Isaiah and Paul.

Even if finite human beings may not attain an exhaustive knowledge of a text (or of anything else for that matter), it is difficult to see why they cannot gain true knowledge. Moreover, the fact of our differences is easier to absorb against the background of our common heritage; all of us have been made in the image of God, who alone enjoys perfect and exhaustive knowledge. To suppose that we can attain knowledge in every way like his would be idolatrous, but that is no reason to think that we cannot gain objective knowledge at all.

Indeed, there are ways of thinking about the acquisition of understanding from a text that help us see a little of how the process works. Doubtless a reader may be largely controlled by personal biases and rigid agendas when first approaching the Scriptures (the text that concerns us here), and thus 'find' in the text all kinds of things the author (and the Author) did not intend to place there; or, alternatively, he or she may not see many of the things that are in fact there. The total mental baggage of the reader, what moderns often call the reader's 'horizon of understanding', may be so far removed from the horizon of understanding of the author as expressed in the text that very great distortions occur. But it is possible that the reader will read and re-read the text, learn something of the language and culture of the authors, discover what elements of his or her own 'baggage' must be jettisoned, and gradually 'fuse' his or her horizon of understanding with that of the text (to use the current jargon). Others speak of the 'hermeneutical spiral': the interpreter 'spirals in' on the meaning of the text.

If the new hermeneutic is treated in this fashion, there are considerable gains that can

come to the church. It reminds us that God's verbal revelation to us in the Scripture not only comes to us clothed in the language and idiom of particular historical cultures, but that to improve our understanding of the objective truth that is there disclosed it is necessary to think our way back into those cultures, so far as this is possible, to minimize the dangers of interpretative distortion. It reminds us that even if an individual interpreter gains some real, objective understanding of the text, none will understand it exhaustively, and other interpreters may bring to light content that is genuinely there in the text and that we ourselves have missed. For instance, believers in Africa might be quicker to detect Pauline metaphors for the corporate character of the church, while many in the West will find it harder to see them owing to their heritage of individualism. Christians need each other; this is as true in the hermeneutical arena as elsewhere. Provided there is a shared deep commitment to submit to the authority of God's revelation, and not the passing fads and agendas (academic and otherwise) of those who want to pass judgment on Scripture, the recognition that none of us knows it all encourages humility and willingness to listen and learn.

Indeed, properly applied, some of the insights of the new hermeneutic remind us that human beings bring enormous cultural and conceptual baggage to the Scriptures they claim to interpret, and that this fact, allied with the Bible's insistence that our sin and idolatrous self-focus drive us away from the light (*e.g.* Jn. 3:19–20), may send us to our knees in the belated recognition that the interpretation of God's word is not merely an intellectual discipline, but turns also on moral and spiritual bearings. In the Bible's view of the relation between God and his people, we need the help of God's Holy Spirit to understand the truth as much as we need his help to do the truth. However that help may be mediated to us, the aim of thoughtful Christians, after all, is not so much to become masters of Scripture, but to be mastered by it, both for God's glory and his people's good.

Some introductory principles of biblical interpretation

What follows is a selection of principles of interpretation, for those who hold that a proper approach to the Bible includes not only some appreciation for what the Bible is, but some care in how to read it and understand it.

The priority of the original languages of the Bible

The original languages take precedence. This is a corollary of the fact that this revelation took

place through specific individuals at concrete historical junctures in real and time-specific human languages. True, linguistics has amply demonstrated that anything that can be said in one language can be translated into any other language. But it has also demonstrated that not all of the meaning of the donor language can be conveyed at the same time and in the same amount of space. Moreover, all translation involves interpretation; translation is not a mechanical discipline. Thus to approach as closely as possible to the intention of the author as expressed in a text it is best to interpose as few intermediary interpretations as possible. Of course, if one does not know the original languages one will be grateful for the translations; moreover a poor interpreter who knows the original languages may make more interpretative errors than many translations, the best of which have been undertaken by competent people. But all things being equal, the point, though intuitively obvious, needs repeating.

For the busy preacher or Bible teacher, this observation has two practical implications. First, if the main point of a sermon or lesson turns on the peculiar mode of expression in just one translation, in most cases it is not the major point of the passage, and may not be justified at all. Secondly, the first priority in commentaries and other interpretative helps should be to reflect work in the original languages, even if the presentation (as in this one-volume commentary) is geared for readers who enjoy no technical expertise.

Some words on words

Word studies, important as they are in their own right, must be undertaken with some care, and never in isolation from larger questions about the way words are used in phrases, sentences, discourses, particular genres. Lexica (dictionaries written in English that treat the words of the original languages) can provide the range of meanings that various scholars have identified (insofar as those scholars are right!), but within certain limitations the most important factor in the determination of the meaning of a word is its use in a specific context. To plump for a meaning associated with the word's etymology is often misleading (just as it is entirely unhelpful to recognize that 'pineapple' comes from 'pine' and 'apple'); the only time when etymology becomes a cautious priority occurs when a word crops up so infrequently and in such ambiguous contexts that there is no other recourse. To try to build up an entire theology based on a single word and its use is a doubtful enterprise; to preach 'reverse etymology', where the meaning of a word is affirmed to be something like later developments of that

word or its cognates (such as the assertion that *dynamis*, 'power', properly calls to mind 'dynamite' – which had not been invented when the NT writers penned their books) is anachronistic at best, ridiculous at worst. Moreover, to try to import the word's entire semantic range into every occurrence (as in the Amplified Bible) is to fail to understand how language works.

Despite the warnings, careful exegesis will be much interested in how words are used by specific biblical authors, and in other biblical books. Just as the meaning of sentences and discourses shapes the meaning of words, so the meaning of words shapes the sentence and discourse; in language, everything holds together. It is valuable to try to find out what the underlying Hebrew and Greek words behind many words in our English Bibles mean, not least words that have traditionally borne a great deal of theological weight, e.g. atonement, Messiah (Christ), truth, apostle, sin, head, resurrection, spirit, flesh, law and countless more. Even if a person's study merely confirms what some secondary sources say, the discipline itself is valuable. It not only provides a degree of familiarity with the Scripture that cannot easily be gained otherwise, but it reminds the Christian that God himself has chosen to disclose himself in discourse, sentences and words.

The importance of becoming a good reader

It is essential to develop literary sensitivity – or, to put it another way, to become a good reader.

At the micro level, countless literary devices serve as pointers for the alert reader. 'Inclusions' begin and end a section with similar or even identical words in order to underline the importance of certain themes. Thus the beatitudes in Mt. 5:3–10 begin and end with the same reward ('for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'), thereby establishing that the beatitudes are setting forth the norms of the kingdom. The body of the Sermon on the Mount opens with the words, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets' (Mt. 5:17), and ends with 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (Mt. 7:12). This 'inclusion' suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is, amongst other things, an exposition of the OT Scriptures ('the Law and the Prophets') in the light of Jesus' coming and ministry, his commitment to 'fulfil' them and what this will mean in the lives of his followers. Hebrew poetry is much less interested in rhyme and even in rhythm than in parallelism of various sorts. (See also the article Poetry in the Bible). In Ps. 73:21–22:

'When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you',

the second line repeats the content of the first, if in other words; the fourth does the same for the third. These are instances of synonymous parallelism. Lines 3–4 take the thought on from lines 1–2; this is step parallelism. Elsewhere one finds antithetic parallelism, (as in Pr. 14:31.)

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt
for their Maker but whoever is kind to the
poor honours God.

There are of course far more complex structures of parallelism. There are also chiasms, where two or more lines work into the centre and then work out again. These can be very elementary, or complex ones such as in Mt. 13:

- 1 the parable of the soils (13:3b–9)
- 2 interlude (13:10–23)
 - (a) on understanding parables (13:10–17)
 - (b) interp. of the parables of the soils (13:18–23)
- 3 the parable of the weeds (13:24–30)
- 4 the parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32)
- 5 the parable of the yeast (13:33)
- Pause (13:34–43)
 - parables as fulfilment of prophecy (13:34–35)
 - interp. of the parable of the weeds (13:36–43)
- 5' parable of the hidden treasure (13:44)
- 4' the parable of the expensive pearl (13:45–46)
- 3' the parable of the net (13:47–48)
- 2' interlude (13:49–51)
 - (b') interpretation of the parable of the net (13:49–50)
 - (a') on understanding parables (13:51)
- 1' the parable of the teacher of the law (13:52)

It must be conceded that chiasms are sometimes rather more in the eye of the beholder than in the text. If the elements become too complex, or the parallels decidedly forced, one may reasonably ask whether a chiasm is really present. On the other hand, some interpreters, burdened by long lists of unconvincing chiasms, dismiss too easily chiasms that are really there. It has often been shown that those who spoke Semitic languages commonly framed chiasms as part of their speech patterns, so one should not become too sceptical. Certainly, there are many borderline cases; indeed, many expositors will be unper-suaded by the example just provided. So

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perhaps it is worth venturing a slightly simpler example, this one based on Mt. 23:13-32:

- 1 First woe (13) – failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah
- 2 Second woe (15) – superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good
- 3 Third woe (16-22) – misguided use of Scripture
- 4 Fourth woe (23-24) – fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture
- 3' Fifth woe (25-26) – misguided use of Scripture
- 2' Sixth woe (27-28) – superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good
- 1' Seventh woe (29-32) – heirs of those who failed to recognize the prophets.

What this chiasm accomplishes, of course, is to drive the reader's focus to the centre – the fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture, a major theme in Matthew's gospel.

Still more important, perhaps, is the ability to understand how larger structures work, and especially the nature of literary genre. Wisdom Literature is not law; to read, say, Proverbs, as if it offered judgments in case law, is to make it ludicrous (compare Pr. 26:4 and 26:5). In the NT the word 'parable' can refer to a proverb (Lk. 4:23), a profound or obscure saying (Mk. 13:35), a nonverbal image or symbol (Heb. 9:9; 11:19), an illustrative or suggestive comparison, whether without the form of a story (Mt. 15:15; 24:32) or with a story (Mt. 13:3-9 – the so-called 'narrative' parables). Many treatments of parables think only of narrative parables, not least because they are so plentiful in the first three gospels, and draw up principles for the interpretation of (such) parables. Certainly all agree that in the case of narrative parables we need not ask if the story that is told really happened.

In the same way, we must ask how apocalyptic is to be understood, what a 'gospel' is, how letters functioned in the first century. Jehoash told a fable (2 Ki. 14:9); is the modern critic right when the book of Jonah is designated a 'fable'? No, this is a mistake of literary category. A fable tells a story of animals or other non-human, natural life-forms in order to draw a moral; it does not intermingle with human beings. The effort of Jehoash qualifies; the book of Jonah does not. With increased information we may ask what 'midrash' and other first-century literary categories meant. All Bible students will wrestle with the meaning of passages such as Gal. 4:24-31. The point is that truth is conveyed in different ways in different literary genres. The person who thinks Jeremiah is speaking literally in Je. 20:14-18 will have some very difficult things to explain. It would be

better to hear the particular outrage of lament.

Above all, good reading goes with the flow. Although it is always worth meditating on individual words and phrases (especially in discourse), even so the meaning of those words is shaped by their context. Good readers will diligently strive to make sense of the flow of the argument. (The exception occurs when there are lists of, say, proverbs – but even many of these are thematically arranged.) This is no less true in narrative than in discourse. Many casual readers of the gospels think of them as more or less disjointed accounts. Closer reading discloses themes interwoven with other themes. One might ask, for example, how Lk. 10:38 – 11:13 is tied together. Re-reading shows that these verses gather up some analysis of why there is so little prayerfulness and what is today called spirituality: a distortion of priorities and values (10:38-42); a lack of knowledge and of good models (11:1-4); and a want of assurance and persistence (11:5-13). Similarly, this entire section of Luke makes its own contribution to the larger flow of his text.

Immediate and more distant contexts

Generally speaking the immediate context takes precedence over both the distant context and merely formal parallels. For instance, in Mt. 6:7 Jesus warns his followers not to 'keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words'; in Lk. 18:1-8 Jesus tells his disciples a parable 'to show them that they should always pray and not give up'. It will not do to reduce the impact of one of these passages by citing the other. The prohibition in Matthew makes good sense in its context; the saying confronts religion that is merely formal, or that thinks it can wrest advantages from God by trying harder. With his well-known interest in prayer, Luke reports far more of Jesus' prayer life, and in ch.18 reports some of his teaching designed to trim the sails of those whose piety is neither passionate nor persistent.

Of the many interpretations of Jn. 3:5, where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born 'of water and the Spirit' if he is to inherit the kingdom of God, one of the most popular is achieved by bringing Tit. 3:5-6 to bear, which speaks of 'God our Saviour' saving us 'through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour'. That there are conceptual and verbal parallels no-one will deny. Still, Jn.3:5 was not only penned by another author, but attributed to Jesus during the days of his flesh. More importantly, in the immediate context Nicodemus is reproached for not understanding what Jesus is talking about (3:10), presumably on the grounds that, as a

revered teacher of Scripture, he should have known what Scripture said. A combination of these and other factors lead many commentators, rightly, to see a reference in Jn. 3:5 to the anticipated fulfilment of Ezk. 36:25–27. This is in line with the expectation that Jesus would perform Spirit-baptism, a point already articulated in this gospel (Jn. 1:26–33).

Of course, any text is surrounded by expanding concentric circles of context. How large a context should be appealed to at any point is not a matter about which it is easy to legislate. Certainly word studies should begin within the text (how does Mark, say, use a term, before asking how Luke, Paul, the NT, and ultimately the Hellenistic world use the term).

Some contextual markers are important in moving from chapter to chapter. For example, although according to Matthew the opening words of ministry ascribed to John the Baptist and to Jesus respectively are identical ('Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'; Mt. 3:2; 4:17), their immediate contexts give the two sayings a quite different shade. The utterance of the Baptist is cast within the shadow of the words from Isaiah that show the Baptist was preparing the way for another; the words of Jesus are cast within the shadow of words from Isaiah that show Jesus was fulfilling the promise to bring light to the Gentiles. Thus John the Baptist is primarily announcing the impending arrival of the kingdom of heaven; Jesus is announcing its inauguration. That is consistent with themes throughout Matthew (and the synoptics, for that matter). At the same time, in other cases it is helpful to link themes and technical expressions to many different spots throughout the canon – but more of this below.

The role of the 'analogy of the faith'

The appeal to the 'analogy of the faith', though helpful, must be exercised with some caution. As used in Protestant theology, this appeal argues that, if any passage is ambiguous, it should be interpreted in line with the great 'givens' of biblical Christianity; it should never be interpreted in such a way as to jeopardize those givens. At one level this is surely sound advice, granted that God's mind ultimately stands behind all the Scriptures. Nevertheless, there are several dangers inherent in a thoughtless application of the analogy of the faith. First, the interpreter may succumb to anachronism. God did not provide his people with all of the Bible all at once. There is a progression to his revelation, and to read the whole back into some early part may seriously distort that part, so that its true significance in the flow of redemptive history is obscured. For example, to read a full-blown Pauline doctrine of the Ho-

ly Spirit into every passage where 'Spirit' occurs in, say, the Psalms, will certainly generate some interpretative blunders.

Secondly, the interpreter's theological grasp, his or her 'systematic theology' (for all of us who read and teach Scripture develop certain syntheses, whether we call them 'systematic theology' or not), may be faulty at many points, but it may be very difficult to spot the faults. The reason is that this synthesis, this systematic theology, itself becomes a controlling grid by which to interpret Scripture, under the guise of serving as the analogy of the faith.

Thirdly, many Christians develop favourite passages of Scripture, and these become a kind of 'canon within the canon' that serves as the touchstone by which to handle other passages. This inner canon becomes, for such Christians, the best summary of 'the faith'. This can lead, for instance, to some fairly bizarre reading of Jas. 2:14–26 on the ground that Paul in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 apparently says something rather different, and Paul's perspective is given automatic priority.

The value of historical and archaeological background information

Because there are so many historical referents in the biblical text, it is entirely proper to seek relevant background information where such information would be shared by the human author and the first readers. This, too, is a function of the fact that the Bible is historically conditioned. When Isaiah writes, 'In the year that King Uzziah died . . .' it is very helpful to find out what Kings and Chronicles says about Uzziah, for it contributes to our understanding of what Isaiah is saying – and after all the same sort of information was presumably available (if not exactly in that form) to both Isaiah and his first readers. A fair bit of nonsense has been written about the exalted Christ's words to the Laodiceans: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!' (Rev. 3:15). Many have argued that this means God prefers people who are 'spiritually cold' above those who are 'spiritually lukewarm', even though his first preference is for those who are 'spiritually hot'. Ingenious explanations are then offered to defend the proposition that spiritual coldness is a superior state to spiritual lukewarmness.

All of this can comfortably be abandoned once responsible archaeology has made its contribution. Laodicea shared the Lycus valley with two other cities mentioned in the NT. Colosse was the only one that enjoyed fresh, cold, spring water; Hierapolis was known for its hot springs and became a place to which people would resort to enjoy these healing baths. By

contrast, Laodicea put up with water that was neither cold and useful, nor hot and useful; it was lukewarm, loaded with chemicals, and with an international reputation for being nauseating. That brings us to Jesus' assessment of the Christians there: they were not useful in any sense, they were simply disgusting, so nauseating he would vomit them away. The interpretation would be clear enough to anyone living in the Lycus valley in the first century; it takes a bit of background information to make the point clear today. Similarly, knowledge of certain ancient social patterns can shed a great deal of light on some passages, such as the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins (Mt. 25:1-13).

When interpreters and translators ask themselves how the first readers would have understood a passage, they are not asking a merely hypothetical question impossible to answer (since we have no access to their minds). Rather, this is simply a way of getting at a host of subsidiary questions: How would these words have been understood at the time? What issues and themes were of resounding importance? What kind of conceptual framework would the biblical text confront? To raise such question is not to affirm that we can always find perfect answers. Sometimes we can infer responsible answers by 'mirror-reading' the text itself. It is obvious, for instance, that Paul is opposing certain people in his letter to the Galatians, and some things about those opponents are reasonably clear. Sometimes the evidence is more difficult, but still worth pondering. For example, however powerfully 1 John may be applied to a modern congregation, in the first instance it was designed to offer assurance to believers at the end of the first century who were suffering various forms of doubt owing in part to the recent departure of some schismatic group (1 Jn. 2:19). If we conclude that this group embraced some form of proto-Gnosticism (about which we know a fair bit from extra-biblical sources), a number of other things in the letter become clear.

None of this endangers the Bible's sufficiency and clarity, for the main purposes of the Bible remain unaltered by such judgments. But because the Bible was graciously given to us by God in a lengthy series of specific historical contexts, significant light can be shed on a passage by patiently probing some of those contexts.

The importance of asking appropriate questions

It is important to ask many questions of a text, and also to learn what questions are inappropriate.

On the positive side, in narrative it is almost

always worth asking the obvious elementary questions: when, where, to whom, how, why, for how long, and so forth. Above all, it is important to ask what the theme and purpose are of the unit of text on which you are working, and how the various parts of the text make their contributions to that dominant theme and point. It is often worth asking what subsidiary themes are present. Sometimes one should ask questions related to an author's use of a particular word or expression, e.g. why did Paul use this word in this context when he might have used that one?

But it is easy to ask inappropriate questions. For instance, if one asks, 'What does this passage say about Christian assurance?' when it is at best remotely related to such a theme, one may 'find' answers that are not really there. One of the best signs of interpretative maturity is the kind of self-critical and reflective questioning of a biblical text that so 'listens' to what is being said that the questions themselves are progressively honed, discarded, sharpened, corrected. This is an extraordinarily important component in spiralling in on the meaning of a text.

Fitting the Bible together

It is important to locate a passage in its place in redemptive history. Of course, scholars who think all the biblical books should be treated separately, who do not perceive one mind behind the whole, are inclined to give this principle short shrift. For those who approach the Bible in the manner advocated here, however, this is merely responsible reading. This means more than organizing the historical material of the Bible into its chronological sequence, though it does not mean less. It means trying to understand the theological nature of the sequence.

One of the most useful avenues of study in this regard is how later Scripture writers refer to earlier ones. For example, one of the important titles assigned to Jesus in Matthew's gospel is 'Son of God'. At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven declares, 'This is my Son . . .' (3:17). Immediately Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. There he spends forty days and forty nights in a difficult fast. The first assault of the devil begins with the taunt, 'If you are the Son of God . . .' (4:3). Jesus replies with words from Dt. 8 that first applied to Israel. At that point it is almost impossible not to remember that as early as Ex. 4 God refers to Israel as his son. As God's son, Israel spent forty years in the desert being taught but failing to learn that 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Dt. 8:3; Mt. 4:4); Jesus the true

SON now spends forty days in the desert and demonstrates that he has learned that lesson. Indeed, the entire passage is criss-crossed with the mes drawn from the period of the exodus, and throughout Jesus is presented as the 'son' that Israel never was: obedient, persevering, submissive to God's word – in short, the locus of the true Israel. That becomes a major theme in Matthew's gospel.

In a similar way, Christian readers soon notice the way Paul handles the law, Hebrews refers to the sacrificial system, and the Apocalypse constantly alludes to Daniel and Ezekiel, to name but a few of the textual connections between the books of the old covenant and the books of the new. The perspective of redemptive history must constantly be borne in mind. Thus, while treating, say, Ex. 4 fairly within its own context, the Christian teacher and preacher will feel obliged to give some indication where the theme of 'Son of God' heads along the axis of God's gracious self-disclosure. Avoiding both anachronism (which reads the later material back into earlier material) and atomization (which refuses to consider canonical connections), this Christian will be eager to learn in what way, as John's gospel insists, the Scriptures speak of Christ.

At few points is this disciplined exercise more challenging than in the interpretation of the gospels. On their face, the gospels describe the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, before his ascension, the descent of the Spirit, and the formation of an international, multi-cultural and inter-racial church. On the other hand, the gospels were clearly written several decades after those events by committed Christians concerned not only to bear witness to those events but to meet the needs and questions of their own readers. There are many ways by which the four evangelists signal their concerns for both history and theology, for witness that avoids anachronism yet points the direction in which Jesus' teaching is taking his nascent church. In the fourth gospel, for example, John constantly draws attention to how much even the disciples did not understand at the time. Only after Jesus rose from the dead did some of his teachings, and their connection with Scripture, become clear (e.g. Jn. 2:19–22). That John should draw attention to this fact reflects his concern to be true both to what actually took place and to its meaning for later believers.

Handling the gospels sensitively means, among other things, that we cannot treat the first disciples' coming to full Christian faith exactly like the coming to faith of people today. In the case of the first disciples, for fully Christian faith they had to wait until the next major redemptive-historical event – the cross and

resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus their steps in faith can never be exactly like ours, for we look back on those events while they had to wait for them. That means we must never teach and preach from the gospels as if they were written simply to provide psychological profiles in discipleship, or as if they were exemplary 'how-to' manuals for Christian living (though they certainly provide rich materials for such constructions). Rather, they are more like books that tell us how-we-got-from-there-to-here; above all they focus on who Jesus is, why he came, how and why he was so largely misunderstood, how his teaching and life led to the cross and resurrection, why he is worthy of all trust, the purpose of his mission and much more. And as we focus on Jesus Christ himself, we are called to trusting and faithful discipleship.

At stake, of course, is how the Bible fits together. This is not to suggest that these are easy topics. Entire schools of interpretation have built up around various schema in which a few irreducible principles have become the fulcrum on which the rest of the evidence has been made to turn. But that fact should call us, not to despair, but to the large-hearted recognition that the inner-biblical connections are many and nuanced, and that there is still more insight to emerge from the study of God's word.

Aiming for biblical balance

Theological synthesis is important, but shoddy synthesis is misleading and dangerous. It has often been observed that a large part of orthodoxy resides in properly relating passage with passage, truth with truth. That observation is both a call to careful work and a warning against reductionism. Biblical balance is an important goal. For a start, we will avoid all approaches to interpretation that seize on some esoteric point from an obscure and isolated passage (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:29) to establish the basic framework out of which we interpret Scripture. If the political mood of our age favours one-issue politics, and sometimes one-issue Christianity, serious readers of the Bible must think more comprehensively. They will want to stress what Scripture stresses, and focus on the largest and more certain themes of God's gracious self-disclosure.

Nowhere are warnings against shoddy synthesis more important than when the Bible addresses themes that frankly invoke mystery. We are not going to understand everything about God; if we could we would be God, and even the assumption that we have such a right betrays our lostness, our wretched self-focus. God is more interested in our loving and trusting obedience and adoration than in our I.Q.s. Thus

when we come across passages such as Jn. 5:16–30, which powerfully articulates the relationship of Jesus the Son of God with his Father, or Rom. 9, which unhesitatingly deploys strong predestinarian language, the importance of recognizing the limitations of the evidence and the even greater limitations of our understanding of it is an important component in the interpretative task.

For the sake of simplification, little has been said about the exploration of how these themes have been handled throughout the history of the church. In fact, it is enormously important to recognize that, just as the interpreter does not approach the Scripture in a vacuum and must therefore become aware of his or her own biases, so also is it true, ironically, that one of the greatest helps in freeing us from unwitting slavery to our biases is the careful reading of the history of interpretation. Such reading must never usurp the place of the reading of Scripture; it is possible to become so expert in secondary opinions that one never ponders the text of Scripture itself. But once the warning has been noted, it is important, so far as we are able, to understand how Christians before us have wrestled with Scripture, not least the most controversial themes and passages. Such discipline will induce humility, clear our minds of unwarranted assumptions, expose faulty interpretations that have long since (and rightly) been dismissed, and remind us that responsible interpretation of Scripture must never be a solitary task.

Determining the functions of biblical themes

Especially where biblical themes are complex and intertwined, it is important to observe the Bible's use of such themes, to determine their specific functions, and to resolve to follow such biblical patterns in our own theological reflection. For example, the Bible never infers that because he is sovereign God stands in the same way behind evil as he stands behind good, or that all human effort is irrelevant, or that fatalism is warranted. Far from it. From God's sovereignty it is inferred that grace must stand (Rom. 9), that God can be trusted even when we cannot see the way ahead (Rom. 8:28), and much more. From the fact that God made us, people often infer that God is the Father of us all, and we are all 'brothers and sisters'; doubtless in some sense that is true. Still, the fact remains that 'Father' language applied to God in the Bible is reserved for those who have entered into covenant relationship with him; under the new covenant, 'brothers' is applied to believers. If we start associating these terms with structures of thought widely at variance

from their biblical usage, it will not be long before we import into Scripture things that are not there, even while we blind ourselves to things that are.

To take an example of a slightly different kind, the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (13:8). Some zealous Christians have drawn inferences such as this: 'Jesus healed all who came to him in the days of his flesh; he is the same yesterday and today and for ever; therefore he will heal me if I come to him.' Jesus may or may not heal today, but in any case the reasoning is bad. Why not similarly say, 'Jesus walked on water in the days of his flesh; Jesus is the same yesterday, today and for ever; therefore he walks on water today'? The point is that the author of Hebrews was not uttering a principle that could be applied to every single facet of Jesus' life. The context of Heb. 13 shows to what purpose the author was putting this truth.

The distinction between interpretation and application

While approaching the Bible reverently, we must constantly distinguish responsible interpretation of Scripture from personal or corporate application. Of course, in hortatory passages the line between the two becomes thin; or, better put, it becomes easier to move from one to the other. But unless we preserve a principled distinction we are likely to succumb to many harmful interpretations.

For instance, we may so quickly pursue 'what the Bible means to me', greatly emphasizing 'to me', that we completely ignore the distance between ourselves and the text, and compromise the Bible's historical specificity and thus the nature of God's graciously given verbal revelation. Worse, the morbid person given to endless introspection will glumly focus on all the passages that establish human guilt; the triumphalistic extrovert will fasten on everything that shouts of victory; the self-seeking hedonist will find passages that speak of life and joy. It is far better for all Christians to read every part of the Scripture, think it through on its own terms, discern, so far as possible, its contribution to the whole of the canon, and then ask how such truth applies to themselves, and to the church and the society of which they are a part.

The importance of godliness

Because the Bible is God's word, it is vitally important to cultivate humility as we read, to foster a meditative prayerfulness as we reflect and study, to seek the help of the Holy Spirit as we try to understand and obey, to confess sin and pursue purity of heart and motive and

relationships as we grow in understanding. Failure in these areas may produce scholars, but not mature Christians.

Above all, we must remember that we will one day give an account to the one who says, 'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word' (Is. 66:2).

D.A. Carson

Further reading

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