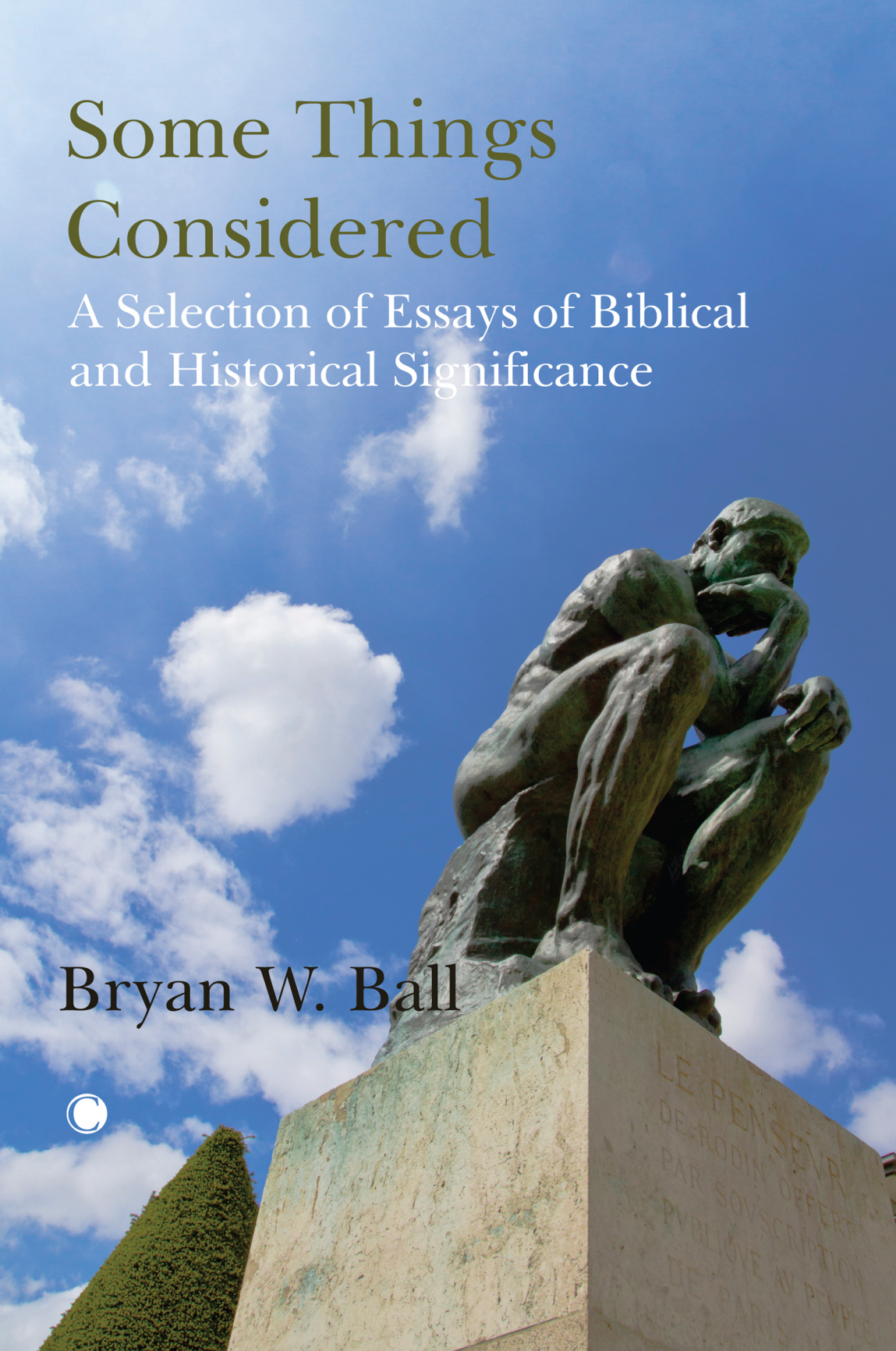


# Some Things Considered

A Selection of Essays of Biblical  
and Historical Significance

Bryan W. Ball



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# Introduction

This book is a selection of distinctive essays on topics of theological and historical significance which, as the title suggests, I believe deserve serious consideration. Some of these chapters have been written specifically for inclusion in this book, others were written previously or delivered as papers at conferences and have been revised and updated. A few of them will ask readers to be willing to ‘think outside the square’ and consider objectively the arguments and the evidence. I do not expect that everyone who reads this book will agree with my conclusions. I do expect, or at least hope, that readers will be sufficiently open-minded to consider the evidence before reaching their own conclusions.

I am grateful once again to Adrian Brink and his colleagues for publishing what will, I think, be my last book. We have enjoyed a long and fruitful working relationship ever since James Clarke & Co. published *The English Connection* in 1981, followed by a second edition in 2014, *The Soul Sleepers* in 2008 and a new edition of *The Seventh-Day Men* in 2009.

Translations and versions of the Bible referred to at various points in the text are as follows:

- ASV – The American Standard Version
- AV – The Authorised or King James Version
- ESV – The English Standard Version
- GNB – The Good News Bible or Today’s English Version
- KJV – The King James Version
- NASB – The New American Standard Bible
- NEB – The New English Bible
- NET – The New English Translation (online)

NIV – The New International Version  
NKJV – The New King James Version  
NLT – The New Living Translation  
NRSV – The New Revised Standard Version  
RSV – The Revised Standard Version.

Reference works including *The Interlinear Bible*, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* and Robert Young's older *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible* have been consulted as indicated in the footnotes where appropriate.

The titles of the chapters are straightforward and clearly indicate the contents of each chapter. As mentioned, they are all 'stand-alone' or distinctive essays dealing with specific topics which may be read in any order the reader chooses, although there are some cross references in the text which are self-explanatory and which give some cohesion to the book as a whole.

I would also like to acknowledge the help of my wife, Dawn, who has read every chapter. Her keen eye for grammatical and punctuation errors has been invaluable. I cannot recall one chapter which has not been improved by her careful scrutiny. Remaining errors and omissions are, of course, mine.

Bryan Ball  
Cooranbong, New South Wales  
Australia, November 2023

## Chapter One

# Basic Principles of Biblical Interpretation

There are three fundamental questions that have claimed the attention of thinking people for centuries: Is there a God? If there is, has he made himself known, has he spoken? If he has, what has he said? Conventional answers to these questions are that God does exist and that his existence is evident through what he has said, i.e. by how he has revealed himself. This he has done through the process of revelation, meaning that he has revealed himself through the ‘Word’, in biblical terms through Christ, the living Word (John 1:1, 14) and through the Bible, the written word. Since nearly all that is known about the living Word comes to us from the written word, it is self-evident that a correct understanding of that word and of the process of revelation itself is imperative. While a more thorough explanation of revelation will be found in a later chapter of this book, it may be noted here that the ultimate intention of revelation is to make known God’s purposes for mankind as revealed in Christ. This core belief has been fundamental to Christianity from the beginning and, it might be said, is central to the development of Western civilisation.

At a more practical level the question to be asked is not so much ‘Can we still believe the Bible, the written word?’<sup>1</sup> important though

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1. A more comprehensive investigation of this seminal question can be found in my book, *Can We Still Believe the Bible? And Does It Really Matter?* (Warburton, VIC, Australia: Signs Pub. Co., 2007; rev. edn., 2011).

that is to contemporary society, but rather 'Can we understand it?' The answer to this basic question, which I shall attempt to explain in what follows, is that God's revelation in Scripture can be understood, but that to be understood correctly the accepted principles of biblical interpretation must be followed. Without the application of these principles, the task of interpreting the Bible may well end in misunderstanding, confusion and error.

It should be remembered that the Bible itself makes it quite clear that correct interpretation is both necessary and possible. The apostle Paul's injunction to Timothy to 'rightly divide the word of truth' is still good advice, since it clearly implies the possibility that the word can be incorrectly 'divided'. The resulting chaos and division which Paul describes here as being the outcome of incorrect interpretation of the word is further argument for rightly dividing it in the first place (2 Timothy 2:15-18).

The New Testament records the experience of an important Ethiopian government official who, while on his way home to Jerusalem, was reading the book of Isaiah. As the journey progressed, he was joined by the apostle Philip, who enquired whether this man understood what he was reading. 'How can I', he replied, 'unless someone explains it to me?' (Acts 8:26-31, NIV). Commenting on this passage, Barclay says that, according to tradition, the man went home and evangelised Ethiopia. 'We can at least be sure', Barclay concludes, 'that he who went on his way rejoicing would not be able to keep his new-found joy to himself.'<sup>2</sup>

We might also note the experience of two disillusioned disciples on the road to Damascus after the crucifixion of their leader. It is recorded that Christ himself caught up with them as they walked and talked, chiding them for their disbelief and lack of understanding. Luke's account of the incident says, 'He opened to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke 24:27). Barclay regards this as one of 'the immortal short stories of the world', describing the 'bewildered regret of these two disciples . . . men whose hopes were dead and buried', but then pointing out that when Christ joined them on the road to Damascus the truth became clear 'and

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2. William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, rev. edn (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1976, rev. edn.), p. 69.

the darkness became light'.<sup>3</sup> These biblical accounts underline the necessity for clear and competent explanation of Scripture and the application of basic principles of interpretation.

It must not be assumed, however, that the Bible can be understood just as it stands, although this is how it is often read. In his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* Bernard Ramm emphasises the necessity for interpreting the text rather than merely reading it. Ramm's book begins with a strong apology for hermeneutics, which he calls 'the science and art of biblical interpretation', saying that it is a science because it is guided by certain rules and an art because the application of those rules requires skill.<sup>4</sup> He further argues that there are two basic necessities for hermeneutics, the first being to ascertain what God has said in Scripture, i.e. 'to determine the meaning of the Word of God'.<sup>5</sup> The second pressing need for interpretation is 'to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the biblical writers'.<sup>6</sup>

Ramm also warns of the consequences of incorrect interpretation, saying: 'The result of erratic hermeneutics is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light.' He cites Shakespeare's comment in *The Merchant of Venice*, 'In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it, and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament.'<sup>7</sup> It seems that the attempt to interpret the Bible and to do so without reference to basic principles both have a long and sometimes undistinguished history. Examples of incorrect biblical interpretation and their misleading consequences include:

- Because the Old Testament Patriarchs practised polygamy (Exodus 21:10; Deuteronomy 21:15-17), it may legitimately be practised today.

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3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pp. 244-45.

4. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 1.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 2.

- Because the Old Testament prohibited usury (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19), it is not permissible now to earn interest on financial investments.
- Because the Bible comments unfavourably on the suffering of women in childbirth (Genesis 3:16),<sup>8</sup> it is not proper now for any woman to use medication or any medical procedure to alleviate the pain.

The message is clear, and Ramm says: ‘Sound hermeneutics would have prevented all this.’<sup>9</sup>

### Presuppositions in Biblical Interpretation

There are at least four presuppositions that influence the Christian interpretation of the Bible: the belief that God exists, that he has revealed himself, that his purposes for mankind are good and redemptive, and that sin exists and that it has affected the ability of man to think clearly and objectively. Frank Hasel’s examination of presuppositions is essential reading for those who want to understand how preconceived ideas affect biblical interpretation. He has much to say that will help the would-be interpreter from the outset, saying ‘No one is able to approach the biblical text with a blank mind.’<sup>10</sup> Whether we recognise it or not, we are all affected in one way or another by these inherent presuppositions. Hasel further states, ‘Interpreters of the Bible cannot divest themselves from their own past, their experiences, resident ideas and preconceived notions and opinions.’<sup>11</sup> Simply being human prevents neutrality and objectivity, a limitation which is difficult for most of us to concede under any circumstances. Hasel’s arguments demonstrate that, in the task of

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8. In context, this text has been understood traditionally to mean that Eve’s punishment was a result of her sin and that as the ‘mother of all living’ (Genesis 3:20) she brought the penalty on all future women.

9. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 3.

10. Frank M. Hasel, ‘Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture’, in George W. Reid, *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), p. 27.

11. *Ibid.*

what may be termed presuppositional interpretation, it is impossible to be completely detached from the text under consideration.

Another source of help in clarifying these issues is an article by Graham Stanton in Howard Marshall's scholarly work, *New Testament Interpretation*. Marshall was formerly professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Aberdeen and introduces his collection of works on interpretation with the following explanation:

The aim of this symposium is to establish the principles and methods involved in understanding the New Testament. The problem of interpreting a passage from the Bible is one to which we would all like to find the key, some simple and easy formula that will enable us to approach any text of Scripture and quickly establish its meaning. Alas, there is no such simple answer, but it is possible to indicate some general principles and types of approach which will enable us to wrestle with the text and come to an understanding of it.<sup>12</sup>

Stanton, professor of New Testament studies at the University of London, entitled his chapter 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism'. It is a thorough examination of the existence and nature of presuppositions and acknowledges that they undergird 'every aspect of the relationship of the interpreter to his text', adding 'An interpreter's work is always affected by human foibles and fallibility.'<sup>13</sup> Stanton is also justly critical of the way in which the Scriptures have often been interpreted in the past, particularly the older 'proof text' method of attempting to determine the meaning of the Bible. He complains that 'interpretation of the Bible has often involved little more than production of proof texts to support an already existing doctrinal framework',<sup>14</sup> which frequently cites texts taken out of context, having no relationship to the wider text under consideration or to their relationship to each other. Unfortunately, as many older readers of this book will recall, traces of this now outdated method of interpretation still linger in some places and in some minds.

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12. I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Stanton also has much to say about the necessity for correct exegesis of the biblical text, the word 'exegesis' being derived from the Greek *exegeomai*, literally meaning 'to interpret' or 'to declare' and commonly held to mean 'to draw out' or 'to lead out'.<sup>15</sup> Hence exegesis is the interpretive process of drawing out of the text its true meaning, which is already there, as opposed to eisegesis, reading into the text that which is not there. Obviously, there is no place in honest interpretation for eisegesis even though it is not difficult to find evidence of it, particularly among those who, in the interests of maintaining a preconceived view, want to make the Bible say what it does not say.

Presuppositions, then, cannot be avoided. Those wanting to know the true meaning of the biblical text must come to terms with this reality, bearing in mind that presuppositions are not the same as preconceived ideas, and that they are an aid rather than a hindrance to understanding the Bible. In light of what has been said above, we give the last word to Stanton:

The exegete cannot allow either his own personal bias or prejudice or his pre-understanding to dominate the text. They cannot be avoided completely, but they must be no more than a door through which the text is approached. The text is prior: the interpreter stands before it humbly and prays that through the scholarly methods and the questions with which he comes to the text, God's word will be heard afresh. This is the exciting task to which the interpreter is called.<sup>16</sup>

This is good and relevant advice and without doubt will stand the tests of time and evaluation.

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15. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-68. On the meaning of the original Greek, see Robert Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible*, 8th edition thoroughly revised, 1939 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), p. 239, no. 19, s.v. *exegeomai*.

16. Graham N. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism', in Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation*, (Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 69.

## Understanding the Text

Gerhard Hasel maintains that, in attempting to understand individual words of the Bible, it is necessary to remember that words should not be considered in isolation. Speaking of 'contextual priority' he states: 'The proper determinant for the meaning of a word is the immediate context in its clause or sentence.'<sup>17</sup> While this is true, it remains a fact that words are the basic unit of information and communication. Without words, there can be no phrases, sentences, paragraphs or books. This applies to the biblical text as much as to the text of any other book, whether the word 'text' relates to an individual text or to the entire biblical text. The necessity to understand the words of the Bible is an indispensable principle of correct biblical interpretation.

This inevitably raises the question of translation. A conservative estimate would be that about a hundred English translations have appeared since the 1800s, many of which are still available today, to say nothing of contemporary translations which continue to appear on a regular basis. Since reliable translating inevitably pays attention to the meaning of the individual words of the text, it will be helpful to understand that translators approach their work from different perspectives, a procedure which frequently leads to different renderings of the same text.

Hugh Dunton explains four types of translation, of which the two most frequently used are the 'formal' or 'literal' translation and the 'dynamic equivalence' approach.<sup>18</sup> The formal or literal translation attempts to translate the original text on a word-for-word basis. Dunton says, however, that 'literalness can be carried too far',<sup>19</sup> arguing that it is virtually impossible to make a literal translation due to the differences in the meaning of words in the original language and contemporary English. He points out that ancient and modern languages are differently structured and that in English a word sometimes has two or more different meanings. He also says that the

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17. Gerhard F. Hasel, 'General Principles of Interpretation', in Gordon M. Hyde, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), p. 173.

18. Hugh Dunton, *Bible Versions: A Consumer's Guide to the Bible* (Grantham: Autumn House, 1998), pp. 38-42.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

use of pronouns can cause problems, citing as an example 1 Kings 13:27 as translated in the Authorised Version, ‘And he spake to his sons, saying “Saddle me the ass.” And they saddled him.’ Dunton legitimately asks: ‘Who got saddled?’<sup>20</sup> On a more serious note Dunton explains that words or phrases which do not appear in the original are set in italics in some translations to show that they have been added by the translator to clarify the text or to make sense of a text which otherwise would be incoherent.<sup>21</sup>

The main intent of the dynamic equivalence approach to translation is to make the text read smoothly in English rather than adhere to the original language. Dunton uses Romans 8:28 as translated in the AV and RSV to show that different translations demonstrate that more than one meaning can often be derived from the original, concluding: ‘Bible translators recognise that there is a core of verses where alternatives seem equally admissible.’<sup>22</sup> This is clearly a challenge for those who want to know the real meaning of a text, and another warning that a text cannot always be understood just as it reads.

In his book *Understanding the Bible* John Stott suggests three perspectives from which the meaning of a text can be derived: the ‘natural sense’, the ‘original sense’ and the ‘general sense’, which he regards as ‘sound principles of interpretation’. The ‘natural sense’ he describes as ‘the principle of simplicity’, arguing that God’s purpose in revelation was that ‘he wanted to communicate with ordinary people.’<sup>23</sup> It is evident that for Stott this is basic to understanding the text, as he explains with surprising frankness:

The principle of simplicity strikes at the root of much popular interpretation. For example, the destructive criticism of radical Christians would limit the truth to a tiny minority of scholars who claim the competence to sift the wheat from the chaff in Scripture, while the fanciful reconstructions of some evangelical Christians would turn Scripture into a complicated jigsaw puzzle to which

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

23. John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (London: Scripture Union, rev. edn. 1984), p. 175.

they alone claim to possess the key. Over against these distortions we must assert that God's whole purpose in speaking and in causing his speech to be preserved is that he wanted to communicate to ordinary people and save them.<sup>24</sup>

Stott's objective is that the biblical text be interpreted against the background of its original purpose, with nothing added or subtracted.

He calls the 'original sense' the 'principle of history', explaining that 'the permanent and universal message of Scripture can be understood only in the light of the circumstances in which it was originally given'.<sup>25</sup> This lays upon the interpreter an unavoidable obligation, which Stott again spells out with unmistakable clarity: 'So, as we read the Bible, we need to keep asking ourselves: What did the author intend to convey by this? What will his original hearers have understood him to have meant?'<sup>26</sup> This approach to biblical interpretation is also known as the grammatico-historical method of interpretation and calls for recognition and understanding of the historical setting in which the text was first written, the style in which it was written, and the language which the author used.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, Stott argues that the 'general sense' from which perspective the biblical text can be approached is 'the principle of harmony'. From this standpoint, the Bible is seen as an 'organic unity' expressing the mind of God, and requiring that the Scriptures be approached 'with confidence that God has spoken and that in speaking he has not contradicted himself'.<sup>28</sup> Stott concludes his illuminating explanation of biblical interpretation by stating that the three principles of simplicity, history and harmony 'arise partly from the nature of God and partly from the nature of Scripture as a plain, historical, consistent communication from God to human beings'.<sup>29</sup> That being so, it is hard to disagree with Stott's injunction to remember the

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 181.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., pp. 181-83.

28. Ibid., p. 186.

29. Ibid., p. 194.

‘solemn responsibility’ laid upon all Christians to understand and treat the Scriptures with the deference they deserve.

From a different perspective, Berkeley Mickelsen examines the various styles in which the original languages of the Bible were written, noting the difficulties that await those who are unfamiliar with them. Hebrew is particularly difficult to translate, let alone understand, since it has no vowels, no punctuation, no space between words or letters, and is written entirely in upper case script which reads from right to left in one continuous sentence or paragraph. He illustrates the challenges of reading the Hebrew by using Romans 3:23 as it would appear if written in English in the style of the original Hebrew:

FRLHVSNNNDNDCMSHRTFFTHGLRYFGD

Reading this from right to left would make it virtually impossible to make sense of what appears to be an unintelligible jumble of letters. The Mickelsens say: ‘Those who translated from the earliest manuscripts had to decide where the word divisions came, where sentences began and ended, where to put periods (full stops) and commas, and what were direct quotations.’ Such decisions were often difficult, ‘and the differences of opinion show up among the translations’.<sup>30</sup> It is hardly necessary to say that finding the right meaning of any biblical text or passage is both necessary and challenging.

Although Mickelsen and Stott approach the question of biblical interpretation from different perspectives, it is unsurprising that they come to very similar conclusions. Mickelsen concurs with Stott’s emphasis on the responsibility laid on those who understand the Scriptures, and affirms that believers who understand the Bible must account to God for their knowledge and use of it. He says, ‘How we understand the Bible influences not only our lives but also the lives of many around us’, since ‘God has given us the Scriptures for our growth *and for our witness to Christ in the world.*’<sup>31</sup>

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30. A. Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera M. Mickelsen, *Understanding Scripture: How to Read and Study the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), p. 39.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 134, my emphasis.

## The Contextual Principle

Context has been described as ‘The parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning.’<sup>32</sup> Without exception, every biblical text and passage has a context that is crucial to its understanding. Moreover, if a text is taken out of context, it will nearly always result in a wrong meaning being given to the text, examples of which will be considered later. Bernard Ramm explains four types of context, the fourth being the materials immediately before and after the passage in question. He illustrates this process of contextualisation using a contemporary analogy: ‘The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approaching, and the following material is the radar of leaving. If we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which it is to be understood.’<sup>33</sup>

Virtually every source consulted in the preparation of this chapter emphasises the necessity of contextualisation. In fact, the contextual principle may be regarded as the most important single principle in biblical interpretation.

Gerhard Hasel uses the term ‘contextual priority’, explaining: ‘Individual words must not be torn out of their religio-cultural moorings and treated in isolation from the total context in which they are found.’<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere Hasel states: ‘The significance of context is of great importance for interpretation’, saying ‘Words find their meaning in the sentence in relationship to each other and in the unit or paragraph to which the sentence belongs’, a relationship which ‘must remain normative’.<sup>35</sup> Frank Hasel similarly argues, ‘A careful interpreter will take into consideration the immediate context before and after the passage under investigation, the context of the biblical book in which the passage is found, as well as the larger context of the entire Bible.’<sup>36</sup>

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32. *The Reader’s Digest Complete Wordfinder*, ed. Sara Tulloch, UK, Oxford, 1993, s.v. context.

33. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 139.

34. Gerhard Hasel, ‘General Principles of Interpretation’, p. 173.

35. Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), p. 106.

36. Frank M. Hasel, ‘Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture’, p. 38.

It is clear from the foregoing, not only that context is essential in the task of interpretation, but that it is much wider than the preceding and following words which surround the text under consideration, and that it can legitimately include the chapter, paragraph, book, and even the entire Bible. Gerhard Hasel refers to this process as ‘The hermeneutical circle of the entire witness of the scriptural canon ... the fundamental structure of hermeneutical methodology’ in the interpretation of Scripture as the Word of God.<sup>37</sup>

Turning now to some examples of misinterpreted texts taken out of context, we note first Daniel 2:29. This text has been used as an instance of God’s guidance to individual people who seek his help and direction. While it is true that individuals can and do receive divine guidance, to use this text in support of such experiences is a clear case of taking a text out of context, using it in a way in which it was never intended to be used. In its own contextual setting, Daniel is speaking to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon in the sixth century BC. Verses 28 and 29 relate specifically to him and can only be interpreted correctly in that context.

It is worth noting here comments made by Hans LaRondelle in a chapter on the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy, in Hyde’s *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*. Against the historical background of the exposition of the book of Daniel, LaRondelle notes that many times current events have precipitated renewed focus on Daniel’s prophecies, and that ‘groundless speculations have brought the book of Daniel into ill repute’. LaRondelle calls for ‘careful consideration’ and says that the application of ‘apocalyptic hermeneutical principles’ is mandatory in the interpretation of Daniel’s prophecies.<sup>38</sup>

Galatians 3:28 has also been taken out of context and used as biblical authority for the ordination of women. While this is now an accepted practice in contemporary church culture across the denominational spectrum, it has no foundation in this text. There were, and still are, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and those who are free, and male and female

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37. Gerhard Hasel, ‘General Principles of Interpretation’, p.177, Gordon M. Hyde, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assoc., 1974), p.173.

38. Hans K. LaRondelle, ‘Interpretation of Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology’, in Hyde, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 225-48, p. 241.

believers. The truth is, as all commentators acknowledge, that in this chapter Paul was refuting the Galatian heresy of legalism, which had arisen from a misunderstanding of the purpose of God's law as set out in the Old Testament. What Paul is saying in verse 28 is that all human beings, from whatever culture and background, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and those freed from slavery, are saved, not by works or obedience to the law, but by faith in Christ: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' The entire chapter is a vigorous attack on the 'gospel' of works and a compelling apology for the true gospel based on faith. It has nothing to do with ministry or church procedure then or at any other time. To use Galatians 3:28 as an argument in support of women's ordination is a classic example of a text being torn from its religio-cultural moorings.<sup>39</sup>

Another well-known passage in the New Testament, Philippians 2:5-8 also illustrates out-of-context interpretation. This passage has long been regarded as a description of the nature and incarnation of Christ. While it clearly asserts that Christ became man, and in so doing became 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross', the main intent of Paul's argument here is not to expound Christology or soteriology, but to extol the virtue of humility and emphasise the necessity of unity in the life of the church, as verses 1-4 make clear. The NIV entitles this chapter 'Imitating Christ's Humility' and translates verse 5 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ.' Lenski in his commentary on Philippians regards this passage as the necessary preamble to what follows in verses five to eight, saying that it models Christ in his self-humiliation and is 'essential for understanding what follows'.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the primary purpose of verses 5-8 is to illustrate the extent of Christ's condescension as an example of humility, rather than to present a theological discourse on the nature

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39. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelicalism & (sic) Biblical Truth*, UK, Leicester, Intervarsity Press, 2005. Wayne Grudem examines Galatians 3:28, concluding that the text 'does not teach that we are all the same or have all the same roles', saying that believers have a special kind of unity in the body of Christ in which 'Our differences as male and female are not obliterated', pp. 184-85.

40. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 769.

of the incarnate Christ. Again, context clarifies the true meaning and interpretation of the biblical text.

## The Principle of Unity

The interpretive principle of unity can be considered from two perspectives, unity in the Church and unity in the Bible itself. The biblical teaching on both aspects of this important principle is compelling. Returning briefly to Philippians 2, and the passage beginning in verse five on the exemplary humility of Christ, Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to be 'likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind' (2:2). The note on this text in the NIV says that it 'emphasises the unity that should exist among Christians'.

Christ's teaching on this matter is, of course, paramount. The 'new commandment' he gave to his disciples after the Last Supper shortly before his crucifixion, urged them to 'love one another' for by so doing 'all will know that you are my disciples' (John 13:34, 35). Commenting on these texts Lenski says that the love the disciples are urged to have for each other is 'the tie that binds them together'. Furthermore, Lenski argues that, where this love exists, 'it is bound to show itself, and although it is never ostentatious, those around will see it and thus realise its presence'.<sup>41</sup>

Paul's extended analogy of the Church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-17 is another powerful argument which illustrates unity within the Church. Paul argues: 'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ' (1 Corinthians 12:12, NIV). Reading through this passage on the interdependence of the human body, one has to conclude that it would be difficult to find a more apt illustration of the unity which characterises the Church. In *Vocabulary of the Bible*, edited by J.J. von Allmen, there is an entry on 'Christ and the Church' in which unity in the body of Christ is thoroughly explained:

The unity of believers among themselves, their brotherly fellowship, far from making them monotonously resemble each other as models cast in the same mould, is realised

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41. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St John's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 960, 961.

precisely through their diversity. The body of Christ has differentiated members and the differences not only do not compromise their unity, but are the condition for it.<sup>42</sup>

One further observation needs to be made regarding the unity in brotherly love emphasised by Christ in John 13:34-35. Not only is love the defining characteristic of authentic believers, it is also a powerful catalyst for Christian witness. The late Francis Schaeffer, widely known as one of the intellectual and spiritual giants of the twentieth century, speaks in his book *The Church Before the Watching World* of 'an observable love and oneness among all true Christians' and, commenting on John 13:34-35, declares: 'The world has the right to decide whether we are true Christians, true disciples of Christ, on the basis of the love we show.'<sup>43</sup>

Finally, in 2 Peter 1:5-7, we find what has been called 'the ladder of virtues', eight in all, where Peter admonishes Christians to 'add to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love'. That Peter is referring here to two different but related things appears from the fact that two different words are used in the original Greek, *philadelphia* for brotherly love and *agape* for the wider love that is for all. It would be superfluous to add *philadelphia* to *agape* if they meant the same thing. Barclay's comment here is unambiguous:

The ladder of Christian virtue must end in Christian love. Not even affection for the brethren is enough; the Christian must end with a love that is as wide as that love of God which causes his sun to rise on the just and the unjust, and sends his rain on the evil and the good.<sup>44</sup>

To love those whose foibles and failings are known to us is often harder than to love those we have never seen. If we read Peter aright,

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42. J.J. von Allmen, ed., *Vocabulary of the Bible* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), p. 317.

43. Francis A. Schaeffer, 'The Church Before the Watching World', in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 2nd edn, 5 vols (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), vol. 4, pp. 115, 151.

44. William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1976), p. 305.

Christians are to show compassion to all, regardless of their age, status, education, gender, ethnicity or religion.

The second perspective from which the principle of unity must be considered is the unity of the Bible. Biblical unity has been a matter of discussion for much of the twentieth century and remains so today. Without pursuing the history of this controversy, it is sufficient to say that there are many compelling reasons to support the traditional claim for biblical unity. A.H. Strong states: ‘The Bible is the work of one mind’, claiming that, despite the fact it has many authors, separated from each other by time and culture, ‘there is a unity of subject, spirit and aim throughout the whole’. He reminds us that the Bible is composed of 66 books and was written by 40 different authors from all walks of life, including shepherds, fishermen, priests and kings, over a period of seventeen centuries, saying ‘no collusion between them was possible’ and remarking ‘if unity in half a dozen writers is remarkable, in forty it is astounding’. The result is one book rather than a collection of books, as reflected in the Latin word ‘Biblia’, a plural noun from which the English word Bible is derived.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, John Stott refers to ‘the astonishing unity of the Bible’, saying: ‘We should not hesitate to claim God himself as the ultimate author of both Testaments or to designate the whole of Scripture as the Word of God.’<sup>46</sup>

The concept of biblical unity has roots in the New Testament where Paul, in writing to Timothy, asserted what would become a fundamental belief of Christianity, when he wrote: ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God’ (2 Timothy 3:16). The NIV is more etymologically correct when it translates the older word ‘inspired’ as ‘God-breathed’. The note in the NIV points out that the ‘primary reference’ is to the Old Testament, since many of the New Testament books had not been written when Paul wrote his epistles to Timothy. The concept of the ‘God-breathed character’ of the Bible is supported, among others, by the Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer when he comments on the unity of the Bible and ‘the centrality of the one witness of Scripture’.<sup>47</sup>

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45. A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (London and Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, 1907), p. 175.

46. John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2004), pp. 125, 127.

47. G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), pp. 161, 167.