

## Hermeneutics and Scripture in the Twenty-First Century

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Significant changes in the scholarly approach to Scripture have taken place over the past several decades. The historical-critical method, which dominated biblical interpretation in the twentieth century, while still employed, is far less influential compared to literary and reader-focused methods. These newer approaches have been widely adopted even among conservative biblical scholars because they often emphasize the unity of the text in its received form. On the other hand, all of these methods as classically defined employ a critical approach to the text “which subordinates the Bible to human reason” and should therefore be “unacceptable” to Seventh-day Adventists, as the 1986 “Methods of Bible Study” document voted in Annual Council has made clear.<sup>1</sup> This voted document details the presuppositions, principles, and methods for interpreting the Bible widely accepted and employed by Adventist scholars and is unique in serving as a kind of officially-adopted explanation of the church’s fundamental belief number one on the “Holy Scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> Because of its importance, we will first summarize some salient points before describing and evaluating more critical approaches to the Bible. Finally, we will briefly look at the role of culture and its impact on interpretation and draw some conclusions.

### *The “Methods of Bible Study” Document*

“Methods of Bible Study” represents a succinct statement of the principles of biblical interpretation accepted by Seventh-day Adventists. Historically as a church, we have insisted on the Protestant principle of Sola Scriptura, i.e., that what we believe and practice must be determined “by Scripture alone.”<sup>3</sup> Even our hermeneutical principles have been intentionally derived on this basis.<sup>4</sup> Among these are the following:

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<sup>1</sup> “Methods of Bible Study Committee (GCC-A)—Report,” *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, 18-20; online: <http://adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc4.html>; accessed 10 February 2013. The

<sup>2</sup> This fundamental belief states: “The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.)”; voted at the 1980 General Conference session; online: <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html>; accessed 10 February 2013.

<sup>3</sup> GC 243 refers to “the great Protestant principle that ‘the Bible and the Bible only’ is the rule of faith and practice.” Ellen G. White, RH, January 10, 1888, par. 11-12: “Had the Bible been received as the voice of God to man, as the book of books, as the one infallible rule of faith and practice, we would not have seen the law of Heaven made void, and the swelling tide of iniquity devouring our land. As men wander away from the truth into skepticism, everything becomes uncertain and unreal. No thorough conviction takes hold of the soul. No faith is exercised in the Scripture as the revelation of God to men. There is nothing authoritative in its commands, nothing terrifying in its warnings, nothing inspiring in its promises. To the skeptic it is meaningless and contradictory.” GC 595: “Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.”

<sup>4</sup> See also Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture according to Scripture,” *Perspective Digest* 17/2; online: <http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/69/archives/17-2/interpreting-scripture-according-to-scripture>; accessed 10 February 2013; Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, D.C.:

Regarding the Origin of Scripture:

- “the Scriptures are an indivisible union of human and divine elements, neither of which should be emphasized to the neglect of the other”;
- “the Bible is its own best interpreter and when studied as a whole it depicts a consistent, harmonious truth”;
- “Although it was given to those who lived in an ancient Near Eastern/Mediterranean context, the Bible transcends its cultural backgrounds to serve as God’s Word for all cultural, racial, and situational contexts in all ages.”<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the Authority of Scripture:

- “Scripture is an authentic, reliable record of history and God’s acts in history”;
- The Bible’s “record of many details of secular history is integral to its overall purpose to convey salvation history. While at times there may be parallel procedures employed by Bible students to determine historical data, the usual techniques of historical research, based as they are on human presuppositions and focused on the human element, are inadequate for interpreting the Scriptures, which are a blend of the divine and human”;
- “Human reason is subject to the Bible, not equal to or above it.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the most important principles for arriving at a correct interpretation of Scripture is directly related to the attitude with which we come to the task: “Those who come to the study of the Word must do so with faith, in the humble spirit of a learner who seeks to hear what the Bible is saying. They must be willing to submit all presuppositions, opinions, and the conclusions of reason to the judgment and correction of the Word itself.” Further, “The investigation of Scripture must be characterized by a sincere desire to discover and obey God’s will and word rather than to seek support or evidence for preconceived ideas.”<sup>7</sup>

As its name implies, most of the “Methods of Bible Study” document is devoted to delineating appropriate guidelines for the exegetical study of Scripture. Exegesis, derived from two Greek words (*ek* and *hēgeomai*) means “to lead out” from the text its inherent meaning. By contrast, eisegesis means to read one’s own ideas into the text rather than allowing Scripture itself to determine the meaning. For those unfamiliar with the languages of the Bible, the choice of which version to study is an important one. There are three main types of versions: (1) formal equivalence or word-for-word translation; (2) dynamic equivalence or phrase-by-phrase translation; and (3) paraphrase, which attempts to reflect the meaning of a text with different words. Among modern English translations, examples of formal equivalence include the New King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version; examples of dynamic equivalence include the New Revised Standard Version, the New

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Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 100-111; George W. Reid, ed., *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Biblical Research Institute Studies 1; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> “Methods of Bible Study,” 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; cf. Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892, 465: “Many give the words of Scripture a meaning that suits their own opinions, and they mislead themselves and deceive others by their misinterpretations of God’s word. As we take up the study of God’s word, we should do so with humble hearts. All selfishness, all love of originality, should be laid aside. Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible.”

International Version, and the New American Bible; paraphrases include the Living Bible, the Message, and the Good News Bible.<sup>8</sup> Since the “Methods of Bible Study” document recommends choosing a version “faithful to the meaning” of the original languages,<sup>9</sup> the best choice for study would be from among the formal equivalence translations.

Other important points regarding how to study the Bible include:

- “Seek to grasp the simple, most obvious meaning of the biblical passage being studied”;
- “Recognize that the Bible is its own best interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture”;
- “Study the context of the passage under consideration by relating it to the sentences and paragraphs immediately preceding and following it”;
- “As far as possible ascertain the historical circumstances in which the passage was written”;
- “Determine the literary type the author is using,” because specific principles may apply;
- “Take note of grammar and sentence construction in order to discover the author’s meaning”;
- “In connection with the study of the biblical text, explore the historical and cultural factors. Archaeology, anthropology, and history may contribute to understanding the meaning of the text”;
- Ellen G. White’s “expositions on any given Bible passage offer an inspired guide to the meaning of texts without exhausting their meaning or preempting the task of exegesis”;
- “After studying as outlined above, turn to various commentaries and secondary helps such as scholarly works to see how others have dealt with the passage. Then carefully evaluate the different viewpoints expressed from the standpoint of Scripture as a whole”;
- More specific guidelines are given for interpreting prophecy, both apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic.
- Parallel accounts should be closely compared, examining them first to ensure that they refer to the same historical event rather than to the same or similar sayings or happenings on different occasions.
- Recognizing that the Scriptures “were addressed to peoples of Eastern cultures and expressed in their thought patterns,” is “indispensable for understanding” statements such as the Lord “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart (Exod 9:12), “an evil spirit from God” (1 Sam 16:15), the imprecatory psalms, and the “three days and three nights” of Jonah typifying Christ’s death (Matt 12:40).
- The Scriptures also “record that God accepted persons whose experiences and statements were not in harmony with the spiritual principles of the Bible as a whole.” Examples include “the use of alcohol, polygamy, divorce, and slavery.” God is at work to restore fallen humanity to the divine ideal. The Bible is “the unfolding of God’s revelation” to human beings, with Christ Himself as “the

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<sup>8</sup> The New Revised Standard Version is classified as dynamic equivalence because its widespread use of gender-neutral language departs from the word-for-word approach of its precursor, while the Good News Bible is classified as a paraphrase because it takes the principle of dynamic equivalence to an extreme.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

ultimate revelation of God's character to humanity" (Heb 1:1-3). "Every experience or statement of Scripture is a divinely inspired record, but not every statement or experience is necessarily normative for Christian behavior today. Both the spirit and the letter of Scripture must be understood (1 Cor. 10:6-13; *The Desire of Ages*, 150; *Testimonies*, vol. 4, pp. 10-12).

- Finally, "make application of the text." biblical passages of local significance still "contain timeless principles applicable to every age and culture."<sup>10</sup>

The document concludes with this important warning: "Even Christian scholars who accept the divine-human nature of Scripture, but whose methodological approaches cause them to dwell largely on its human aspects, risk emptying the biblical message of its power by relegating it to the background while concentrating on the medium."<sup>11</sup>

Another way of "emptying the biblical message" is through what could be described as "minimalizing" the text, i.e., reducing its content to a minimum so as to make Scripture's meaning acceptable to the mind of the interpreter. The most obvious example of this in recent times is the minimalizing of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 down to the bare statement of Genesis 1:1 so that the account only tells us *who* created the heavens and the earth, but not *how* that creation took place. Another example is the assertion that Daniel 8:14 describes God's judgment on the little horn, not the judgment of God's people (which is supposedly found only in Daniel 7), so that the content of Daniel 7 and 8 is effectively minimalized down to Daniel 7 alone. Taking a New Testament example of this hermeneutic, the historicity of Acts has been questioned and the speeches considered merely Luke's invention, effectively minimalizing the entire book to little if any historical value. One final example: some, by defining ordination narrowly in terms of the laying on of hands, reduce the relevant New Testament material to as little as two verses (Acts 6:6; 13:3);<sup>12</sup> then even these can be explained away, minimalizing Scripture entirely on this issue, so that the practice of ordination really begins later in church history.<sup>13</sup> Other examples could be given with a similar result: The process of minimalizing reduces the voice of Scripture on a given topic thereby freeing interpreters to ignore the text and place their interpretations above the text.

### *Critical Methods for Interpreting Scripture*

While biblical Studies methods have been somewhat in flux in recent decades, there are two basic approaches to Scripture: (1) a critical approach which emphasizes the human element in Scripture and subordinates the Bible to human reason; and (2) a biblical approach that derives its presuppositions and principles for interpreting Scripture by studying how the inspired writers of the Bible approached and interpreted the canonical writings. This biblical approach has already been described to some extent,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>12</sup> See Darius Jankiewicz, "The Problem of Ordination: Lessons from Early Christian History" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, Chicago, Ill., 15 November 2012), 2; John Brunt, "Ordination in the New Testament" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, Chicago, Ill., 16 November 2012), p. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5: "Never is the laying on of hands associated with appointment to an office or with a service that makes a person a minister or an elder or deacon." Rather, "it blesses Christians for a specific, ad hoc assignment."

based on the “Methods of Bible Study” document, but it will be necessary to look at it further once we have considered methods that take a more critical approach to Scripture and their impact on biblical interpretation.

### *Presuppositions of Critical Methods*

In contrast to a biblical approach, critical methods employ several presuppositions foreign to the notion of Scripture as the embodiment of divinely-inspired truth. Common to all critical methods, of course, is *the principle of criticism*. Based on the process of “methodological doubt” articulated by Rene Descartes, the principle of criticism subjects every assertion to rigorous testing and verification by accepted methods of scientific investigation before it can be accepted and leaves open the possibility of correction or revision of the assertion in light of new evidence or arguments.<sup>14</sup> A second presupposition, and closely connected to the first, is the supremacy of reason and *the priority of the secular sciences*.<sup>15</sup> Literary approaches to the text, rather than rejecting this fundamental stance of historical criticism and the results derived from it, generally build upon them.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to these, the historical-critical method also utilizes presuppositions specifically connected with the process of *historical* investigation: (1) *Principle of analogy*. This principle postulates that “historical knowledge is possible because all events are similar in principle. We must assume that the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now.”<sup>17</sup> Closely related to this is the principle of correlation whereby “the phenomena of history are inter-related and inter-dependent and no event can be isolated from the sequence of historical cause and effect.”<sup>18</sup> (2) *Separation of divine and human elements*. The principle of analogy correlated with a closed continuum of cause and effect excludes *a priori* any supernatural activity, filtering out the divine elements and leaving behind the human history and processes accessible to the historical researcher.<sup>19</sup> Only those parts of the Bible that can be scientifically substantiated from history and experience are to be accepted as true. For example, historical-critical approach would conclude that since no one walks on water today, Jesus could not have walked on water; His healings may merely have relieved psychosomatic illnesses, and so on. (3) *Evolution of religious thought*. While not so blatantly articulated, an important presupposition underlying the critical analysis and reconstruction of biblical materials is

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<sup>14</sup> John J. Collins, “Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (e. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 2, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 45 (speaking specifically of the historical-critical method): “The basic postulate is that of human reason and the supremacy of reason as the ultimate criterion for truth.”

<sup>16</sup> E.g., *ibid.*: “The same linguistic and literary principles at work in the case of literary masterpieces are at work in the case of biblical writings” (105); “A literary approach to the Bible [by an “intelligent reader,” 106]...allows—even requires—a view of the text as both an ancient document with original meaning and a living message with contemporary significance” (107).

<sup>17</sup> Collins, 2, adding to the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation, the principle of autonomy: “Neither church nor state can prescribe for the scholar which conclusions should be reached.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis, Miss.: Concordia, 1977), 11, 17-18. For a critique of Maier’s own proposals, see Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Trans. Roy A. Harrisville; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 66-71.

the presumed development of religious thought from primitive to more sophisticated ideas.<sup>20</sup>

### *Reader-Response Criticism*

In contrast to the historical-critical method, reader-response criticism finds meaning *through* the text rather than *in* the text. Based on Hans-Georg Gadamer (and Martin Buber's conception of revelation as encounter), reader-response criticism centers on the reader and speaks of two horizons: of the author and of the reader. The text represents a filtered reflection of the ideas and horizon of the author. Readers do not have access to the text directly inasmuch as they receive the text through their own filter of ideas or horizon.<sup>21</sup> The horizons of the author and reader are different, separated by widely different times, locations, cultures, and histories. This gap cannot be bridged completely, but some degree of understanding is possible through a "fusion of horizons" whereby the meaning of the text becomes actualized in the reader.<sup>22</sup>

Reader-response criticism, rather than pursuing truth based on empirical evidence, focus on "truthfulness" which needs no demonstration since it depends only on a given reader's acceptance of statements as true.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the focus of such methods is on the reader of the text rather than the text itself; "meaning [is] uncovered in an experience of the reader."<sup>24</sup> Thus, like the historical-critical method, reader-response criticism places the interpreter above the text as the ultimate determiner of meaning.

### *Impact of Critical Methods on Biblical Interpretation*

Both the historical-critical method and reader-response criticism have had a devastating impact on biblical interpretation. The historical-critical method reduces the Bible as the Word of God to merely a human word, shaped by the same historical processes that have shaped other great examples of literature. It also prioritizes the empirical evidence gathered from surrounding religions and cultures as the norms for understanding the Bible. The entire procedure, which dissects the various biblical books into its many literary strands and traditions, leaves the Bible as a fragmented book rather than the harmonious and unified revelation of God.

Reader-response criticism, while focusing on the unity and coherence of the various biblical books, disconnects the Bible from history and removes biblical interpretation from the realm of consistency and certainty. As a result, even contradictory interpretations may be equally valid as long as they are based on an intelligent and coherent reading of the text. Changing the focus from the text itself to the reader of the text has opened the door to a variety of agenda-driven interpretations including Marxist, feminist, and various ethnic readings of Scripture.

By contrast to reader-centered approaches, a biblical approach is a text-centered approach along the lines described by E. D. Hirsch.<sup>25</sup> According to Hirsch, "meaning" adheres within the text itself, based on what the author meant to say by the linguistic signs employed. Because meaning is based on the text, it is retained in the text and is as

<sup>20</sup> An example of this principle in connection with reconstructions of the development of the Ten Commandments is given in Hasel, 91-92.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. McKnight, 141.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming; New York: Seabury, 1975); Gadamer's German term for "fusion of horizons" is *Horizontverschmelzung*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 265. Similar is Stuhlmacher's "Hermeneutics of Consent" (83-87), on which see Hasel, 81.

<sup>24</sup> McKnight, 267.

<sup>25</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967).

unchanging as the text itself. “Significance,” on the other hand, refers to the application of the text. It implies a relationship between the meaning of the text and a person and situation in the present. Therefore, while the meaning of the text does not change, its significance may change as the needs and situations change. It is the task of interpretation to identify the meaning of the text through the process of exegesis using the biblically-based method described above and then to apply that meaning to the present.

### *Applying Biblical Hermeneutics in the Twenty-First Century*

One of the clearest passages of Scripture dealing with the hermeneutical principles we have been discussing is Luke 24, which describes two disciples returning home to Emmaus after observing the Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus approaches them and initiates a conversation with them by asking them what they were discussing. The disciples rattle off in quick succession a number of facts:

- Jesus was a prophet mighty in word and deed (v. 19).
- The Jewish leaders delivered him to the Romans to be crucified (v. 20).
- “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21).
- The third day, the empty tomb, the women’s story (vv. 21-23).
- The women’s story was confirmed, the empty tomb, no trace of Jesus (v. 24).

Everything these two disciples said was true. They were incontrovertible facts. They could be empirically established. They had facts of history and lines of evidence but, instead of all this leading them to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, it only led them to doubt. Why? What kept the disciples from believing? In addition to the facts, they also held certain presuppositions. The truth of Jesus as the Messiah was in conflict with their established ideas.

#### *Crucial Role of Presuppositions*

Two key presuppositions combined with a deduction from the facts of history related to Jesus of Nazareth led these disciples to a logical conclusion. The first presupposition is clear from the fact that they “were hoping” (*ēlpizomen*) that Jesus was the one who “was about to deliver Israel” (*mellōn lytrousthai*). In other words, they expected the Messiah to liberate them from the Romans.<sup>26</sup> Their second presupposition is closely related to the first: by definition, the Messiah would not fail (Ps 2; cf. Isa 42:4). Based on these two presuppositions and in view of the fact that Jesus was crucified by the Romans, the disciples reached the logical conclusion: Jesus could not be the Messiah. Upon closer examination, the text itself reveals their hermeneutical errors:

1. Their understanding was not based on *all* that the prophets had said.
2. Apparently, the problem was not that they had not *read* it all, but they did not *believe* it all (v. 25).
3. Jesus himself had explained several times that he would die, but the disciples did not believe it (vv. 5-8; cf. 9:22, 43-45; 18:31-34).
4. The “third day” should have been an evidence for faith (v. 21; cf. vv. 22-23, 11).

Even though these disciples believed the Scriptures, they did not allow them to correct their wrong presuppositions and, as a result, they came to wrong conclusions. So Jesus

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<sup>26</sup> On the use of *lutroō* in the sense of liberation, see BDAG 606.2, citing Ps 118:134 as well as 1 Macc 4:11 and *Ps.Sol.* 8:30; 9:1.

proceeds to correct their mistakes and to show them some of the important principles for correct interpretation already discussed.

There is nothing wrong with presuppositions in themselves, as long as they are biblical. The problem with the disciples was that their presuppositions were not entirely biblical. They were based in part on a limited study and grasp of the Scriptures, but also on popular misconceptions. Some of these misconceptions were closely related to Jewish thinking and culture, which raises the whole issue of how culture and meaning relate and the potential impact of culture on interpretation.

### *Culture and Interpretation*

As pointed out above, the biblical text contains many cultural elements. When these are recognized in the text, how are they to be treated? Can cultural *forms* be separated from the *meaning* conveyed by them? If so, how might that impact interpretation?

The Bible teaches universal truths through a variety of cultural forms, some of which are universal and others which are not. If both form and meaning are universal, then the interpretation is unaffected by culture and there is a *direct* application across times and cultures. If, on the other hand, a universal meaning is clothed in a temporary cultural form, then interpretation must take this into account and the application will be *indirect*. Cultural forms are frequent in Scripture. In order to determine how to decide which are universal and which are not, it will be helpful to look at some examples.

- *Sabbath*. In the case of the weekly Sabbath, form and meaning are both universal is the Sabbath. Several lines of biblical evidence make this clear: first, the Sabbath appears as part of the creation narrative (Gen 2:2-3), before the entrance of sin and before the later diversification of languages and cultures. Second, as Jesus makes clear, the Sabbath was created specifically *for* human beings—it is the only thing God made after their creation—and, as Lord of the Sabbath, he explained by precept and example how it is to be kept (Mark 2:27-28). Other sabbath days were instituted only at Sinai in connection with the temple and its rituals (Lev 23).<sup>27</sup>
- *Circumcision*. The first mention of circumcision is in connection with Abraham, who was given instructions that both he, all his male descendants, and even servants he might purchase were to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant God had made with him (Gen 17:10-14), a sign that was later codified as a requirement of all male Israelites and any non-Israelite who wished to eat the Passover (Lev 12:3; Exod 12:43-49). A number of passages explain the deeper meaning of circumcision as signifying a right covenant relationship, i.e., loving God with all one's heart and soul and no longer being stiff-necked (Deut 30:6; 10:6; cf. Rom 2:28-29). Like the presence of the temple, circumcision was no guarantee of God's favor without this right relationship (Jer 4:4; cf. 21:10-12; 22:5). In fact, the time would come when God would treat the circumcised like the uncircumcised (Jer 9:25; cf. 1 Cor 7:18-19), apparently pointing to circumcision no longer serving as a sign of the covenant. This is confirmed by the New Testament when God instructs Peter by means of a symbolic vision that he should not make any distinction between believers who are circumcised Jews and those who are uncircumcised

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<sup>27</sup> Further, see Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 391-95.

Gentiles, because God cleanses both on the basis of faith, evidencing it through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:11; 15:7-11) and symbolized by baptism (Col 2:11-13).<sup>28</sup>

- *Jew-Gentile Table Fellowship.* Peter's vision depicted a mixture of clean and unclean animals. When God commanded the apostle to kill and eat, Peter's answer ("I have never eaten anything common or unclean") reflects underlying Jewish scruples over purity in connection with food and people. The word used by Peter ("common," *koinon*) is a Jewish technical term referring to clean animals of doubtful purity, here questionable because of being mixed together with animals that were classified as unclean (Lev 11; Deut 14). Through the providential circumstances God arranged, Peter grasps the meaning of the vision: "just as the animals were to be reckoned as clean despite being mixed with the unclean, so Cornelius should be considered 'clean' despite his remaining uncircumcised."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Peter should have no qualms about eating with believing Gentiles (Acts 10:28).
- *Food Offered to Idols.* If believing Jews and Gentiles could eat together, what about food that may have been offered to idols? The apostolic decree, based on the laws of Israel pertaining to Gentiles living among them (Acts 15:29; cf. Lev 17-18),<sup>30</sup> stipulated that believing Gentiles would not eat such food. Paul, in affirming this requirement, clarifies its application based on whether or not there was an idolatrous intention (1 Cor 8-10): "(1) Jesus-believers were not to eat food in a pagan cultic context; and (2) Outside of a pagan cultic context, indeterminate food was permitted while known idol-food was forbidden. Paul's approach to idol-food was consistent with the apostolic decree, but it was a more contextualized application of the principle."<sup>31</sup> In other words, the apostolic decree, based on levitical law applicable to Gentiles, was applied in a new setting to address issues not clearly answered by the decree.
- *Baptism.* The Christian ordinance of baptism derives from a Jewish cultural form of self-immersion in water for purification from ceremonial defilement (*baptizō*).<sup>32</sup> Christian baptism is so culturally offensive to Muslims that some suggest an alternate form is necessary.<sup>33</sup> The meaning, however, is inseparable from the form, which transcends the meaning of circumcision in being egalitarian and symbolic of the believer's being washed from sin, identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and acceptance of Him as Saviour (Rom 6). Furthermore, the command is given in a universal setting ("all nations," Matt 28:19). Therefore, the form is universal and unchanging. In this case, the offense results not simply from

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<sup>28</sup> Further see Clinton Wahlen, "Peter's Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity," *NTS* 51 (2005): 505-18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 515. See also idem, "Did Jesus Make All Foods Clean?" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* (ed. Gerhard Pfandl; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 301-4.

<sup>30</sup> Wahlen, "Peter's Vision," 518.

<sup>31</sup> David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23* (WUNT 2/304; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 108, cf. 206.

<sup>32</sup> The verb is used in middle and passive forms respectively in Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38.

<sup>33</sup> See Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* (2d ed.; Waynesboro, Ga.: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 203-8 for a discussion.

a clash of cultures but from a clash of *convictions* of two religious cultures, Christianity and Islam.

- *Slavery*. God did not create human beings to live in slavery. He redeemed Israel from slavery and provided legal protections so that no Israelite would ever be sold into perpetual servitude. However, provision was made for a person unable to pay his debts to work off his or her indebtedness through indentured service which lasted six years (Exod 21:2-6). Even so, these servants had legal protections: they were to be treated fairly, were to be given rest from their labors on Sabbath (Exod 20:10), and had to be set free after fulfilling their term of service. No such provision for servants existed in the church. Through Christ's sacrifice the door of salvation is open to everyone—rich and poor, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28)—and through God's grace we are all free moral agents. New Testament references to slavery are to the circumstances that existed under Roman law, which both Jews and Christians had to put up with even though “from the beginning it was not so” (cf. Matt 19:3-8). Therefore, Christians are instructed to treat slaves, in the home and in the church, with compassion as fellow-servants of Christ (1 Cor 7:22-23) because, as believers, we are all slaves, with Christ as our one Master (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1). In the Lord, then, no one is really a slave, but a sister or a brother (Phlm 16).

### *Conclusion*

Scholarly study of the Bible is still largely dominated by critical approaches which elevate the human above the divine and subordinate God's Word to the conclusions reached on the basis of hermeneutical principles foreign to Scripture. Even the more recent literary approaches, while focusing on the unity of the book or writing being studied, are based on these critical presuppositions. They often intentionally bring to the study of Scripture ideologies and agendas that often hinder rather than help the hearing of God's Word. Barriers to understanding include fact-based investigations divorced from faith, pre-conceived but wrong ideas left unexamined, and a failure to hear and believe all that God has said.

The Bible writers' handling of Scripture reveals the method we should use in its interpretation, which includes acceptance of the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice and as a trustworthy, clear, and harmonious revelation of God, Scripture as its own best interpreter, and manifesting a humble, Spirit-guided approach in its study. Only thus may we be confident of reaching correct conclusions regarding the meaning of biblical passages and appropriately applying them to our present context.

Historical and cultural elements found in the Bible must be recognized and understood. Scripture teaches universal truths through a variety of forms. Some of these forms are universal and unchanging, such as the Sabbath and baptism. Others, like circumcision, are cultural and therefore of potentially more limited application. Even in the case of circumcision, however, the spiritual significance of its symbolism continues to be relevant for Christians. Interpreters should be extremely cautious in concluding that a given cultural form in Scripture pertains only to a given time or place. In fact, there would appear to be no secure basis to reach such conclusions in the absence of clear inspired indicators within the horizon of Scripture itself that such is the case because, through divine foresight, its horizon extends far beyond that of the human author to accomplish God's purposes until the end of time (Isa 55:11).