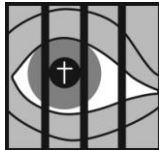


How to Study the Bible  
Written and Copyrighted  
by  
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Written and Copyrighted  
11/19/2009  
for  
My Brothers in Christ  
Who are serious students of the Bible  
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OPENING



BLIND EYES

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## Prayer

Before studying the Bible, we need ask God to open our eyes, ears and hearts so that we can properly hear from God. Hebrews 4:12-13 reminds us of the Scriptures function.

<sup>4:12</sup> Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

We can use this prayer prior to Bible study.

Almighty God,  
to you all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from you no secrets are hidden.  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name,  
through Christ our Lord.  
Lord, open our hearts and minds  
by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
that, as the Scriptures are read  
we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

### What is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of various books written by various authors at various times in various languages. The Bible contains at least 66 different books (the Bibles of the Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church contain more books). Some of the books were written by such people as Paul, Peter, John and James. Some parts of the Bible are as old as about 1,000 B.C. and some as recent as about 150 A.D. Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. Some of it is written in Aramaic. All of the New Testament is written in Greek.

On a deeper level the Bible is an inspired human response to God's revelation. The Bible is inspired but it is not dictated by God.

- In the beginning Luke's gospel account, Luke claims that he has investigated the life of Jesus carefully. Such investigation would be unnecessary if the Bible were dictated. All Luke would have to say is, "Thus says the Lord, ..." Instead Luke begins his gospel account with:

Luke 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, 1:2 just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, 1:3 it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to

write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 1:4 that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

Basically Luke informs Theophilus his gospel account is the result of careful investigative reporting. Such reporting would be unnecessary if his gospel account were dictated by God.

Furthermore, the proper title of Luke's Gospel is "According to Luke (*Κατά Λουκάν*)."  
This means that Luke is not the gospel. Jesus' life, death and teachings are the gospel. Luke bears witness to this gospel.

The various gospel writers recorded the life of Jesus from their own perspective. For example in the Gospel according to Mark 4:20, the good soil will produce a crop thirty times, sixty times and even a hundred times what was sown. In the Gospel according to Matthew 13:23, the good soil produces a crop a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Note the different order of the numbers. In a trial, isn't evidence more convincing if several witnesses tell the story from their own perspective rather than all witnesses telling the same story without any variation? Furthermore, the gospel accounts were written to different audiences with different problems.

- God is referred to in the third person rather than the first person.

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

If Genesis 1:1 were dictated by God, it would probably read, "Thus says God, 'In the beginning, I created the heavens and the earth.'"

- Even a casual reading of the Bible indicates that there are various literary styles. Compare for example the book of Amos with the book of Hosea in the Old Testament. Compare the gospel according to Mark with the gospel according to John for an example from the New Testament. The careful reader will have to conclude that there are various literary styles in the Bible.
- A comparison of 1 Kings 21:17-19 with 21:20-24 indicates that even prophets were free to put God's messages into their own words. This is a very important passage because it is the only place in the Bible where we as readers not only can overhear what God commands the prophet to say, but also overhear what the prophet actually says.

In 1 Kings 21:17 God tells Elijah what to proclaim.

1 Kings 21:17 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,  
21:18 "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. 21:19 And you shall say to him, Thus says the LORD, "Have you killed, and also taken possession?"

And you shall say to him, Thus says the LORD: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."""

In 1 Kings 21:20-24 Elijah proclaims God's message to Ahab in Elijah's own words.

21:20 Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD. 21:21 Behold, I will bring evil upon you; I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; 21:22 and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. 21:23 And of Jezebel the LORD also said, The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. 21:24 Any one belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat."

Note that Elijah does not repeat what God says word for word instead he has the freedom to put God's message into his own words. Of course, his freedom is limited if he is going to be faithful to the message God instructed him to proclaim. He cannot faithfully proclaim, "Thus says the Lord, 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.'"

- The Psalms would be very difficult to understand if God dictated them.

Psalms 23:1 provides an example of a psalm of praise that would be difficult to understand if God dictated it.

Psalms 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

If God dictated this it would mean something like The Lord is the Lord's shepherd, the Lord shall not want. In addition, don't the psalms of praise become less impressive if God simply writes love letters to himself?

Psalms 13:1 provides an example of a psalm of lament or complaint that would be difficult to understand if God dictated it.

Psalms 13:1 How long, LORD, will you leave me forgotten, how long will you hide your face from me?

If God dictated this, it would mean something like, how long, Lord, will you leave the Lord forgotten, how long will you hide your face from the Lord. Doesn't it seem strange that God would write letters of complaint to himself?

- The Bible is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16-17) in that God has breathed the breath of life into it so that it might instruct us in theology and ethics.

According to Genesis 2:7, 15, God breathes the breath of life into man so that he can fulfill his job in the garden. His job was to till and keep the garden.

Genesis 2:7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.  
2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

In 2 Tim 3:16, God breathes the breath of life into Scripture so that it might fulfill its job. The job of Scripture is to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God might be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Tim. 3:16 All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 3:17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The word “and” in “inspired by God and profitable...” is an explanation of what it means that the Bible is inspired.

## What does the Bible mean?

In our quest to interpret the Bible properly, we must acknowledge what the Bible "means" involves several different layers of understanding. The word “mean” can mean several different things. It can mean “what it means to me” or “what my church says the Bible means” or even, “what I want it to mean.” It is helpful to distinguish these different layers of meaning.

**1. Original Meaning** One layer of meaning is the meaning that the text had for the original author. Of course, the original author is not available for us to interview. In order to find the original author’s meaning we must do several things. This process of the interpretation of a text involves bringing the meaning out of the text. This is opposed to reading a predetermined meaning into a text with the assumption that the author shares our beliefs.

- Which is the best copy? We must rely on scholars to determine the best copy of the text. We don’t have the original copy of any of the books of the Bible. Instead we have various copies of the various books of the Bible. Scholars compare these various manuscripts to determine what the original author actually wrote. Even though we do not have the original copy of any of the books of the Bible, scholars can reconstruct the original text with about 98% agreement. The reconstruction of the original text is necessary for almost all ancient texts.

Isaiah 56:6 provides an example of textual variation in the Old Testament. I have italicized the differences between two Hebrew manuscripts.

And the sons of the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, *to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord*, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and hold fast my covenant”

And the sons of the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, *to bless the name of the Lord*, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and hold fast my covenant”

The first reading reflects the original reading. The second reading comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jews who suffered opposition from both the Roman Empire and Jews in power in Jerusalem copied this manuscript. The scribes who copied the second manuscript could neither abide that Gentiles (all people who were not Jews) might minister to God as priest (implied by the Hebrew word used for service) nor that Gentiles might love God.

The last chapter of the gospel of Mark provides an example of textual variation in the New Testament. Manuscripts support different endings to the gospel of Mark.

Some manuscripts support an abrupt ending to the gospel according to Mark so that chapter 16 ends with verse 8.

<sup>8:1</sup> When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” <sup>8</sup> So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid

Other manuscripts support another ending to the gospel account. They add after Mark 16:8:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Other manuscripts support another ending to the gospel account. They add after Mark 16:8:

And having arisen early on the Sabbath he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and announced it to those who had been with him while they were mourning and weeping. And they, having heard that he lived, and that he had been seen by her, did not believe. And after these things he appeared in another form to two of them while they were walking along, going to the country. And they went away and announced it to the others, but they did not believe them.

And afterward he appeared to the eleven as they reclined, and he reproached their lack of belief and their hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him risen. And he said to them: Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

He who has believed and been baptized will be saved, but he who has not believed will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who have believed: In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues, and in their hands they will pick up serpents, and if they should drink any deadly thing it will not harm them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will get well. So the Lord Jesus, after speaking with them, was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through the accompanying signs.

Scholars think either the gospel according to Mark originally ended abruptly or it had conclusion that has been lost. The longer endings reflect scribes desires to harmonize the ending of Mark with those of Matthew and Luke.

We have to rely upon good translations and commentaries to discern which manuscripts most likely reflect the original.

- Which is the best translation? We must rely on scholars to provide the best translation of texts originally written in a foreign language. Knowledge of the original languages affects Biblical Interpretation. Most of the authors of the Old Testament wrote in Hebrew. Some also wrote in Aramaic. Authors of the New Testament wrote in Greek. There is the old saying that something gets lost in translation. We could also observe that something gets *added* in translation. It helps to compare translations, consult commentaries and do word studies (I will explain more about this in a later paper) in order to understand the meaning of the original author.

For example, Genesis 2:18 states “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”

In English, the word “helper” implies inferiority. I learned in my first job as a teenager that a carpenter’s helper does all of the jobs that the carpenter is too lazy to do. In Hebrew, the word for helper does not imply inferiority. In Hebrew, “helper” means one who gives assistance that is necessary to the well-being of the person who receives help. According to some passages in the Old Testament, God helps people. We certainly would not conclude that God is in any way inferior to people. Here are some passages in which God helps people.

Exodus <sup>18:4</sup> Moses said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"

Deuteronomy <sup>33:7</sup>, And this Moses said of Judah: "Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah, and bring him in to his people. With thy hands contend for him, and be a help against his adversaries."

1 Samuel <sup>7:12</sup> Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Hitherto the LORD has helped us."

These examples demonstrate that knowledge of the original languages may help us to discover the meaning intended by the author.

- What kind of literature is this? It is important that we determine what kind of literature we are reading.

Whenever we read a piece of literature, we ask ourselves at least two questions at the same time. What does the author mean? What kind of literature are we reading? We make different assumptions about the meaning of a text based upon our assumptions about the type of literature we read. Two basic forms of literature are poetry and prose. Songs are often written in poetry. Stories are often written in prose. Experienced readers do not read poetry in the same way they read prose.

Modern readers would be confused if they read a law code the same way they read a comic book. Those who read the Bible will be similarly confused if they read prose as if it were poetry. They will see things that are not there and miss things that are there.

Some readers assume that the Bible contains only one kind of literature. However, the Bible has both prose and poetry. Furthermore, there are different types of prose. For example, there are narratives, letters, parables, law codes and gospel accounts. In addition, there are different types of poetry. For example, there are psalms, victory songs, prophetic proclamations, proverbs and psalms.

Let us look at Psalm 23 for example.

- <sup>23:1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
    he leads me beside still waters;  
<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.  
    He leads me in right paths  
    for his name's sake.  
<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
    I fear no evil;  
    for you are with me;  
    your rod and your staff—  
    they comfort me.  
<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
    in the presence of my enemies;  
    you anoint my head with oil;  
    my cup overflows.  
<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
    all the days of my life,  
    and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
    my whole life long.

If we were to read it as a prose historical report rather than poetry of praise, we would suppose that the speaker was a sheep and that God was a shepherd that took good care of his talkative sheep. In v.5, the speaker is a dinner guest who apparently has a dry scalp. Why else would God pour oil

on his head? God also seems to have poor eyesight. God spills wine because he cannot recognize when the cup is full. In v.6, God provides a house for this apparently homeless person.

However, if we recognize Psalm 23 as poetry of praise, we realize that the psalmist claims that God cares for him even as a shepherd cares for his sheep. In v. 5, the psalmist praises God for providing him such security that he can eat in the presence of his enemies with no anxiety. Furthermore, God provides fullness of joy (oil and wine were associated with joyful feasts). In v.6, the psalmist praises God because God will show goodness and mercy to him throughout his life so that he will continually live in the presence of God.

- Caution: Read with care We need to read carefully. For example, we need to pay careful attention to changes of speaker and addressee. This is especially important in Hebrew poetry.

For example, Psalm 121 reads as follows:

<sup>132:1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.  
<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
<sup>7</sup> The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
<sup>8</sup> The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.

If we read this carefully, we will recognize that it actually records a conversation. In verse 1, the psalmist asks who will protect him as on his journey. In verse 2, the psalmist assures himself that God will help him. In verse 3, someone else speaks to the psalmist. In verse 3, “your” refers to the psalmist and “he” refers to God. This new speaker assures the psalmist that God will care for him.

If we did not read carefully, we would miss the conversation and not correctly interpret the psalm.

- Who is the audience? It helps to learn the identity of the audience

Paul wrote letters to the church at Corinth (1 and 2 Corinthians). Corinth was an important city in the Roman Empire known for its sexual immorality. It is probably no accident that Paul addresses the problem of sexual immorality in both of his letters to the church in Corinth.

We can learn the identity of the audience and their circumstances by consulting Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries.

- Culture It is important to understand the cultures of the Bible and how it might affect interpretation.

Some passages are difficult to understand without knowledge of Hebrew culture. Genesis 15:7-17 provides a good example.

<sup>15:7</sup> And God said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."

<sup>8</sup> But Abraham said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

<sup>9</sup> He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." <sup>10</sup> And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two <sup>11</sup> And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away <sup>12</sup> As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. <sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abram, Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; <sup>14</sup> but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age <sup>16</sup> And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Israel was one of the nations that existed in the ancient Near East. In that time and place, kings made treaties with one another by cutting up animals and placing them on opposite sides of a path. The kings walked between the cut up animals and pledged that if they did not keep the treaty, they should be killed even as the animals were killed. It was kind of like signing on the dotted line. God, represented by a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch alone passes between the cut up animals. God alone signs on the dotted line and pledges to keep the covenant.

Without knowledge of Hebrew culture, we might miss the significance of this passage. We can find knowledge of Hebrew culture in Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries.

- Does history affect the meaning? We should discern how the history of Israel and the early church might affect interpretation.

Ezekiel addressed an audience living in Babylon. Babylon's army had defeated Israel's army. It was common for people who were defeated by foreign armies to

assume that the gods of the foreign nations were stronger than their gods. Ezekiel emphasizes that Israel imprisonment was the result of its unfaithfulness to God of Israel, not the supposed superior strength of the gods of Babylon.

We can learn about the history of Israel and the early church by consulting Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries.

- Is the author quoting another passage? We need to determine whether the author quotes from another passage and if so, why? What meaning does the passage he quotes from mean in its original context? What new meaning does it have in its new context? Commentaries can help us discern when an author quotes another passage. I will provide an example in the section “**How does it fit with the rest of the Scriptures?**”
- Who IS the author? It is helpful to discover the identity of the author.

The apostle Paul writes several of the books from the New Testament. Paul often uses terms such as “righteousness,” “flesh” “law,” etc. If we are uncertain about the meaning of a term in one book written by Paul, we may be able to define it by observing how Paul uses the word in other books.

It is difficult to identify the author of many books of the Old Testament. For example, no one knows who wrote the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Ruth, Job, etc.

Sometimes the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament. It might seem that we can rely on these quotations to determine who wrote various books in the Old Testament. However, the authors of the books of the New Testament used different conventions for quotation that modern authors do. For example, the unknown author of the book of Hebrews (a book in the New Testament) states,

Hebrews <sup>2:6</sup> But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?"

The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 8:4.

<sup>8:4</sup> What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

The author does not bother to identify the source. This certainly differs from the way that modern authors quote sources. Modern authors often identify the author, the book, the page number, the date of publication etc. Certainly, in a judicial appeal it would not do to begin a quotation with “Someone has testified somewhere....”

It seems that the authors of the New Testament were interested in the general location of the passage in the Old Testament rather than its author. During the time the New Testament was written, the Old Testament was divided into the Law, the

Prophets and the Writings. The following references demonstrate the New Testament authors' interest in the general location of a passage rather than the identity of its author.

Matthew <sup>27:9</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, <sup>10</sup> and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

If Matthew quoted the Old Testament using the same conventions that modern authors do, we ought to be able to find the passage that Matthew quotes in the book of Jeremiah. However, none of the verses of Jeremiah provides the text that Matthew quotes. Here are the closest verses from the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah <sup>18:2</sup> "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words."

<sup>19:2</sup> and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

<sup>19:11</sup> and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In Topheth they shall bury until there is no more room to bury.

<sup>32:6</sup> Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>7</sup> Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." <sup>8</sup> Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. <sup>9</sup> And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. <sup>10</sup> I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales.

The Old Testament passage closest to Matthew 27:9-10 is Zechariah 11:12-13

<sup>11:12</sup> I then said to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. <sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to me, "Throw it into the treasury" --this lordly price at which I was valued by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the LORD.

Mark 1: 2-3 provides another example:

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

This is a quotation of both Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1

Isaiah <sup>40:3</sup> A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Malachi <sup>3:1</sup> See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

If the New Testament's quotation identified the author of Old Testament books, we would have to conclude that Jeremiah wrote both Jeremiah and Zechariah and that Isaiah wrote both Isaiah and Malachi. It seems better to suppose that the New Testament authors were concerned to refer the reader to the Prophetic scrolls instead of the Law scrolls or the Writings scrolls.

**2. How does it fit with the rest of the Scriptures?** Another level of meaning is provided by the way that the rest of the Bible interacts with the passage or ideas expressed in the passage we study. Consultation of the rest of the Scriptures guards against taking things out of context and making improper applications. However, we should consult the meaning of the rest of the Scriptures only after determining the original author's meaning.

Christians often read the Old Testament as a book of questions and the New Testament as a book of answers. However, we should not assume that the authors of the New Testament use an Old Testament passage in a way that explains the intention of the original author. If we make this assumption, we will miss the development that occurs throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament and we may become confused. The interpretation of Hosea 11:1-2 and Matthew 2:13-15 warns us of the danger of assuming that the authors of the New Testament use an Old Testament passage in a way that explains the intention of the original author.

Hosea <sup>11:1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup> The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols.

Matthew <sup>2:13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

It is confusing if we were to follow the practice of treating the Old Testament as a book of questions and the New Testament as a book of answers. If we were to read Matthew's meaning back into Hosea, Hosea 11:1 would mean, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Jesus). The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baal's and burning incense to idols." This of course does not make sense. Why is Jesus referred to as "them" or "they?" What about Jesus offering sacrifice to Baals and offering incense to idols? It is better to figure out what Hosea means in its context and what Matthew means in its context. New Testament authors may use the Old Testament artistically instead of literally. This warns us of the danger of assuming that the authors of the New Testament use an Old Testament passage in a way that explains the intention of an Old Testament author.

In Hosea 11: 1-7, Hosea draws a contrast between God's care for Israel and Israel's rebellion. This is a version of the "this is what we have done for you and this is the way you have repaid us" speech many of us heard as children. The goal of this speech is to induce guilt and hopefully bring about repentance. Matthew uses part of Hosea's speech to show that God took care of Jesus just as God took care of Israel. However, unlike Israel, Jesus responded to God's care with obedience.

We consult commentaries to find if another passage quotes the passage we study.

**3. Communities' Meaning** Another level of the meaning of a text is the meaning that various communities have discerned in the Bible over the course of time. We examine the traditional context in order to learn how a Christians, Jews and secular scholars have interpreted the passage from the beginning to present. Study of communities' interpretations may help us to overcome the limitations that the spirit of our time may impose upon us. However, we must not assume a community's interpretation of a passage explains the original author's intention.

We can trace the way various communities have interpreted a text by reading commentaries, sermons and debates throughout the history of the church. Jewish and secular scholars have often become involved in these debates and have provided their own commentaries.

**4. Personal Beliefs about God** Scriptures should inform our beliefs about God. However, there is a danger that we may allow our own beliefs about God to influence our interpretation of the Scriptures.

When we interpret the Bible properly, we unpack the meaning of a text the original author placed there. We must guard against slipping something into the package and claiming it was originally there. We need to guard against our often unspoken assumption that the Biblical authors shared our own beliefs.

God has revealed himself progressively throughout the Scriptures. Hebrews 1:1-3 states:

<sup>1:1</sup> Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. <sup>3</sup> He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

According to the author of Hebrews, Christ's revelation is superior to the records of God's previous revelations. God has communicated most clearly in Christ since Christ conveys the very imprint of God's very being. I hope that we base our beliefs upon the entirety of the Scriptures and upon God's self-disclosure in Christ. If we allow our own beliefs about God to influence the interpretation of earlier texts, we will miss the progression of revelation because we slip later theological developments into earlier texts.

For example, on the basis on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, I affirm without reservation the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. However, I recognize that in the Scriptures, there is an evolution of belief in life after death. For much of the Old Testament, the authors believed that no one could escape the power of death. In Psalm 89:46-47, the psalmist gives voice to this.

<sup>48</sup> Who can live and never see death?  
Who can escape the power of Sheol?

In Psalm 6:4-5, the psalmist begs God to save him because if he dies; he can neither remember nor praise God after his death.

<sup>4</sup> Turn, O LORD, save my life;  
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.  
<sup>5</sup> For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
in Sheol who can give you praise?

Although I believe in the bodily resurrection, I should not interpret earlier Scriptures so that they share this belief.

We must guard against reading our own personal beliefs about God back into the Scriptures.

**5. Modern Meaning / Application** Another level of the meaning of the text is modern context. In this context, we seek to apply the text to the modern world. Unless we allow the Scriptures to change our actions, we do not properly study the Scriptures. As a Christian, I think it is wise to judge all applications by the life and teachings of Christ. For example, perhaps one could justify a holy war based on certain passages from the Old Testament. Jesus' clear teachings on violence and the love of one's enemies would not permit such an application.

We have to depend upon the Holy Spirit to teach us how to apply the text. It helps to meditate in silence after studying the Scriptures and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may use someone in the church to help us apply the text. However, it is important to listen to the Holy Spirit.

James 1:22-25 reminds us of the importance of listening and obeying the Scriptures.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.

I believe we should move from interpretation to application. We should not start with an application and then interpret the Scriptures so that they agree with this application.

## **The Bible's Many Levels of Meaning**

With all of these different levels of meaning, where do we begin? I think it works best to begin with the original author's meaning. Then consult how the rest of the Scriptures interact with the passage we study. Then consult how various communities have interpreted the passage. Then ask how this passage informs our beliefs about God. Finally, we should apply the text. This method guards us against reading things into the text that are not there. It is my hope that by pointing out the various levels of meaning, we may both think more carefully and communicate more clearly with one another.

I hope too that this paper will encourage us to become involved in a life long pursuit of the interpretation and application of the Scriptures. Every time I preach in Monroe, I model this interpretive method. I will also model this method in the following example with a series of texts.

### **Looking at Christ's Deity Using This Method**

Do you think it is important that Christians preached from the beginning that Jesus was God incarnate? Do you think it is important that the deity of Christ was not just a development in later Christian thought? If you do think it is important, you might want to read carefully the following demonstration of the proper way to study the Bible.

Babylon conquered Israel in about 587 B.C. Isaiah 40-55 records the words of a prophet who ministered to Israel towards the end of its imprisonment in Babylon. This is clear from Isaiah 48:20 where the prophet commands Israel to leave Babylon and flee Chaldea (another poetic name for Babylon).

<sup>20</sup> Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,  
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,  
send it forth to the end of the earth;  
say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!"

The command presumes that the audience is able to obey it. The command, "Get out of Monroe!" presumes that the audience is located in Monroe. If Israel is not located in Babylon, this commandment is ridiculous.

While Israel was in Babylon, it accused God of weakness. Remember conquered nations often assumed that the conqueror's gods were stronger. Israel also accused God of unfaithfulness to the covenants God had made with it. They, like us, blamed God for their failures. Isaiah 50:1-3 reflects this perspective.

<sup>50:1</sup> Thus says the LORD:  
Where is your mother's bill of divorce  
with which I put her away?  
Or which of my creditors is it  
to whom I have sold you?  
No, because of your sins you were sold,  
and for your transgressions your mother was put away.  
<sup>2</sup> Why was no one there when I came?  
Why did no one answer when I called?

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver?  
By my rebuke I dry up the sea,  
I make the rivers a desert;  
their fish stink for lack of water,  
and die of thirst  
<sup>3</sup> I clothe the heavens with blackness,  
and make sackcloth their covering.

In Hebrew poetry, writers likened Jerusalem to the exiles' mother. Writers likened the covenant between God and Israel to a marriage. When Israel accused God of walking out on their mother, they said, in so many words, that God broke his covenant promises. The prophet reminds Israel that their imprisonment was the result of their own crimes and not God's. In v. 2, God defends himself against the charge of weakness. In Hebrew, the hand is associated with power. To be "short handed" was not to lack sufficient employees. To be "short handed" was to lack sufficient power. Verses 2-3 assert that God has sufficient power to bring about both salvation and judgment. In Hebrew, the sea represents chaos. God claims that he can overcome chaos with a mere command. In Hebrew, darkness was a figure of speech for judgment. God argues that the exile was a result of his judgment and not the power of the Babylonian's gods.

In Isaiah 45:1-7, God calls Cyrus to destroy Babylon and predicts his victories. God claims the power to bring both judgment and salvation.

<sup>45:1</sup> Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,  
whose right hand I have grasped  
to subdue nations before him  
and strip kings of their robes,  
to open doors before him—  
and the gates shall not be closed:  
<sup>2</sup> I will go before you  
and level the mountains,,  
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze  
and cut through the bars of iron,  
<sup>3</sup> I will give you the treasures of darkness  
and riches hidden in secret places,  
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,  
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.  
<sup>4</sup> For the sake of my servant Jacob,  
and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name,  
I surname you, though you do not know me.  
<sup>5</sup> I am the LORD, and there is no other;  
besides me there is no god.  
I arm you, though you do not know me,  
<sup>6</sup> so that they may know, from the rising of the sun  
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;  
I am the LORD, and there is no other.  
<sup>7</sup> I form light and create darkness,  
I make weal and create woe;  
I the LORD do all these things.

Let us keep this background in mind as we approach Isaiah 45:18-25.

<sup>45:18</sup> For thus says the LORD,  
who created the heavens  
(he is God!),  
who formed the earth and made it  
(he established it;  
he did not create it a chaos,  
he formed it to be inhabited!):  
I am the LORD, and there is no other.  
<sup>19</sup> I did not speak in secret,  
in a land of darkness;  
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,  
“Seek me in chaos.”  
I the LORD speak the truth,  
I declare what is right.  
<sup>20</sup> Assemble yourselves and come together,  
draw near, you survivors of the nations!  
They have no knowledge—  
those who carry about their wooden idols,  
and keep on praying to a god  
that cannot save.  
<sup>21</sup> Declare and present your case;  
let them take counsel together!  
Who told this long ago?  
Who declared it of old?  
Was it not I, the LORD?  
There is no other god besides me,  
a righteous God and a Savior;  
there is no one besides me.  
<sup>22</sup> Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.  
<sup>23</sup> By myself I have sworn,  
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
a word that shall not return:  
“To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear.”  
<sup>24</sup> Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me,  
are righteousness and strength;  
all who were incensed against him  
shall come to him and be ashamed.  
<sup>25</sup> In the LORD all the offspring of Israel  
shall triumph and glory.

In 45:18-19, the prophet defends God against the charge of both weakness and covenant unfaithfulness by arguing that God created the world and that God created a good world capable of human habitation. In 45:20-21, the prophet speaking for God calls upon the foreign nations to assemble after God has defeated Babylon. He asked, who predicted Cyrus’s destruction of Babylon. This is a rhetorical question (one that does not really demand an answer) since the obvious answer is “God.” In 45:22, God calls upon the foreign nations to repent (turn to him) and experience salvation. God calls upon them to stop relying upon their supposed gods and turn to the only real God. This verse represents

the high point of monotheism in the Old Testament since it denies the existence of any other gods besides Israel's God. Israel's God is not only greater than the foreign gods. The foreign gods do not even exist. In 45:23-25, God proclaims that everyone will acknowledge his universal dominion.

Paul takes this passage up in Philippians 2:5-11.

<sup>2:5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

This passage is very important for many reasons. I will explore only one. The claim that Jesus is God incarnate is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Some have argued that the deity of Christ was a late development in Christian thought. However, this passage shows that Paul preached the deity of Christ. It was not a later development in Christian thought. According to Acts 28, Paul wrote Philippians 60 to 62 A.D. during his captivity of Rome. The gospel writers wrote their gospel accounts after Paul wrote his letters. Paul's letters are some of the earliest Christian literature.

In Philippians 2:9-10, Paul quotes from Isaiah 45:23.

<sup>23</sup> By myself I have sworn,  
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
a word that shall not return:  
“To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear.”

No good monotheistic Jew (Paul was at least that) would quote this passage from Isaiah and apply it to anyone besides God unless he believed that Jesus was God incarnate.

The careful study of the Bible that employs the methods I have provided shows that the deity of Christ was central to the Christian gospel from its earliest beginnings.