

THE VALUE OF HERMENEUTICS

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There was a time in the history of the world when communication was relatively simple. Everyone throughout the world spoke the same language and used the same vocabulary. They shared a common culture. They lived in similar places. They had a similar set of experiences that they could refer to. And everyone was eager to keep things that way. So, they began to build a tower in order to make a name for themselves and keep themselves from being scattered all over the world.

The Lord, however, had other plans. As he watched these human beings use his gift of easy communication to facilitate their blatant rebellion against him, he took action. He confused the people's language so that they no longer could understand what their neighbors were saying. Thus was erected one of the most enduring barriers to communication between one person and the next: the barrier of language.

This language barrier, however, gave birth to other barriers as well. As people scattered all over the face of the earth, they no longer shared a common culture. They no longer lived in similar places. They no longer had a common set of experiences that they could refer to. And so, even if someone were able to break through the language barrier and decode the words that someone else was saying, there still was no guarantee that they would grasp the full meaning of the speaker's message.

These barriers to communication also have had a profound effect on the most important communication of all, God's communication with us in his Word. For those of us who do not speak ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, or koine Greek as our native language, God communicates with us over the barrier of language. Since we are not ancient Hebrews living in ancient Hebrew society, nor are we first-century Jews living in the Roman Empire, God must communicate with us over the barrier of culture. Since we live thousands of years after God had the words of Scripture written down for us, his communication with us also must overcome the barrier of time. So, how is it that God can communicate with us at all? And how can we be sure that the message we're receiving truly is the message God intends us to receive?

Those are the questions we hope to answer in this paper as we discuss the value of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles that govern how we interpret and understand a message that someone else is sending us. Many times when we hear the word "hermeneutics," we think in terms of biblical hermeneutics, that is, the principles that govern how we interpret and understand Scripture in particular. But hermeneutics is not limited to

interpreting and understanding only the message of Scripture. Hermeneutics actually is something that we do countless times every day as we seek to interpret and understand the myriad of messages that come to us from a myriad of different sources.

### **How Can Anyone Understand Anyone? Hermeneutics in General**

When two people communicate with each other, the goal is for one person to convey a message to the other person so that the message is understood as intended. The person sending the message is referred to as the “sender.” The person receiving the message is referred to as the “receiver.” Practically speaking, when we’re looking at a written verbal communication, the sender is the author or writer and the receiver is the reader. When we’re looking at a spoken verbal communication, the sender is the speaker and the receiver is the hearer.

The tools used in communicating can be divided into two categories: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal tools include the words that are used to compose the message. These words are put together according to certain rules of morphology and syntax in order to communicate meaning in keeping with the grammar of the language being used. In addition, the verbal context in which the words are found affects the meaning conveyed in the message. Messages rarely occur in a vacuum. Both the words that precede the message and the words that follow it will help determine the meaning of the sender’s message.

Verbal tools, however, are not the only tools that are used in communication. Along with the verbal tools go a host of non-verbal tools that can have just as much impact on the meaning of the message as the words, their morphology, and their arrangement. “Okay, I’ll do it,” spoken with an eye roll and a deep sigh means something very different from “Okay, I’ll do it,” spoken with eager excitement. “What do YOU want?” spoken with an accusatory finger jab or with arms folded tightly across the chest is very different from “What do you want?” spoken with genuine interest by a server in a restaurant. How things are said, where they are said, the people among whom they are said, any accompanying gestures—these all will have a profound effect on the meaning conveyed by the words in a message.

Failing to recognize the meaning added by these non-verbal cues is an easy way for a receiver to not understand the sender’s message as the sender intended. Such was the case with Kim, a woman with Asperger’s Syndrome who was profiled in an episode of the National Public Radio program *Invisibilia*. Kim was unable to understand people’s emotions. Gestures and voice

inflections meant nothing to her. For her, communication was about decoding the literal meaning of the words she heard or read and trying to make that meaning fit with the emotionless world she perceived. This, of course, led to Kim constantly misunderstanding the messages people were sending her.

Eventually, Kim underwent a medical experiment designed to test the effects of high-powered magnetic fields on the brains of people with Asperger's Syndrome. She was asked to watch a video and describe what she saw.

There was a guy sitting at a computer, and a woman walked up and said "hi" to him. And they exchanged pleasantries, and then he said, "Oh, John returned your DVDs." And she said, "OK, great." And then he said, "Do you want to check them?" And she said, "Oh, OK." So she picks up the first DVD and opens it, and the camera shows that there's nothing in there. And then she closes it and puts it down. And then she picks up the second one and opens it, and it's empty again. And she closes it and puts it down. And then the guy says, "Are they OK?" And she goes, "Yup, they're OK." And then the guy says, "Would you lend him your DVDs again?" And she goes, "Sure, I would lend them again." So I'm looking at this and I'm thinking... I can't believe she'd actually be willing to lend the DVDs again after they were returned empty. Wow, she's really a generous person.<sup>1</sup>

Then the doctor pressed a high-powered magnet to Kim's head for thirty minutes. When she watched that same video again, this is what she saw.

OK, now we watch the same video again. So she walks up, they say "hi." She opens the first video. It's empty. She's angry. She slams it down. She opens the second one. She's angry. She slams it down. He says to her, "Are they OK?" And she says in a very sarcastic tone of voice, "Yes, they're OK." He asks, "Would you lend them again?" And she says in a very sarcastic tone of voice, "Sure, I would lend them again," clearly meaning no way would I lend this guy any videos again... Everything that was intended in this went completely over my head. And now I saw it—the body expression, the facial expression and the tone of voice and that whole interaction. I completely missed the meaning of the whole thing until after the TMS [magnetic treatment]. And then I saw the whole thing clearly.<sup>2</sup>

So, what can we, as receivers of a message, do to make sure that we understand a sender's message as the sender intends? The first thing we can do is make sure we know as much as we can about the sender. Who is this person? Where does he or she live? What is his or her background? What is his or her historical setting? What is his or her worldview? Does this person have any biases or presuppositions that we will want to keep in mind as we interpret the

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<sup>1</sup> "Frame of Reference," narrated by Alix Spiegel and Hanna Rosin, *Invisibilia*, *NPR*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/484359511/frame-of-reference>.

<sup>2</sup> "Frame of Reference."

message? Do we have any other interactions with this person other than through this particular message? Not all of this information will always be relevant to understanding a particular message. Not all of this information will always be available. But the better we know who the sender is, the better we will be able to understand the message that he or she is sending us.

Once we know who the sender is, we also want to know what we can about the language that the sender is using. Of course, it is essential to know whether the sender is using English, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Chinese, or some other language to convey his or her message to us. But knowing the sender's language goes far beyond just knowing the bare vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and other grammatical rules of the language. It also includes knowing the various connotative and denotative meanings of words as the sender uses them. It includes recognizing that the meanings of words can change depending on the area of the country or the world in which they are being used. It includes understanding idiomatic expressions, whose meanings cannot be determined simply by putting together the meanings of the component words. (For example, it is helpful in English to understand that if something costs "an arm and a leg," actual amputations are not required to purchase it.) In other words, knowing the sender's language also includes knowing the sender's culture, because culture and language are inseparably linked.

One of the things I like about living in Louisville, Kentucky, is that in the winter when the weather person says, "It's going to be very cold tomorrow," he or she means that the temperature will be somewhere between ten and fifteen degrees ABOVE zero. For those of you who live farther north than Louisville, Kentucky, temperatures like that mean, "I might think about wearing a sweater today." "Very cold" for you is temperatures BELOW zero, often far below zero. In fact, when I was growing up in New Ulm, Minnesota, the rule in our house was that you could wake up Dad to drive you on your paper route if it was *really* cold outside. That meant twenty degrees below zero or colder. Nineteen degrees below zero was not cold enough. Nineteen below meant, "You'd better bundle up and get going. You have papers to deliver."

Similarly, when I mention the word "derby" to many of you, not much will come to your minds. Some of you might think of a demolition derby at the county fairgrounds. Some of you might even think of the Kentucky Derby, which is run annually at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky, on the first Saturday in May. For me, however, the word "derby" is full of meaning. It means, of course, the Greatest Two Minutes in Sports which has taken place every

year for the past 142 years. But it also means the two-week Derby Festival that leads up to the first Saturday in May. It means Thunder Over Louisville, which is the largest annual fireworks show in North America. It means the bed races and the Great Steamboat Race and the balloon glow and the balloon race and the marathon and the mini-marathon. It means fantastic hats and suits and celebrities and fancy parties. It means getting to know horses with names like Fusaichi Pegasus, Barbaro, Big Brown, and American Pharoah.<sup>3</sup> It means grilling out with family and friends. It means mint juleps and a garland of roses. It means jockey silks and singing “My Old Kentucky Home.” It means all these things and more to me because I’ve lived in Louisville for eighteen years. If you don’t know these things and I start talking to you about “derby,” you won’t know what I’m talking about. You won’t understand the full meaning of my message in the way that I intend it.

Knowing the sender’s language also involves knowing how this particular sender tends to use language. You can gain insights into this by looking at other messages that the sender has written or spoken, if they are available. Are there words that he or she uses in ways that most other people don’t use them? Does he or she consistently give special meanings to certain words? Does he or she tend to use language in non-literal ways? Perhaps the sender is like one of my classmates who has a tendency to speak in hyperbole. I remember one time when he was describing how he felt when his roommate turned on his desk lamp in the middle of the night. “The angel Gabriel descended from heaven and sat on my forehead,” he said. Obviously Gabriel did not leave heaven to sit on my classmate’s forehead. But that wasn’t the message he was trying to convey. His message was that his roommate’s desk lamp was really bright and woke him up in the middle of the night. Knowing his predilection for exaggeration made it possible to understand what he was saying.

Now that we know the sender and his or her language, we turn our attention to the purpose for which the sender is sending this message. In this area, we often will find ourselves having to look for more implicit information than we did in considering who the sender is and how he or she uses language. Senders are not always explicit in indicating the purpose for which they are sending their messages. However, even if all we can gather is implicit information, knowing what we can about the sender’s purpose for sending the message is important for

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<sup>3</sup> And, yes, American Pharoah’s name is spelled correctly here. His owners spelled his name differently from the way you spell the title of the ancient king of Egypt.

understanding the message as the sender intends. In his book *Performing without a Stage: The Art of Literary Translation*, Robert Wechsler writes,

To determine an author's thought processes, where they go beyond the conventions of his language, a translator must also determine the author's intent. But this is a thorny subject: critics hate to get into it, and writers tend to say it doesn't exist, that a book is what it is, not what its author intended. But it's hard to understand a book without at least speculating about intent.<sup>4</sup>

So what clues can we gather to form an idea about the purpose for which the sender is sending his or her message (if the sender has not explicitly stated the purpose)? One of the first clues we can look at is the genre of the message, that is, what kind of writing or speaking this is. Different genres of messages produce vastly different sets of expectations that the receiver then uses when interpreting the message. When you read an article on the front page of the newspaper about an event that happened yesterday, you expect that the purpose of the article is to inform you. You expect that the language used will be literal rather than non-literal. You expect that the people and places referred to in the article are actual people and places and are not made up by the writer. So, as you read the article, you interpret the message of the article in keeping with those expectations. The expectations help you understand the purpose of the message, which then helps you understand the meaning of the message. If, however, you turn to the opinion page and read an editorial about that same event, your expectations will be different. While you still expect that the language will be literal rather than non-literal and that the people and places described are actual people and places, you no longer expect that the purpose of the message is simply to inform you. Instead, you expect that the purpose of the editorial is to persuade you to adopt a particular opinion. And you will use that expectation as you seek to understand the message of the editorial as the sender intended.

Similar things happen when you read or listen to poetry. Poetry can be used to do many different things. It can be used to inform. It can be used to persuade. It is particularly useful for causing an emotional response in the receiver. When you look at the language used in poetry, you expect it to be much more non-literal than the language used in a newspaper article. Rarely will a literal understanding of the words of a poem accurately convey the poem's actual message. You expect that in poetry rhythm and rhyme can convey meaning. Even the physical placement

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Wechsler, *Performing Without a Stage: The Art of Literary Translation* (North Haven, CT: Catbird Press, 1998), 139.

of the words on the page can convey meaning. So, as you read a poem, you keep all these expectations in mind and use them as you seek to understand the message of the poem as the sender intends.

You also can gather clues to the purpose of a message by looking at the occasion for the message. If a person stands up and speaks in front of a group of people gathered to celebrate a wedding, you expect that the purpose of that message is to toast the wedding couple and wish them well. If that same person stands up and speaks in front of a group of gathered business people, you expect that the purpose of that message is to present a business proposal or offer business advice. If that same person stands up and speaks in front of a group of children seated in desks, you expect that the purpose of that message is to teach the children something. The occasion for the message is an important factor to consider as we seek to understand the purpose of a message.

So is the kind of communication event the message is intended to be a part of. The characters “Cul&r” probably won’t mean anything to you if you encounter them as part of a technical dissertation on molecular chemistry. Are they a formula? Do they signify some special copper isotope? Those characters seem out of place in that type of communication event. They make perfect sense, however, if you encounter them in a text message from your child. In that type of communication event, it is common for the sender to almost indecipherably abbreviate words and phrases in order to convey maximum information with a minimum of characters. With that understanding of the type of communication event the message is a part of, you can understand the purpose of the abbreviation and therefore the meaning of the message: “See you later.”

Understanding as much as we can about the purpose for which the sender is sending the message is vital if we are to understand the message as the sender intends. It also is important for us to understand as much as we can about the receiver to whom the sender is sending the message. In fact, if possible, we want to know the same things about the intended receiver as we wanted to know about the sender. Who is this person? Where does he or she live? What is his or her background? What is his or her historical setting? What is his or her worldview? What biases or presuppositions does this person bring to the communication equation? As was true with regard to the sender, not all of this information will always be relevant to understanding the meaning of every message. Nor will all of this information always be available. But the more

information we can gather about the sender's intended receiver, the better equipped we will be to understand the message as the sender intended.

There is one more question we need to ask as we consider the message's intended receiver. Are *we* included in the intended receiver? This question is particularly important, because if we're not a part of the intended receiver, we must be careful not to inject ourselves into the sender's message. Doing that would at the very least distort the message from what the sender intended. If, however, we are a part of the sender's intended receiver, we must take into account our own background, historical setting, worldview, biases, and presuppositions as we seek to understand the meaning of the sender's message. There is no such thing as an unbiased receiver, just as there is no such thing as an unbiased sender. And that is just as true when we are the intended receiver as it is when anyone else is.

We now have gathered a whole bank of information about the message we are seeking to understand. We know what we can about who the sender is. We know what we can about his or her language and culture. We have put together our best idea about the purpose for which the sender is sending the message. And we have learned what we can about the sender's intended receiver. In most of our daily communication, this information gathering takes place almost effortlessly, without us even realizing it. Sometimes, however, we have to put some work into gathering this information. So, is the effort sometimes required to gather all this information worth it? Can't we just as easily understand the sender's message without all this information?

No, we can't. Understanding is more than just decoding words. Decoding words is what Kim, the woman we read about earlier, did when she watched the video in the medical test the first time. That was not understanding. Understanding a message means that we receive the meaning of the message in the way that the sender intends us to receive it. Decoding the words, of course, is a part of that. But it is only a part. In order to understand the sender's message as the sender intends, we need to take into account not only the information we receive from decoding the words but also the information we have gathered from the entire context of the message. As we process all this information, we form expectations about the intended meaning of the sender's message. These expectations lead us to form various interpretations of the sender's message based on the information we have gathered. We then sort these interpretations based on how well they fit with the information we have gathered. And we settle on the interpretation that we believe best fits both the message and the contextual information that surrounds the message.

Does this process guarantee that we will always understand the message as the sender intends? Unfortunately, no. Misunderstandings still will occur. Sometimes we are not able to gather all the information we need to receive all the meaning the sender intends. Sometimes the information we have gathered may be incomplete or erroneous. Sometimes, we can draw incorrect inferences in spite of having accurate and complete information. But none of this changes the fact that as receivers of a message, we owe it to the sender to do what we can to receive the sender's message as he or she intends. After all, our role as receivers is not to tell the sender what he or she meant. It is, to the best of our ability, to receive the sender's message and allow the sender to tell us what he or she meant. Not every detail of how the sender views his or her message will be identical with every detail of how we view it as receivers. But the more overlap there is between the sender's view and our view as receivers, the greater our understanding will be and the more successful the communication will be.

Let's put all this into practice now using the following example.

### ***Church Visitor Struggles through Greeting***

*March 17, 2016*

*CHARLOTTE, NC—Mike Stevener was reportedly on the verge of enjoying his first worship service in over a decade this past Sunday, when the pastor smiled and told the congregation to “take a minute and greet those around you.”*

*“Things had gone pretty well up until that point,” Stevener informed reporters. “Parking, getting a bulletin, finding a seat in the sanctuary—that’s not easy for a visitor, okay? We sang a couple songs and I thought, I can do this.”*

*“But then . . .” He trailed off, visibly shaken.*

*According to witnesses at the scene, it was almost 30 seconds before anyone noticed Stevener, who was pretending to check his hymnal. Long-time greeter Judy Ren, 74, broke the lull. This caught the attention of women’s ministry director and mother of seven, Jenny Whitham, who locked onto the man and hurried to introduce Carter, Cayden, Caitlyn, Cole, Chloe, Connor, and Coburn. Moments later, deacon Jeff Olshefski had the visitor’s right hand in a vice grip of fellowship and the entire left side of the sanctuary was circling.*

*Sources later found Stevener smoking a cigarette behind the youth building. “Listen, I’m a veteran. I’ve been in combat, and I’ve never seen anything like that. One guy climbed over three rows of chairs and elbowed Caitlyn—or Chloe, not sure—out of the way just to get to me. It was like the scene from Animal Planet where the lions go after the elephant at the watering hole. The rest of the service went fine, but it was tough to concentrate on the sermon because I was still sweating and shaking a little bit. Also my hand is hurting.”*

*When reached for comment, deacon Olshefski felt confident that Stevener would return, noting, “Oh yeah, Mike’ll be back. Good guy. Weak handshake—kind of clammy—but good guy.”<sup>5</sup>*

So, what information can we gather about this message right away? It looks like a news article, doesn’t it? It has a dateline (March 17, 2016, Charlotte, NC). It relates events in a rather matter-of-fact way. It includes quotations from people who witnessed these events. And it is relatively devoid of non-literal language, except for a simile in the second last paragraph (“It was like the scene from Animal Planet...”). All this would lead us to form a preliminary expectation that we should understand this message as we would understand any news article.

However, something isn’t quite right. The events described seem too outlandish to actually be real. In addition, would events such as those described here really warrant a news story? Yes, small town newspapers will sometimes contain stories about events that some people might consider rather insignificant. But even by those standards, this story seems out of place.

Could this be a satire? If it is, that piece of information will radically change our expectations for this message. If this is satire, we expect the language to mimic that of a serious news story. But we also expect that the people being described may not be real people and the events being described probably never happened. Satire uses humor and exaggeration to offer a critique. So, if this is satire, the purpose of the message is not to inform us of actual events, as would be the case if this is an actual news story. Instead, its purpose is to highlight the foibles of a person or group of people by exaggerating certain actions or characteristics.

So, which is this? Is it an actual news story or a satire? Let’s continue gathering information about this message and see how that information helps clarify things for us.

Who is the sender of this message? There is no byline with this news article, so we can’t immediately be sure who wrote it. That information doesn’t seem to be available to us. What about the sender’s language? Well, it appears to be Standard American English. It appears to be literal rather than non-literal. But since we don’t know who the sender is, we can’t know whether this sender has any idiosyncratic language features that would affect how we understand the message. What about the sender’s culture? Again, since the sender is so far unknown, we can only assume that the sender’s culture is the general American culture that we are familiar with. Nothing in the article indicates that we should expect anything different.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://babylonbee.com/news/church-visitor-struggles-greeting/>, accessed August 11, 2016.

Where was this article published? If you look at the footnote at the bottom of the previous page, you'll see that this article was published on a website called "The Babylon Bee." The tagline of "The Babylon Bee" declares, "The Babylon Bee is your trusted source for Christian news satire." These two pieces of information are huge when it comes to providing the contextual information about this message that we were missing. Now we know who the sender is. He is a man named Adam Ford, who is the editor of "The Babylon Bee."<sup>6</sup> Mr. Ford is indeed an American. And he's a Christian (which gives us more information about both his personal culture and worldview). As you look at other articles on his website, you can see that his use of language is very straightforward and literal. But the biggest piece of information we now have is that the genre of the message is definitely not that of an ordinary news article. The fact that this message was published on a satirical website has confirmed our suspicion that this is satire. And so we now also know the purpose of this message. Adam Ford intends to use the outlandish events being described to offer a critique.

Who is the intended receiver? Since this message has been published on the internet, we can safely assume that the message is open to anyone who wants to read it. But since in this message Mr. Ford is describing distinctly Christian events happening in a Christian setting, we can also safely assume that his intended receivers are Christians, including us.

As we process all this contextual information, we quickly see that there are two ways we can interpret this message. The first way is to interpret it as a serious news article. An actual congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, went so overboard in welcoming an actual worship guest named Mike Stevener that the combat veteran actually suffered serious psychological trauma. The second way is to interpret this message as a satire. There is no actual congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, that acted like this. There is no actual Mike Stevener, Judy Ren, Jenny Whitham and her seven children, or Jeff Olshefski. The events described in the message are humorous exaggerations of how some congregations can unwittingly go overboard in welcoming guests. And the message of this satire is for Christians to recognize that while it's very good to make worship guests feel welcome, we don't want to smother them.

Which of these two interpretations best fits the information we have? Well, the first interpretation seems to fit well with the straightforward, literal language of the message as well as the message's apparent format as a news story. But it does not fit at all with our knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> He also is the artist behind some very interesting webcomics that you can find at [www.adam4d.com](http://www.adam4d.com).

that this is satire, not a serious news story. Because this is satire, it is demonstrably false that Adam Ford intends this message to be understood as a serious news story. So, we can't say that this is what this message means, even if it is what we'd prefer it to mean. The only way we can understand this message in keeping with all the contextual information we have gathered is to understand it as a satire. Adam Ford has clearly indicated to us that it is satire, and everything else we know about this message is consistent with what we'd expect in a satire. As receivers, we need to let Adam Ford tell us what he means in his message and not presume to tell him what he means. And so, we take him at his word that this is a satire and understand his message accordingly.

You came here today expecting to hear an essay about biblical hermeneutics. So far, we have spent eleven pages talking about hermeneutics, but the only references to the Bible occurred on the first two pages. So, when are we going to get to the subject matter that we came here for? Actually, we have, in a way, been talking about biblical hermeneutics all along. We started this essay by noting that hermeneutics is the study of the principles that govern how we interpret messages of all kinds. We've seen how these principles enable us as receivers to understand a sender's message as he or she intends. Now, we want to turn our attention to the most important message of all, God's message to us in the Bible. Since our goal in receiving God's message in the Bible is to understand that message as God intends, we will use the same principles of hermeneutics that enabled us to understand other messages as their senders intended. We will add to these general principles several things that are unique to Scripture. And we will arrive at a sound method for interpreting the Bible that conveys to us the meaning of God's message as he intends.

## Understanding God’s Message as God Intends: Biblical Hermeneutics

So, what is unique about the Bible and, therefore, about interpreting the Bible? What makes biblical hermeneutics unique is the biblical text itself. The Bible is not just some message sent by some person. It is the actual Word of God and is inspired by God. How do we know that? The Bible itself tells us so. Paul wrote to his coworker Timothy, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Ti 3:16<sup>7</sup>). Peter writes in his second letter, “No prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21). Repeatedly, the Bible records that “the word of the Lord came to” this prophet or that prophet (Isa 38:4; Jer 1:2; Eze 1:3; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jnh 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zep 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zec 1:1). The Bible repeatedly makes it very clear that it does not just *contain* the Word of God. It *is* the Word of God.

When God gave us his Word by inspiration, he didn’t just give his human writers the thoughts he wanted them to convey and trust that they would come up with suitable words on their own. God’s inspiration of the Bible was such that he gave his human writers the exact words he wanted them to write. Jesus demonstrated this when he pointed to a single word (“gods”) in Psalm 82 and used that word as the basis for his rebuke of his enemies (Jn 10:34-36). Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews used a single word (“new”) from Jeremiah 31 to demonstrate the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant (Heb 8:13). Paul also noted to the Christians in Corinth that his message to them came “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit” (1 Co 2:13).

The divine inspiration of Scripture has profound implications for us as we interpret the Bible, since it means that we approach the biblical text with a set of presuppositions that we do not have when we interpret any other message. First, because every word of the Bible is God’s Word, we know that every word of the Bible is objectively true and without error. Jesus himself testifies to this when he says, “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17). The psalmist confesses, “The entirety of your word is truth” (Ps 119:160). Paul asserts to the Christians in Rome, “God must be true, even if everyone is a liar” (Ro 3:4). Regardless of what the Bible is talking about, we approach it with the presupposition that everything it says about everything is absolutely true.

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture passages are taken from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009.

Because the Bible is objectively true, every person and every event that it records is historically accurate. The people described in the Bible actually lived when the Bible says they did. The events described in the Bible actually happened as the Bible says they did. Jesus demonstrates this truth in his own handling of Scripture. Many people today deny the historicity of the Bible's accounts about Adam, Eve, Noah, and Jonah. Jesus, however, had no such doubts. He treated these Bible accounts as historical facts. In support of his teaching about marriage, he quoted the Bible's account of Adam and Eve.

“Haven't you read,” He replied, “that He who created them in the beginning made them male and female,” and He also said:

“For this reason a man will leave  
his father and mother  
and be joined to his wife,  
and the two will become one flesh?

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, man must not separate” (Mt 19:4-6).

As he taught his disciples about the time leading up to the end of the world, Jesus referred to the time of Noah.

“As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. They didn't know until the flood came and swept them all away” (Mt 27:37-39).

And when giving the scribes and Pharisees a sign that foretold his resurrection, Jesus pointed to the historical event of Jonah's three-day stay in the belly of the fish.

But He answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights” (Mt 12:39-40).

Since the Bible cannot err, it also can contain no contradictions. As we've already heard Paul say, “God must be true, even if everyone is a liar” (Ro 3:4). This does not mean that there will be no tensions, humanly speaking, between different statements in Scripture. In fact, it is extremely important to remember that there can be no contradictions in the Bible precisely because there are times when different statements in Scripture seem to our human reason to be at odds with each other. For example, the Bible clearly states that if someone is condemned to hell, it is because of his or her own sin and unbelief. “The person who sins is the one who will die” (Eze 18:4). “Whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). At the same time, the Bible also clearly states that if anyone is saved, it is completely the result of God's grace and not

in any way a result of anything that he or she did. “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8,9). To our human reason, those two statements seem to be at odds with one another. How can a person’s damnation be all his or her own fault while a person’s salvation is all to God’s credit? Yet, we know that in Scripture there are no contradictions. So there is no contradiction between these two statements. That they seem at odds to our human reason is the result of a deficiency in our human reason, not the result of a contradiction in God’s Word.

As we approach the Bible, we also come with the presupposition that it is clear. We believe that in the Bible God communicates with us using human language that we human beings can understand. We have this conviction because God himself has revealed to us that he gave us the Bible, not to confuse us, but so that we might know him and what he has done for us. Toward the end of his Gospel, John writes, “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30,31). The psalmist states, “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path” (Ps 119:105). This does not mean, however, that we will always fully comprehend everything that God is saying. Even Peter admitted that in Paul’s letters “there are some matters that are hard to understand” (2 Pe 3:16). When we encounter a portion of Scripture that contains one of those “matters that are hard to understand,” we must keep in mind that the fault lies not with the clarity of Scripture but with us and the limits of our human reason. What God says in his Word remains clear regardless of whether we fully comprehend how things can be as God says they are.

The Bible also is sufficient. In other words, in the Bible God tells us everything that we need to know for our faith and life. When it comes to looking for information about how we are saved and how God wants us to live, our attitude is the same as Peter’s when he said to Jesus, “Lord, who will we go to? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). Later, Peter also wrote, “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness” (2 Pe 1:3). And so, even though God in his Word doesn’t tell us everything that we might like to know, we remain convinced that “all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:16,17).

There is one more unique presupposition that we must have as we approach the Bible. Paul describes this presupposition in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth.

Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. But the unbeliever does not welcome what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually (1 Co 2:12-14).

If we are to understand God's message in the Bible as he intends (that is, if we are to believe it), we must have faith. Apart from faith, Scripture is nothing but foolishness to us. We may be able to comprehend the bare meaning of the words, because Scripture is clear. But there can be no true understanding apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. As we confess in the Formula of Concord,

Before a person is enlightened, converted, regenerated, renewed, and drawn by the Holy Spirit, he can by himself and by his own natural powers begin, work, or agree to work in spiritual things and in his own conversion or regeneration as little as a stone, a block, or a lump of clay. He can control the outward members of his body and hear the Gospel. To a certain extent he can meditate on it and discuss it, and is to be seen in the Pharisees and hypocrites [Matthew 23:25-28]. Nevertheless he regards it as foolishness and cannot believe it. In this respect he acts even worse than a block. For he is rebellious and hostile to God's will, unless the Holy Spirit is effective on him and kindles and works in him faith and other abilities pleasing to God, and obedience (*FC*, Solid Declaration, Article II, paragraph 24).

These are the unique presuppositions that we must hold if we are to understand the message of the Bible as God intends. Because the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, it is without error or contradiction, it is clear, it is sufficient, and it cannot be understood apart from faith. With these presuppositions firmly in hand, let's see how the hermeneutical principles that we've already discussed apply to our handling of Scripture.

The first step in understanding a message as the sender intends is to know what we can about the sender (hereafter referred to as the "author").<sup>8</sup> When we consider the author of any particular passage of Scripture, we must recognize that there are in fact two authors. There is the Author, God himself through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And there is the author, the individual prophet, evangelist, or apostle who originally wrote God's words on a scroll or parchment.

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<sup>8</sup> I am making this change in terminology because in our dealings with Scripture we are primarily talking about working with a written text, whether we read that written text ourselves or hear it read by someone else.

Scripture itself testifies to this “dual” authorship. We already have seen some of the many places where Scripture makes it clear that God is the ultimate Author behind every word of the Bible (2 Ti 3:15-16; 2 Pe 1:21; Isa 38:4; Jer 1:2; Eze 1:3; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jnh 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zep 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zec 1:1). The apostle Paul also acknowledged to the Christians in Thessalonica that although he was the one who brought them the message of the gospel, he himself was not the ultimate author of that message. God was. “This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers” (1 Th 2:13). At the same time, Scripture recognizes the various authors of its individual books. Jesus recognized Moses as the author of the first five books of the Old Testament (Mt 8:4; 19:8; Mk 1:44; 7:10; 10:3; 12:26; Lk 5:14; 20:37; 24:44). The book of Jeremiah begins with the words, “The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests living in Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin” (Jer 1:1). Other Old Testament books begin similarly (Am 1:1; Ob 1:1; Na 1:1). In keeping with the letter writing practices of the time, Paul identifies himself as the author of his New Testament epistles (Ro 1:1; 1 Co 1:1; 2 Co 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; etc.). The same thing happens at the beginning of the epistles written by James (Jas 1:1) and Peter (1 Pe 1:1; 2 Pe 1:1). All this is in keeping with what Scripture itself tells us about how it came into being: “Men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21).

So, what do we know about the Author, God? God himself tells us everything that we need to know about him in Scripture itself. He tells us that he is holy (Lev 19:2). He tells us that he is eternal (Ps 90:1,2). He is all-powerful (Lk 1:37), all-knowing (1 Jn 3:20), and omnipresent (Ps 139:7-10). He is unchanging (Mal 3:6). He is righteous and gracious (Ps 145:17). We could go on and on listing everything that God has told us about himself in the Bible. But the important thing for us to realize as we seek to understand God’s message to us is that knowing God as he has revealed himself to us in Scripture is essential. What God has told us about himself in the Bible is a huge part of the bank of knowledge we make use of as we interpret the messages he gives us in Scripture. And any meaning we derive from God’s messages in Scripture must be consistent with everything he has told us about himself in Scripture.

Knowing what we can about the human author of a portion of Scripture also is important. Doing this, however, will be easier in some cases than it is in others. Some human authors are

clearly identified in Scripture. We've already seen how Jesus clearly identified Moses as the human author of the first five books of the Old Testament. David is identified as the human author of numerous psalms. The human authors of many of the Old Testament books that we classify among the Major and Minor Prophets also are clearly identified by name. And in the New Testament, we know the identities of the human authors of almost all of the books. Other sections of Scripture, however, were written down by human authors whose identities remain a mystery to us. We do not know the identity of the human author of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, Esther, Job, and many of the psalms. We also do not know definitively who the human author of the letter to the Hebrews was. Different people have offered different possibilities for who these unknown human authors might be. But the fact remains that God has not chosen to reveal to us definitively who the human authors of these portions of Scripture are.

Even when we do know the identity of the human author of a portion of Scripture, we may not always know everything that we might like to know about who that person is. We know a lot about Moses (who he was, what his background was, where he came from, what his worldview was, what his historical setting was, etc.), because God has given us four whole books filled with details that encompass all of Moses's life. Similarly, we know a lot about the apostle Paul because God has shared with us through the pen of Luke many details about Paul's life, and Paul himself reveals even more details about himself in his many letters. However, we know very little about who Hosea was other than the time during which he prophesied ("during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, king of Judah, and of Jereboam son of Jehoash, king of Israel" (Hos 1:1)) and a few details about his unique marital situation, which God used as an object lesson for the people of Israel (Hos 1, 3). We can piece together what Hosea's historical setting was by looking at the books of Kings and Chronicles, which describe what happened during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Jereboam II. But even with that, there are many details about Hosea that we will never be able to determine definitively.

So, does this mean that we are at a disadvantage when we are seeking to understand God's message in a portion of Scripture whose human author we don't know all that well? Not at all. Remember our presupposition concerning the sufficiency of Scripture. In the Bible God has given us all that we need to know for our faith and life. That includes all that we need to know in order to understand his message to us as he intended. If God felt it necessary that we know every

last detail about Hosea's life in order for us to understand his message to us through pen of Hosea, he would have told us those things. The fact that he hasn't revealed to us all those details tells us that he did not deem it essential to our understanding of his message. Where God has left what we consider to be "gaps" in the information he has given us about the human authors he used to write his Word, we are not obligated to fill those gaps with our own or anyone else's guesses. What we can do is take the information God has given us about the human authors he used to write his Word and make sure that whatever meaning we take from a particular section of Scripture is consistent with the information that God has given us.

What about extra-biblical sources of information about the human authors of Scripture and their historical setting? Since the Bible inerrantly records actual historical events in their actual historical setting, reliable extra-biblical historical sources can provide useful information that can help us better understand the historical setting of a particular biblical author. However, it is worth emphasizing that the ultimate purpose of all the information gathering that we do around a particular passage of Scripture is to ascertain what the passage means, not where it came from. We do not want to be so concerned about discovering every possible detail about a particular biblical author that we lose sight of the message God is conveying to us. After all, knowing the human author and his historical setting is just one part of the bank of information that we will use as we seek to receive God's message as he intends.

There is one other issue that we must consider before we leave our discussion about knowing the Author and the authors of Scripture. Did the human authors of Scripture always understand everything that the Author was inspiring them to write? According to Peter, they did not. Peter wrote,

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that would come to you searched and carefully investigated. They inquired into what time or what circumstances the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when He testified in advance to the messianic sufferings and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you. These things have now been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Angels desire to look into these things (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Imagine what it must have been like for Isaiah as he wrote the words of chapter 53 of his prophecy.

He grew up before Him like a young plant  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He didn't have an impressive form

or majesty that we should look at Him,  
no appearance that we should desire Him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of suffering who knew what sickness was.  
He was like someone people turned away from;  
He was despised, and we didn't value Him.  
Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses,  
and He carried our pains;  
but we in turn regarded Him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But He was pierced because of our transgressions,  
crushed because of our iniquities;  
punishment for our peace was on Him,  
and we are healed by His wounds.  
We all went astray like sheep;  
we all have turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has punished Him  
for the iniquity of us all (Is 53:2-6).

What meaning did Isaiah derive from these words? He knew that these words were talking about the Messiah whom God had promised to send. He knew that they described how that Messiah would suffer for the sins of all people. He understood that with these words God was describing how he would save all people through the work of the Messiah. But did he understand the amazing detail with which he was describing the Messiah's passion? Did he understand how he was prophesying that Jesus would remain silent in the face of the unrelenting accusations of his enemies? Did he understand that he was predicting that the Messiah would be crucified? Probably not. Here, the Author (God) was writing down details whose full significance would not be revealed until long after Isaiah was dead. Isaiah understood what he needed to understand at that time. But he did not understand everything that God was revealing through the words God was causing him to write.

So, what impact does this have on how we interpret this and other prophetic passages of Scripture? As we consider the prophecies of Scripture, we cannot limit ourselves only to those interpretations that would have occurred to the original human author. Sometimes the human author himself did not have all the information necessary to fully understand what God was inspiring him to write. But behind every human author who didn't fully understand everything that he was writing stood the Author, God, who knew exactly what he was talking about. As the Author of all of Scripture, God often used his human writers to speak about people or events that would be revealed only later. When that happens, we take into account not only what the human

author knew but, much more importantly, what God has revealed to us about the later fulfillment of his words. This, too, is part of knowing the Author as well as his human authors and is an important part of receiving God's message as he intended.

We have now learned what we can about both the Author and the human authors of Scripture. Next, we turn our attention to the author's language.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, begins with knowing biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the languages in which God chose to write his Word. We need to know how these languages work, their grammar, their morphology, their syntax. We need to understand how the tenses, voices, and moods of the Greek verb work. We need to understand the difference in meaning between a Hebrew perfect and an imperfect. We need to be able to explain the difference between natural gender and grammatical gender. And we need to have as much of an in-depth knowledge of these languages as we can, otherwise we open ourselves up to all sorts of foolish mistakes. A cursory knowledge of the biblical languages can yield at best only a cursory understanding of God's message. And often a cursory knowledge of the biblical languages yields far worse than that, a complete (even deliberate) misunderstanding of God's message. Such was the case recently when Rabbi Mark Sameth wrote an article in *The New York Times* titled "Is God Transgender?" Here is a sample of his argument.

The Hebrew Bible, when read in its original language, offers a highly elastic view of gender. And I do mean *highly* elastic: In Genesis 3:12, Eve is referred to as "he." In Genesis 9:21, after the flood, Noah repairs to "her" tent. Genesis 24:16 refers to Rebecca as a "young man." And Genesis 1:27 refers to Adam as "them."

Surprising, I know. And there are many other, even more vivid examples: In Esther 2:7, Mordecai is pictured as nursing his niece Esther. In a similar way, in Isaiah 49:23, the future kings of Israel are prophesied to be "nursing kings."<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis original)

So, has Rabbi Sameth discovered amazing new biblical truths based on heretofore misunderstood facets of Hebrew grammar? No. Even a beginning Hebrew student can see that Rabbi Sameth, who you would think should have an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew language (he is a rabbi, after all), isn't playing by the rules of Hebrew grammar at all. Dr. Andrew Bartelt

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<sup>9</sup> In the following discussion, I will be referring to the (small "a") author's language and culture. Especially in the area of language, this does not in any way exclude reference to the (capital "A") Author's language. The Author of Scripture is the one who chose to give his Word in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and gave the exact words of Scripture to each of the human authors. However, for the sake of simplicity, and because God chose to use the particular linguistic characteristics of the individual human authors in his inspiration of Scripture, I will refer to the "author's language" and the "author's culture."

<sup>10</sup> Mark Sameth, "Is God Transgender?" *The New York Times*, August 12, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/opinion/is-god-transgender.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/opinion/is-god-transgender.html?_r=0), accessed August 19, 2016.

pointed this out in his response to Rabbi Sameth's article, which he titled "Is God Transgender? It Helps to Know Hebrew." He begins by saying,

In all the discussion and debate over transgender issues, let's at least get facts right. In his *New York Times* editorial, Rabbi Mark Sameth should know his historical Hebrew orthography better, certainly before making claims on biblical texts in the *New York Times*.

First, there is no evidence whatsoever for a "highly elastic view of gender" in the Hebrew of what we now call the Old Testament. The examples that Sameth cites are all cases of common spelling conventions, due not to elasticity in any "view of gender" but to some elasticity in the use of final vowels and how they were marked, both in the older consonantal texts and then also in the vocalized texts of the Hebrew scribal traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Bartelt then goes point by point through Rabbi Sameth's argument and refutes each assertion with very basic Hebrew grammar and orthography. Finally, he writes,

It is a basic principle of biblical interpretation to interpret the unclear in light of the clear, and this applies also to grammatical oddities and spelling conventions. To assert that the Hebrew Bible supports "gender elasticity" by using examples such as these, and even misunderstanding the grammatical facts that remove the very argument Rabbi Sameth is trying to make out of thin air, is not only bad method but, more importantly, ignores the preponderance of clear biblical evidence that gender is unique and distinct, male and female.

Grasping at straws can hardly be considered credible argumentation, especially for the *New York Times*.<sup>12</sup>

Would we through foolish grammatical errors go as far afield from God's intended message as Rabbi Sameth did? Perhaps not. But we still need to make sure that we understand as much as we can about the languages God used to write his Word to us. Not doing so is failing to do our part as receivers of God's message who want to understand God's message in the way that he intended.

Knowing the author's language also involves knowing his vocabulary. When it comes to biblical vocabulary, we want to apply the same principles that we applied when we spoke of knowing the vocabulary of the sender of any message. There we noted that knowing the sender's language involved knowing how *that sender* used the words being considered. Just because someone else uses a word in a particular way does not mean that this sender uses that word in that way. The only way to understand a sender's message as the sender intends is to let the

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Bartelt, "Is God Transgender? It Helps to Know Hebrew," *Concordia Theology*, August 15, 2016, <http://concordiatheology.org/2016/08/is-god-transgender-it-helps-to-know-hebrew/>, accessed August 19, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Bartelt, "It Helps to Know Hebrew."

sender himself reveal by his own usage how he uses different words and what meanings he attaches to them.

Similarly, as we seek to understand the vocabulary used in the Bible, we want to let Scripture's own use of words determine what they mean. How Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words are used in extra-biblical sources can be instructive, but it cannot definitively determine what the words mean in the context of Scripture. Only Scripture's use of words can definitively determine what those words mean in Scripture. For example, some Greek authors did use the verb βαπτίζω to signify "to immerse." In fact, the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived around 200 B.C., left a pickle recipe that uses the verb βαπτίζω to describe how the vegetable being pickled is immersed in the vinegar solution.<sup>13</sup> However, Nicander's pickle recipe does not definitively determine what Scripture means when it uses the verb βαπτίζω. For that, we must look at the way in which Scripture uses the verb. In Mark 7, we see βαπτίζω (and its related noun βαπτισμός) being used in this way.

For the Pharisees, in fact all the Jews, will not eat unless they wash their hands ritually, keeping the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they have washed [βαπτίσωνται]. And there are many other customs they have received and keep, like the washing [βαπτισμούς] of cups, jugs, copper utensils, and dining couches (Mk 7:3-4).

It's easy to see how Jewish people would have immersed cups, jugs, and copper utensils in water before using them. It's not so easy to see how they would have felt compelled to immerse themselves and their dining couches before each meal. Obviously, Scripture here is not using the verb βαπτίζω solely with the meaning "to immerse." While scriptural usage of βαπτίζω does not absolutely exclude the meaning "to immerse," it also includes other methods of applying water, such as sprinkling or pouring. Scripture itself determines the meanings of its words by its own usage of those words.

This principle holds true also when we consider the etymology of the words used in Scripture. Word etymology can at times be instructive. But it also can be deceptive. In his book

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<sup>13</sup> From *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*: "The clearest example that shows the meaning of baptizo is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles and is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'dipped' (bapto) into boiling water and then 'baptised' (baptizo) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution" (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/baptizo.html>, accessed August 19, 2016).

*Exegetical Fallacies*, D. A. Carson cites the example of the Greek word ὑπηρέτης, which is found in 1 Corinthians 4:1.<sup>14</sup>

More than a century ago, R. C. Trench popularized the view that ὑπηρέτης derives from the verb ἐρέσσω “to row.” The basic meaning of ὑπηρέτης, then, is “rower.” Trench quite explicitly says a ὑπηρέτης “was originally the rower (from ἐρέσσω).” A. T. Robertson and J. B. Hofmann went further and said ὑπηρέτης derives morphologically from ὑπό and ἐρέτης. Now ἐρέσσω means rower in Homer (eighth century B.C.!); and Hofmann draws the explicit connection with the morphology, concluding a ὑπηρέτης was basically an “under rower” or “assistant rower.”... Leon Morris concluded that a ὑπηρέτης was “a servant of a lowly kind”; and William Barclay plunged further and designated a ὑπηρέτης as “a rower on the lower bank of a trireme.” Yet the fact remains that with only one possible exception—and it is merely possible, not certain—ὑπηρέτης is never used for “rower” in classical literature, and it is certainly not used that way in the New Testament. The ὑπηρέτης in the New Testament is a servant, and often there is little if anything to distinguish him from a διάκονος. As Louw remarks, to derive the meaning of ὑπηρέτης from ὑπό and ἐρέτης is no more intrinsically realistic than deriving the meaning of “butterfly” from “butter” and “fly,” or the meaning of “pineapple” from “pine” and “apple.” Even those of us who have never been to Hawaii recognize that pineapples are not a special kind of apple that grows on pines.<sup>15</sup>

Again we see that Scriptural usage determines the meaning of the words Scripture uses. If you want to know what a word in Scripture means, don’t just look at its history or how other people outside of Scripture have used it. See how Scripture uses it and let Scripture itself show you what the word means in this particular context.

But what if a particular word is a *hapax legomenon* and is used only once in all of Scripture? In that case, extra-biblical usage and word etymology will indeed play a larger role in helping us ascertain the word’s meaning. But the context of Scripture, both the immediate context of the word in question and the wider context of Scripture as a whole, still will determine which meanings we will even consider possible. Since we approach Scripture with the presupposition that it can contain no contradictions, no meaning we consider for a word used in Scripture can lead to a contradiction with anything that Scripture clearly says. Just because Scripture uses a word only once does not give us an excuse to make it mean whatever we want. Even in the case of a *hapax legomenon*, we want to do what we can to make sure we are understanding God’s message as he intends.

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<sup>14</sup> Οὕτως ἡμᾶς λογίζεσθω ἄνθρωπος ὡς ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ (SBL Greek New Testament, 2010). “A person should consider us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of God’s mysteries” (HCSB).

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), Kindle edition, chapter 1, section 1.

Hand in hand with knowing the author's language goes knowing the author's culture. The people whose lives are recorded for us in the Bible lived in cultures very different from ours. The more we understand about those cultures, the better we will understand the events that are described, the references that are made, the figures of speech that are used, and even the meanings and significances of individual words. Take, for example, Moses's account of Abraham's purchase of the field at Machpelah in Genesis 23. When we read that account, we may at first wonder why Abraham had to pay 400 shekels of silver for a piece of land that Ephron the Hittite said he would "give" to Abraham. But the interaction between Abraham and Ephron makes sense when we understand that this was the way that people negotiated in that culture. Similarly, for those of us whose interaction with sheep is limited to the occasional visit to a petting zoo, Jesus' words in John 10 may not mean much. But when we look at the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep, when we understand just how much the sheep depended on their shepherd for everything, when we see the lengths to which a shepherd was willing to go in order to protect his sheep, those same words convey profound meaning. Learning what we can about the author's culture gives us more of the information we need in order to understand the author's meaning as he intended.

So does learning what we can about the purpose for which the author wrote. When we consider the purpose for which the Bible was written, we recognize that there are two "levels" of purpose. First, there is the overall purpose of the Bible as a whole. Then there are the purposes of the books of the Bible individually.

God has clearly revealed to us the reason for which he wrote the Bible as a whole. Through John he tells us, "These are written that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name" (Jn 20:31). The whole purpose of the Bible is to lead people to saving faith in Jesus. And everything God wrote in the Bible in one way or another points to Jesus.

Christ stands at the center of all Scripture. From Genesis 3:15, through the line of Adam, through Noah and his sons, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through the Exodus, the period of the Judges, the monarchy, exile, and return, the entire Old Testament traces the bright red line of God's promise to send the Messiah. That red line continues through the New Testament as we see God's fulfillment of his promise in the coming of Jesus, his life, his death, and his resurrection, and how he sent his disciples to proclaim him and his saving work to the world.

From beginning to end, Scripture focuses first and foremost on Christ our Substitute. He is the one who would come to strike the serpent's head (Gn 3:15). He is the true sacrifice that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed to. He is the one who "was pierced because of our transgressions" and "crushed because of our iniquities" (Is 53:5). He was the one "who did not know sin," but became "sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Co 5:21). God did not give us the Bible primarily as a "life manual" to show us how he wants us to live by following Jesus' example. He gave us his Word so that we "may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing [we] may have life in His name" (Jn 20:31). Therefore, if we are to understand God's message as God intends, we must always recognize this overarching purpose for which God wrote all of Scripture. God gave us his Word to show us Jesus and lead us to trust in him alone for forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Every book of Scripture shares this overall purpose with Scripture as a whole. Yet, each individual book also was written for a particular purpose and a particular occasion. Many times, these purposes and occasions are revealed in the books themselves. Luke wrote his Gospel and the book of Acts to tell Theophilus about Jesus and about the expansion of the early Christian church. David wrote Psalm 51 when Nathan the prophet came to confront him with his sin with Bathsheba. Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome to share with them the message he proclaimed and prepare for his planned visit to them. Jesus gave John his Revelation so that John could pass it on to the seven churches in the province of Asia who were undergoing severe persecution. Where this information is available for a particular book or passage, we will want to add it to the collection of information that we are gathering so that we can take it into account as we seek to understand the passage's meaning.

But even when the specific purpose or occasion for a portion of Scripture is not explicitly indicated, we still can gain insight into its purpose by looking at its genre. As was the case with the messages we receive outside of Scripture, the genre of a message within Scripture tells us a lot about what we can expect from that message. It's important for us to keep that information in mind as we seek to understand God's message. If a message is given in the form of a narrative, we expect that its purpose is to report events as they actually happened. The language used will tend to be literal rather than non-literal. The people and places described will be actual people and places. If the message is given in the form of a letter, we expect that it will contain the elements that were common in ancient letters and share the purpose of a letter. The letter's

author will identify himself right at the start of the letter. He then will identify and greet the letter's recipients. Since a letter's purpose is personal communication between the author and the letter's recipients, we expect that the author's language will be more literal than non-literal. And we expect that the letter will conclude with some sort of closing blessing.

Our expectations are very different when we look at poetry in the Bible. While English poetry is often characterized by rhythm and rhyme, Hebrew poetry is characterized by parallelism. The second half of a verse might use different words to restate what was said in the first half of the verse. Or the second half of the verse might present the opposite of what was said in the first half. Or the second half might build on what was said in the first half. Regardless of how the parallelism presents itself, knowing that it exists enables us to understand its meaning. Hebrew poetry also tends to be rather terse. So, we can expect as we read Hebrew poetry that not every word we might expect to be in the text will actually be expressly written in the text. As was the case in English poetry, Hebrew poetry is more open to non-literal language than either narrative or a letter is. So, as we read Hebrew poetry, we can expect that an exclusively literal understanding of the words being used may not actually reveal the meaning God intends. This tendency toward non-literal language is even more pronounced in apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is filled with fantastic imagery, such as creatures with four faces that convey the chariot of the Lord over the earth (Ezekiel 1). Or a creature with iron teeth and ten horns (Daniel 7). Or a scroll with seven seals that, when opened, unleash horrible disasters on the earth (Revelation 6). To look at apocalyptic literature and try to understand it as you would a narrative is to completely miss the meaning of the message as God intends us to understand it.

The final area of information that we want to consider as we seek to understand God's message is who the intended receiver is. Again we need to consider two "levels" of receiver. On one level, the intended receiver of all of Scripture is all people. All people—including us—are sinners. All people—including us—are in desperate need of salvation through faith in Jesus. All people—including us—need to hear the gospel message that God proclaims in his Word. Therefore, whatever portion of Scripture we are considering, we can know that God intends for all people—including us—to be listening.

Yet, at the same time, individual books and passages in the Bible were originally written for very specific receivers. While God speaks to all people through Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul did originally write this letter specifically for the Christians in Rome. Knowing

what we can about the Christians in Rome will help us understand God’s message to us in this letter. While Jesus certainly wants us to pay attention to his words of rebuke to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13-36, he originally spoke those words very specifically to the Pharisees. Knowing what we can about who the Pharisees were and what their attitude toward Jesus was will help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ words as he intended them. In a sense, whenever we read Scripture we are “eavesdropping” on someone else’s conversation, and we need to keep that in mind as we seek to understand the meaning of God’s message. While all Scripture is given for our learning (2Ti 3:16), not every passage of Scripture will apply to us in exactly the same way as it applied to the people to whom it was originally addressed. Failing to recognize this is an easy way to derive a meaning from God’s message that God never intended to convey to us. That, of course, is not what we want to do as receivers of God’s message.

So, we have gathered a whole bank of information about the passage of Scripture that we are considering. We know who the Author is and who the author is. We know what we can about the language the author is using and the culture in which he is living. We’ve done what we can to deduce the purpose for which this portion of Scripture was written, taking into account the genre in which God placed it. And we have learned what we can about the intended receiver of this message—including us. Sometimes we can gather all this information without too much difficulty. But sometimes it can take a lot of study and effort to put all this together. Is it really worth it? Is all this information really necessary? Can’t we simply decode the words of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek and say we understand what God is saying to us?

No, we can’t. As is true with any message that we receive, it simply is not enough to just decode the words of Scripture. Decoding is not understanding. Decoding is what some of us did back in our college and seminary classes when we weren’t prepared for class and the professor called on us to translate. None of us would say that what we did there was anywhere near understanding the message God was conveying in those words. If we want to understand God’s message to us in the Bible as he intends, we need to take into account all the information we have gathered about the portion of Scripture we are considering. This includes the unique presuppositions that we must bring to Scripture if we are to understand it properly. As we process all this information, expectations form about the meaning of the message. These expectations lead to interpretations of the message. We then sort out the various interpretations, discarding any that do not agree with all the contextual information that we have gathered. And

we arrive at the interpretation that best fits with everything we know, not only about this particular passage, but also about Scripture as a whole.

Does this mean that we will always fully understand every passage of Scripture? No. Sometimes the full meaning of a portion of Scripture will elude us, even after we have done everything we can to let Scripture itself reveal to us the meaning of this passage. Will we ever really know this side of heaven what Paul is referring to when he speaks in 1 Corinthians 15:29 about those “who are being baptized for the dead”? Can we ever really know exactly what Jephthah did when he “kept the vow he had made about [his daughter]” (Jdg 11:39)? When we find ourselves in a situation like this, it is good for us to admit that we do not have all the information we might like in order to fully interpret this portion of the Bible. Much better to do that than to say, “This is what the Lord says,” when we’re not really sure that this is what the Lord says. Our goal when we approach Scripture is never to tell God what he means. That isn’t our goal when interpreting a message from anyone else, and it certainly is not our goal when interpreting a message from God. Our goal is to listen to God as he reveals to us what he means. Only then can we be sure that we are understanding God’s message as he intends.

Let’s put all this into practice as we examine the following passage.

*Καὶ εἶδον ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, ἔχοντα τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ ἄλυσιν μεγάλην ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ. <sup>2</sup> καὶ ἐκράτησεν τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφεις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὃς ἐστὶν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, καὶ ἔδησεν αὐτὸν χίλια ἔτη,<sup>3</sup> καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἀβυσσον, καὶ ἔκλεισεν καὶ ἐσφράγισεν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ, ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη, ἄχρι τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη· μετὰ ταῦτα δεῖ λυθῆναι αὐτὸν μικρὸν χρόνον.*

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. <sup>2</sup> He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for 1,000 years. <sup>3</sup> He threw him into the abyss, closed it, and put a seal on it so that he would no longer deceive the nations until the 1,000 years were completed. After that, he must be released for a short time. (Rev. 20:1-3)

As we consider this portion of Scripture, we start with the unique presuppositions that we must always have if we are to understand God’s Word correctly. We understand that this portion of Scripture, like every portion of Scripture, is verbally inspired by God. That makes God the ultimate Author of this passage. It also means that this passage is without error or contradiction, and will not contradict anything else that God says in Scripture. This passage, like every portion of Scripture, is clear and sufficient. And faith is necessary in order to truly understand it.

To this information, we add what we can know about who the human author is. From Revelation 1:4, we know that the human author of this portion of Scripture is the apostle John.

John was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James (Lk 5:10). He also was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. In fact, he was especially close to Jesus as the disciple Jesus loved (Jn 13:23). While Jesus was being crucified, he entrusted John with the care of his mother Mary (Jn 19:25-27). John was among the first of Jesus' disciples to see Jesus' empty tomb (John 20:3-10). He along with the other apostles boldly proclaimed Jesus, even when it led to him spending time in prison and being flogged. And now, he was in exile on the island of Patmos "because of God's word and the testimony about Jesus" (Rev 1:9).

The language John uses is, of course, koine Greek. Therefore, we bring to this passage all that we know about how koine Greek works. We also have the opportunity, since John was the human author of four other New Testament books, to look at John's other writings and learn what we can about his personal use of language. From these other books, we can see that John's Greek tends to be rather simple, grammatically speaking. He doesn't tend to use a lot of complicated dependent clauses as Paul sometimes does in his letters. Yet, behind that grammatical simplicity lies a depth of meaning that often gives you reason to pause and contemplate all that John is saying.

The culture in which John is living is that of a Jewish Christian living in the Roman Empire. What this means is that John is being persecuted for his faith. Many of his fellow Jews have rejected him because he is a follower of that Jesus of Nazareth. The Romans have exiled him to Patmos because of his determination to keep on talking about Jesus of Nazareth.

This persecution gives rise to the occasion and purpose for which God had John write this portion of Scripture. John addressed this book "to the seven churches in Asia" (Rev 1:4). These churches were "Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea" (Rev 1:11). As John begins to describe the amazing vision that God gave him that Sunday on Patmos, he identifies himself as "your brother and partner in the tribulation, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus" (Rev 1:9). All this indicates that God had John write this portion of Scripture down so that he might bring comfort and encouragement to the Christians of these seven congregations as they suffered persecution just as John did.

One more extremely important piece of information that we want to keep in mind is the genre in which God placed this message. Revelation is a prime example of apocalyptic literature. That fact reveals to us a whole set of expectations that we want to keep in mind as we seek to understand what God is saying here. Apocalyptic literature is not narrative, where we expect the

people, places, and events that are described to be real, actual people, places, and events. In apocalyptic literature, we expect to see fantastic imagery and language used in symbolic ways. To try to understand this apocalyptic vision as if it were a narrative would be to derive from it a meaning that God never intended. So we take this passage as the apocalyptic literature that it has revealed itself to be and seek to understand it accordingly.

Now that we have gathered the contextual information that we need, let's look at the details of the passage itself. In this passage, John sees an angel coming down from heaven. The angel has a key and a chain in his hand. He seizes a dragon, a serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and he binds him for a thousand years. He throws the Devil into the abyss, closes the abyss, and then seals the abyss so that the Devil is trapped there until the thousand years end.

How are we to understand this? Several interpretations present themselves. We could understand John's language as if it were a narrative. John saw an angel. The angel had an actual key and an actual chain. The angel actually tied a huge dragon-like serpent in the chain and threw it into a bottomless pit, which he then locked for 365,000 actual days. However, nothing in this interpretation fits with the vast amount of information that we have gathered about this passage. First of all, we know that this is not a narrative. This is apocalyptic literature. The words John writes here are not meant to be understood completely literally. The fantastic imagery is symbolic, just as is always the case in apocalyptic literature. In addition, other portions of Scripture help us understand the imagery that God is using here. The dragon is called that ancient serpent, recalling the form Satan took in the Garden of Eden when he tempted Adam and Eve to sin (Gen 3:1). Previous portions of Revelation have made it clear that the abyss is hell (Rev 9:1,2,11). Because Satan is a spirit and not an actual serpent, the chain the angel uses to bind him cannot be an actual metal chain. And since the abyss is hell, it can't have an actual door that the angel could close and put a seal on. But what about the thousand years? Can't that be taken as a literal span of 365,000 days? Why, in the middle of all this fantastic imagery which is meant to be understood symbolically, would God insert one detail that he meant for us to understand non-symbolically? No, the thousand years is just like every other detail in this vision. It is a symbol and is not meant to be taken as a literal span of 365,000 days. Nothing about this first interpretation fits with anything that we know about this passage. So we have no choice but to discard it and find a different interpretation.

The proper interpretation of this passage is the one that lets Scripture reveal its own meaning. This is apocalyptic literature. Since it is apocalyptic literature, we expect that we will encounter fantastic imagery and language used symbolically. As we begin to go through the details of this vision, we understand them in keeping with our expectations concerning apocalyptic literature. The dragon is not an actual dragon. It is Satan, our ancient enemy, who attacked our first parents in the form of a snake. The key and the chain that the angel carries are not an actual metal key and chain. Rather they show that God has given the angel power to restrain Satan from his diabolical activity. And in keeping with God's use of the number one thousand elsewhere in Revelation, the one thousand years referenced in this passage are a long, definite, complete period of time during which Satan will be restrained.

This interpretation also fits very well with everything else that we know about this passage. We know that God had John write this passage in order to comfort and encourage persecuted Christians. What greater comfort could God give them than to assure them that in spite of how things appeared, Satan did not have free rein in the world; God was in control. He was restraining Satan. And as John's vision continues from this passage, as God shows his people seated on thrones and reigning with him, that comfort and encouragement continues until finally Satan is crushed, the new heaven and the new earth appear, and all God's people join him at the wedding feast of the Lamb. That is the message God wants to convey to us through these words that he had John write. That is how we understand God's message as God intended.

What is the value of hermeneutics? The value of hermeneutics is being able to understand God's message to us in his Word in the way that he intends, in spite of the barriers of language, culture, and time that stand between us and the original text. It is sitting at our Savior's feet like Mary and listening as he himself reveals his truth to us. It is the joy of believing that "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing [we] may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). The historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation that we have detailed in this paper enables us to do all these things. It keeps us from standing above God's Word and dictating to him what he must mean. It frees us from feeling obligated to provide information that God simply has not given to us. It opens up the Scriptures to us and enables us to see them in all their Christ-centered beauty. God grant that we may always interpret his Scriptures in this way so that we may always understand his Word as he intends.

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