Is It Possible to Understand the Text of the New Testament in Today's Culture?

By
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Introduction

In session four of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, held in April of 1546, the following canon was affirmed regarding the interpretation of Scripture:

> Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, [the Council] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,--in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, --wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,--whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,--hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never (intended) to be at any time published.[1]

The Council of Trent convened to address the Protestant Reformation, not only to affirm the faith of the Roman Catholic Church, but also to attempt to combat the Protestant doctrines that were being promulgated throughout Europe. The fact that Protestantism had rejected the authority of the Pope and the Roman Magisterium meant that it felt at liberty to read and interpret the Scriptures without the need to conform the doctrines derived to the teachings of the Roman Church. It was this freedom of interpretation that enabled Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to let the Scriptures speak and for them to act and formulate doctrine accordingly. The Roman Church, however, believed this freedom to lead to anarchy, especially since the Bible was being used to disprove cherished doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, such as purgatory, indulgences, and papal supremacy. It was for this reason that the above canon was ratified, prohibiting laymen from interpreting Scripture without the overarching guidance of the Church and her teachings to ensure orthodoxy.

This is not to say that before the Reformation no-one thought to search the Scriptures to form one's beliefs. Indeed, from the Bereans in Acts 17:10-11, through Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, men have recognized the need to examine the Scriptures alone to determine true

[1] The canons of the Council of Trent can be found at http://www.thecounciloftrent.com. This citation is from http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch4.htm.

doctrine.[2] It would be wrong to suppose that such investigation always led to uniformity of thought. Indeed, it is true to say that while many have undertaken careful and proper interpretation of the Scriptures, there are also many that have used the Bible to support their own predetermined viewpoints, or improperly handled the Word to undermine its authority. Roman Catholic apologists have used the variety of opinions among Protestants on various doctrinal issues to try to undermine the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*—that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to teach and lead the Christian into salvation and righteous living.[3]

Christians are also used to hearing atheists and other non-Christians challenge them on the validity of their arguments based on the fact that different Christian groups believe different things, and ultimately that one's interpretation of the Bible is subjective and clearly open to various meanings. From this perspective one might question how the Bible could be said to be true if its teachings are open to such widely different interpretations, and whether one can even determine truth as a result.

Postmodernism has taken this attitude to the point of saying that truth is relative to the individual, and there has developed a form of criticism based on this viewpoint. Called "reader-response criticism," its concern is not the background to the text, or the historical situation of the writer, but the way the text impacts the reader. According to this view, the only interpretation that matters is the reader's; the author's original intent and the way the author's words would have been understood within his culture and timeframe are irrelevant—if they can even be known with any degree of certainty.[4] This view may appeal to those who want to "hear" from the Scripture a personal word for his

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[2]Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Book House, 1950), pp. 19-25.

[3]For example, Roman Catholic apologist Patrick Madrid claims: "As a rule of faith that, without recourse to Sacred Tradition and an infallible Magisterium, promises doctrinal certitude and a unity of faith, <sola scriptura> fails miserably. The best evidence of this is Protestantism itself. There are today, according to one recent study, over 22,000 distinct Protestant denominations in the world, each of which claims to go by the 'Bible alone,' yet no two of them agree on what exactly the Bible teaches." (http://www.ewtn.com/library/scriptur/solascri.txt). Madrid's reference to "22,000 distinct Protestant denominations" is vastly exaggerated, but his perspective is clear.

[4]Gordon D. Fee, New Testament Exegesis 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 182.

or her situation, but it robs the text of meaning since there is no longer any one meaning to the text, and each person's interpretation—even if contradictory with other interpretations—is equally valid.

Reader-response criticism, along with other interpretational methods that posit multiple different meanings for any one passage, is however a victim of its own methodology. Those that write on the subject expect their readers to interpret their own words according to the meaning the authors intend. One must ask why they impose such a double standard by not according the same privilege to the text of Scripture. The answer, obviously, is because this is the only way that the methodology can be consistently taught and communicated. If the words that people write are to have any meaning, then they must primarily have the meaning the writer originally intended, otherwise there would be no point in writing.[5]

Not only does this approach make the original author's meaning irrelevant, as Walter Kaiser warns, it undermines the acquisition of knowledge of any sort. If one cannot know what a piece of writing means outside of one's own perceptions, ideas, and worldviews, one will not be able to learn anything beyond what one already knows:

> All knowledge is reduced to the horizon of one's own prejudices and personal predilections. This is true whether it is done for "spiritual" or for philosophical reasons, both approaches usurp the author's revelatory stance and insert one's own authority for his.[6]

Unless one is to appeal to some kind of ecclesiastical authority to understand Scripture, it is necessary to find that meaning within the text of Scripture itself. This is the purpose of exegesis: to draw out from the text the meaning of the words within their context. The term "exegesis" is derived from the Greek ἐξήγησις, which is the word used for a "narration" or "explanation." The verbal form of this word, ἐξηγέομαι, occurs in the

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[5]Ibid., p. 184; See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 1981) pp. 46-47.

[6]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in Norman Geisler (ed.), Inerrancy (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), pp. 118-119.

New Testament in the context of explaining or relating something to others (see Luke 24:35, Acts 10:8, and Acts 21:19, for example).[7]

Every person that attempts to read, understand, and apply the words of Scripture engages in exegesis. The problem is that there has been a lot of misunderstanding, bad doctrine, and outright sin committed on the basis of bad exegesis. Simply engaging in the practice of biblical interpretation does not guarantee that one's results will produce a proper understanding of the passage in question. Over the centuries, interpreters have developed principles and methods to help the exegete draw meaning from the text that does not do violence to the writer's original intention.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the basic principles of exegesis in order to demonstrate that it is possible to come to an understanding of what the Bible teaches. This author recognizes that a degree of humility is also necessary, since not every passage of Scripture is equally clear, and there are some passages that remain veiled in terms of coming to a certain conclusion with regard to its proper meaning. This does not mean one cannot form opinions on such passages, and it certainly does not mean that Scripture is unclear, or that one simply cannot know what the Bible means. There are certainly areas within the pages of Scripture that are considered ἀδιάφορα, where believers are free to disagree with one another in good conscience.[8] These are not areas of essential doctrine, however, even in these places it is important that the practice of exegesis be conducted properly. This will ensure that one's conclusions will be consistent with the passage and the intent of the author, even if those conclusions are disputable.

Hermeneutics and Exegesis

Sometimes the terms "exegesis" and "hermeneutics" are used interchangeably; but there is a difference between them. While exegesis refers to the actual drawing out the meaning from the text, hermeneutic refers more to the science of interpretation. The Greek word ἑρμηνεύω from which the English word comes is often used in the New

[7]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology, pp. 43-44.

[8]Paul indicates the existence of such issues in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8:8-9.

Testament with the meaning of "to translate." There is a related term, διερμηνεύω, which means "to interpret."[9] Berkhof defines "hermeneutics" as "the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation."[10] So, technically speaking, hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation, while exegesis is the practical application of those methods. Wayne Grudem puts it this way:

> When one studies principles of interpretation, that is "hermeneutics," but when one applies those principles and begins actually explaining a biblical text, he or she is doing "exegesis."[11]

Fee points out that historically, exegesis was a discipline under hermeneutics. However, he sees the term hermeneutics as having come to mean more what the texts mean at a later point in history, as opposed to what the text meant to the author in its original context.[12] Properly speaking, therefore, the following principles are actually hermeneutical principles by which one can perform exegesis on the texts. For the purposes of this paper, however, the term exegesis will be used in the broader sense as indicated by Fee.

Permanent Tensions

Gerald Bray describes three "permanent tensions" he observes among exegetes that may be helpful to consider by way of general comment.[13] The first is between careful, systematic, scholarly exegesis where texts are weighed, historical circumstances taken into account, and good principles of exegesis applied. This is in contrast to the common, unsystematic variety of exegesis, where passages are taken out of context and applied where the original authors would never have intended. The former is often seen

[9]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology, p. 44.

[10]Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, p. 11.

[11]Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), p. 109.

[12]Gordon D. Fee, New Testament Exegesis, p. 1

[13]The following is from Gerald Bray, Biblical Interpretation (Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 40-43.

as the domain of the professional scholar, whereas the latter is that which most of the laity practice, often under the influence of popular songs whose writers are often careless with the text of Scripture.

Bray's second tension is between those that practice proper exegesis, reading out of the text the originally-intended meaning, and those who practice "eisegesis," reading into the text one's own ideas and theories. While most careful exegetes will try to avoid eisegesis, it is too tempting to wander onto that path such that even the best of scholars must have his or her guard up. As Bray points out, the tendency toward eisegesis "is one of the greatest dangers of preaching, and one of the most obvious causes of its decline into disrepute."[14] Eisegesis is not limited to the insertion into the text one's own ideas and theories. As James White points out, there is also the danger that one might read the theories and assumptions of one's own culture and contemporary setting into the text. This amounts to reading Scripture as if the writers shared the modern mindset and were subject to the same traditions and presuppositions of the modern reader. No-one is immune from this tendency, which only emphasizes the need for consistent and objective hermeneutics.[15]

The third tension noted by Bray is that between unity and diversity of Scripture. Biblical scholars, he points out, have a tendency to isolate passages in their search for sources and background information leading to an undue emphasis on anything that appears to be different. A classic example cited by Bray is the supposed two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. When analyzed separately, the Genesis 2 account has much that is different about it, which leads some to posit that this is an alternative creation account written by a different hand. In fact, this may be nothing more than a stylistic device, repeating what has been narrated before but in greater detail. In concentrating effort on one passage, the scholar may miss the wood for the trees. The theologian, on the other hand, relies upon the unity of Scripture to be able to piece together a biblical theology.

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[14]Ibid., p. 41.

[15]James R. White, Scripture Alone (Minneapolis, Mn: Bethany House, 2004), pp. 91-92.

Bray's final tension is between text and context, between researching the original meaning of the passage and its meaning to the original hearers (as far as that is possible), and the application of the passage to the modern context. As Bray points out, there will inevitably be some loss of context since there is only so much of the original context that survives to modern times. However, since the Scriptures have been preserved for contemporary audiences, even those parts that are steeped in a foreign culture must have a meaning that makes sense to modern ears. The exegete needs to be sensitive to this, without letting the text become lost completely in the modern context, which is completely foreign to the original authors.

Some Basic Assumptions

When approaching exegesis, whether New Testament or Old, one should be aware of some basic assumptions. Some of these may appear obvious, but nevertheless they need to be stated. First, the Bible, at the very least, is work of literature like other works of literature, written by rational people, and is, therefore, capable of being interpreted. God did not inspire the Scriptures in some secret code that can only be deciphered by specialists. He chose to use ordinary people with natural capacities to formulate sentences and apply the grammatical rules of their language and culture to transmit His Word to His people. This is not to diminish the inspired nature of Scripture: it is still God's inspired word to man. However, the means by which he chose to transmit that revelation was by human agency. As Walter Kaiser puts it, "God has deliberately decided to accommodate mankind by disclosing Himself in our language and according to the mode to which we are accustomed in other literary productions."[16] The natural implication of this is that, at a basic level, the same rules of interpretation one would apply to Jane Austin, Charles Dickens, J. K. Rowling, or one's e-mail correspondence also apply to Scripture. This would include paying attention to context, and grammar—principles that will be outlined below.

Following on from this, another natural assumption is that everyone is capable of understanding communication. Kaiser notes that "from the moment God spoke to Adam

[16]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," p. 120.

in the Garden, and from the time Adam addressed Eve, until the present," people have been applying God-given rules of hermeneutics.[17] The ability to understand one another is innate, which is why people are often perplexed when they find their words misunderstood especially when they believe they have spoken clearly. Indeed, it would be correct to say that the rules of hermeneutics, like the rules of grammar and spelling, are *descriptive*, rather than *prescriptive*. In other words, they describe the way in which people naturally draw meaning out of someone else's communication; the rules do not define how to understand someone else. If this is so, one might ask why it is necessary to set out rules of hermeneutics in the first place. One reason is the same reason people still need dictionaries and grammars: the rules are sometimes broken (either accidentally or deliberately), and correction needs to be administered to restore correct understanding. Another applies particularly to the fields of history and biblical studies: one is often removed by many years from the original communication. One might often be removed from the original by language and culture too. If the modern Bible reader had actually been born in first century Palestine, he or she would have a greater understanding of the New Testament than he or she would otherwise. Hence it is necessary to study languages and cultures to be able to properly apply the rules of hermeneutics to foreign documents, such as the Bible.

One final assumption that is necessary to properly interpreting Scripture is the fact that Scripture can be understood, or the perspicuity of Scripture. This means that the Scripture is clear in its teaching such that anyone reading it can understand what he or she needs to understand in order to be saved and to grow in grace and maturity in the faith. As Grudem puts it: "The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it."[18] This does not mean, however, that all parts of the Bible are equally understandable. There are "difficult" passages that take study and effort to understand; and some may never be conclusively understood this side of eternity. This does not mean the Bible is incomprehensible; just that there are some problem passages

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[17]Ibid.

[18]Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 108.

that may require specialist skill (knowledge of the original languages and cultures, for example) to fully understand. However, there are more than sufficient comprehensible passages to keep the believer studying for a lifetime. The natural order provides a good analogy: there is enough in creation that is comprehendible such that the ordinary person is able to live in it without difficulty. That does not mean there is not also complexity to the natural order, and parts of it that baffle even scientists. However, those aspects do not need to be understood by all people for continued existence.[19]

As noted above, many of the following principles of exegesis apply to the Bible as a whole; however the focus of this paper is the New Testament, so issues pertinent to New Testament exegesis in particular will be highlighted. Exegetes may differ on the order in which these principles are applied.

The Broad Context

For each passage of Scripture to be interpreted, the exegete should take a step back and consider the broader context of the passage. That is, the exegete needs to consider the author, his historical environment, and the type of literature the author is composing.

For the evangelical, the question of authorship of the New Testament documents is without question apart from the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews. Liberal scholars debate whether Paul wrote most of the corpus ascribed to him, and also whether the Gospels can be attributed to their traditional writers. One's position on this question will determine the context in which the document is placed: is it written from the viewpoint of an "insider" or from a later biographer looking back? Is it a letter written by Paul addressing a situation within the newborn church, or is it written by a later imitator addressing a situation contemporary to his time? It is certainly questionable whether these questions can be definitively answered from the context of a document, especially with a letter where only one side of a conversation is known. However, the exegete should be able to come to a defensible conclusion on this so he can begin to establish the document's historical context. As Berkhof observes, "It is impossible to understand an

[19]This analogy is borrowed from Walter Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," p. 128.

author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against the proper historical background."[20] Given the tumultuous events of the first century, it might make an important difference to one's interpretation whether the document was written in AD 50, AD 70, AD 90, or AD 120.

When one has come to a decision with regard to authorship, it will help greatly to learn as much as one can about that author. If the work is anonymous, or for whatever reason the authorship is in question, at least a time frame and social environment may be discernable from the text. Where the author is known, one can learn more about him from his other writings, or other works that speak of him. For example, Paul gives biographical information in his letters (Philippians 3:5-6, 2 Corinthians 11:22-28), but Luke also provides some background to Paul's life, both in terms of his conversion (Acts 9:1-30), and by recording Paul's own testimony (Acts 22:3 ff., for instance).

Beyond the author, one should consider the author's audience. This is particularly important when considering an epistle, since many of the issues addressed by the epistle writer will be prompted by the concerns of his audience, or in direct response to correspondence from his audience. A popular view of the Gospels is that they were written within the context of church communities, and each evangelist selected and arranged his material to address the needs of his audience. If this is correct, then one might assume that by examining the choices made by the Evangelist, one can get an idea of the kind of issues facing him and his church. By considering the writer's audience and attempting to put oneself into that situation, it becomes easier to avoid the common exegetical mistake of assuming that first century writers (and readers) have twenty-first century mindsets. As James White notes, "Assuming the ancient writer would 'think like me' on this or that issue is one of the main reasons modern preaching so often turns ancient writers in to postmodern Americans rather than allowing them to speak within their intended context."[21]

From the immediate context of the author, one can then move to the author's general geographical and historical context. From where was he writing? His

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[20]Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, p. 114.

[21]James R. White, Scripture Alone, p. 83.

environment will influence his writing, including the climate, landscape, the dominant industry—fishing or farming—and so forth. Not only this, but also, in the case of the Gospels, the environmental setting of the narrative is important, particularly when examining Jesus' parables and analogies. It is also interesting to observe the Evangelist's comfort describing the settings of the various events in Christ's life (for example, the Sermon on the Mount, the Large Catch of Fish, or the Feeding of the Five Thousand). Does the Evangelist betray a familiarity with the Judean landscape and culture that suggests either he was present at the events, or that he is utilizing primary sources, or perhaps that he is from that region? It goes without saying that an understanding of the political situation behind the New Testament documents is also critical to accurate exegesis. What was the standing of the Jews within Roman-controlled Palestine? What did it mean to be under Roman house arrest? What were the Messianic expectations of the Jewish people in the first century? What was the Jewish attitude toward lepers? Why were there money-changers in the Temple court, and what did this mean? Such questions speak to the socio-political environment within which the New Testament writers worked. To understand the documents, one needs to understand the culture.

Finally, one needs to consider the type of literature one is dealing with. The New Testament contains four distinct genres of literature: Gospel, history, epistle, and apocalyptic. Each genre presents different issues with regard to exegesis, and these need to be accounted for when one is interpreting a passage. Not only does the New Testament contain these forms of literature, but different literary genres might be identified within each. For example, in the Gospels Jesus uses parable and analogy. Paul quotes from the Old Testament prophets, and also from the Psalms, which are poetry. One cannot simply apply a "wooden," literalistic interpretation to all types of literature. Each genre has to be interpreted according to the rules of that genre. It will be helpful to examine briefly the specific issues pertaining to exegesis of each of the four forms of New Testament literature.

Issues Specific to the Gospels

It might be tempting to classify the Gospels as history since they purport to document the life of Christ. The Gospel genre, however, is more than just simple

historical narrative. It is true that the Gospel writers intended to document the sayings and stories of Jesus, that there might be a permanent record of these things for the church.[22] But it is also true that the Gospels were written for an audience, and for a very distinct and explicit purpose. John, for instance, states in his Gospel that "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). As noted above, it is widely thought that the Gospel writers compiled and edited their work for local churches, so the selection of material was directed toward the Gospel writer's purpose.

Another popular theory regarding the Gospels that might affect one's exegesis is that three of the four, namely Matthew, Mark, and Luke, display some kind of literary dependency. This means that Matthew and Luke might have used and adapted material from Mark, and Luke might have used Matthew as a source for material. Whether or not one subscribes to this theory, it cannot be denied that there are parallel accounts within the four Gospels, and these should be compared in the course of interpretation. Even if the Gospel writers did not draw from one another, they certainly drew from sources of one kind or another, whether written or oral. It is very possible, therefore, that the accounts contained in each Gospel originated as separate traditions that were compiled into a narrative by each Gospel writer.

This means that on one level, the Gospel accounts are presenting sayings and works of Jesus that need to be understood in themselves. On another level, however, the Evangelist is presenting the sayings and works of Jesus in a particular way in order to say something to his reader either about Jesus Himself, or about a particular topic. Hence, one should pay attention to whether the Gospel writer is placing passages in a chronological order using temporal particles and other narrative devices, or if he is simply presenting material in a topical sequence without suggesting historical continuity.[23] For example, in Matthew 13:24-34 Jesus gives a series of parables: the

[22]See, for example, Luke's comments at the beginning of his Gospel, or Paul's reference to the tradition that was passed to him and that he is passing on regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23.

[23]The majority of scholars today, both liberal and evangelical, would say that even if the Gospel writer presents the material as chronologically continuous with temporal particles and phrases ("then," "next," "the next day," etc.), one cannot assume these sayings really were delivered in this order. It is to be understood that the Evangelists exercised a certain "artistic license," or were perhaps convinced (wrongly,

Tares among the Wheat, the Mustard Seed, and the Leven. Between each one, Matthew says "Jesus presented another parable to them…" or "He spoke another parable to them…" Whether or not these were presented on the same occasion, or on separate occasions and Matthew has collected them together in one place is not clear. If the latter is true, not only can one examine the parables themselves to understand what Jesus was teaching, but one can look at the parables as a group to determine what Matthew was trying to say by presenting these parables as a set.[24]

When interpreting a passage from the Gospels, one should first be aware of the type of literature one is dealing with. As noted previously, within the Gospels there are various genres: parable, apocalyptic, prophetic, poetry, narrative, and so on. There are also different types of narrative: miracle stories, sayings, pronouncements. Each of these must be interpreted according to its type. For example, in John's Gospel, each of Jesus' miracles is called a "sign." Since signs point to something, part of one exegetical process when working with miracle stories in John is to determine what the "sign" is specifically indicating. Is it simply to show who Jesus was, or is it to demonstrate a particular aspect of His character or work? Parables must be recognized for what they are: fictitious stories that point to a reality. The exegete must also be attentive to literary devices such as exaggeration, irony, and metaphor. These should be treated for what they are, not with wooden literalness.

Once one has determined the meaning of the passage as it is presented in the Gospel, one can then move to looking at the way the passage is presented within the Gospel to try to get a sense of the Gospel writer's intention. Does there appear to be a reason for the positioning of this pericope at this particular point in the narrative? Is it connected chronologically to the previous pericope, or might it be placed there topically? If the latter, what is the Evangelist trying to communicate about Christ, or about that subject?[25]

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even) the events happened in that sequence. The present writer has problems with this view as it pertains to broader issues of inerrancy and inspiration, but such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

[24]See Fee, New Testament Exegesis, pp. 20-22.

[25]Fee also includes an examination of the way in which one Gospel writer might have adapted (i.e., edited or added to) a story from one of the other Gospels. For those who subscribe to the dependency theory of the Synoptic Gospels, the purpose of this step is to understand the mindset of the Evangelist and

Issues Specific to Historical Literature (Acts)

As it applies to the New Testament, historical exegesis really applies specifically to The Acts of the Apostles. As Fee correctly points out, one's approach to Acts should account for Luke's stated purpose in writing (Luke 1:1-3, cf. Acts 1:1-2).[26] Fee also states that Luke writes as a Hellenistic historian of his period, and as such paints vivid pictures of events. One should not, therefore, expect "absolute precision" from him.[27] However, Luke's stated purpose is to present a careful account (Luke 1:3), so while one should allow for the fact that Luke did not have the benefit of digital recording devices and the Internet for research, one should also bear in mind that, perhaps moreso that other Hellenistic historians, Luke wanted to present a reliable account.[28]

The interpretation of Acts, therefore, involves mainly an understanding of the historical background to the region, its topography, geography, and political and social situation. This was also true with regard to the Gospels, but this is especially true for Acts, since much of the work is straight historical narrative. Luke's purpose in presenting an orderly account is demonstrated in the fact that he begins with Jesus' statement to His disciples that they will be His witnesses "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and then proceeds to structure his work around that statement. The gospel goes to Jerusalem and all Judea (Acts 1-7), then Samaria (Acts 8), and then, through the conversion and ministry of Paul, to the remotest parts of the earth (Acts 9-28). Within each of these sections, the main focus of the narrative switches to various people, most notably from

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his audience. Did he make a change for theological reasons, or just for stylistic reasons? Did he change the context of the story because of his audience? See Fee, New Testament Exegesis, pp. 24-25.

[26]Ibid., p. 27. Luke's authorship of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts is one of the few areas of New Testament studies where liberal and conservative scholars of every stripe are united in agreement.

[27]Ibid., p. 28.

[28]Indeed, Thucydides notes in his History of the Peloponnesian War that the speeches he records keep "as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used," and he freely admits to making the speakers say "what, in my opinion was called for by each situation" (I.22). Luke makes no such caveat, and in fact could probably rely upon the accounts of multiple witnesses, including the original speakers for much of Acts.

Peter within the Jewish context to Paul with the Gentile mission. The exegete needs to be sensitive to these things.

Also, like the Gospel writers, given that Luke probably had a wealth of material to choose from, he must have selected the events he describes for a reason. It is true that each event in his narrative moves the story along; but none of the stories are simply "filler" material. For what reason did Luke, for example, include the story of Ananias and Sapphira? What is the significance of Stephen's stoning, or Peter's vision of the sheet? Why did Luke include the story of Paul's shipwreck in Malta? Beyond the historical, there may be theological points that Luke is trying to make.

Issues Specific to the Epistles

There are a number of considerations to account for when interpreting the New Testament epistles. Not least of these is the fact that these are letters to specific people or churches in the context of specific situations to which the author of the epistle is addressing himself. This means that the exegete is working with one side of a conversation. Preceding the epistle there might have been a letter from the church or individual, or perhaps news regarding the church or person in question prompted the writer to put pen to paper. Either way, there is a side to the situation that the interpreter must discern from clues within the work or from external sources.

Most of the New Testament letters were written by Paul, who is also one of the main subjects of The Acts of the Apostles. This means the exegete has a lot of information to draw from regarding the person of Paul, his travels, and his imprisonments. Drawing from clues within the epistles and Acts, one can put together probable dates, locations, and situations surrounding each of Paul's epistles. For example, Philippians was probably written toward the end of Paul's life (c. 62) while he was under house arrest in Rome. The clues to this can be found both within the letter—the references to his "imprisonment" (1:7), the "praetorian guard" (1:13), and Caesar's household (4:22), and from Acts—the circumstances of Paul's stay in Rome, living in his own accommodation, able to receive guests, but under guard, for two years (Acts 28:16-31).

Another advantage to having a body of letters by a single person is that one can get a sense of the style and vocabulary of the author, which phrases he likes to use, and what meaning he gives to those phrases. While it is true that the same author can change style and vocabulary depending on the audience and situation he is addressing, often one is able to find help understanding a phrase in one of his epistles by examining his use of the same phrase in others.

Another aspect of the New Testament letters that one needs to consider is the letter's overall style. Those written to individuals tend to be very ad hoc and personal; for example Paul admonishes Timothy to "use a little wine for the sake of your stomach," (1 Timothy 5:23). Other letters were clearly intended for wide distribution and deal with more general concerns. Paul tells the Colossians, for example, to be sure their letter is read to the Laodicean church, and that the Laodicean letter is read to the Colossians.

The careful exegete should also pay attention to the letter writer's use of varying forms of expression. Galatians is written with passion, with Paul switching between rebuke, autobiography, hyperbole, exhortation, and instruction. Romans, on the other hand, is the closest thing one can find in the New Testament to a systematic theology. With each passage, the interpreter should note the way in which the letter writer is expressing himself and be sure to interpret accordingly.

Finally, it is crucial to ask why that particular passage, paragraph, and sentence is there. What purpose does it serve to the overall argument, and indeed, the point of the letter? One should be able to trace the argument through from the start of the work to the passage under examination and establish a coherent train of logical thought.[29] The ninth chapter of Romans, for example, is not an isolated thought from the rest of the letter. Indeed, to understand the reasoning behind this chapter, one needs to trace Paul's argument all the way back from the first chapter of Romans through to that point. One will then see how Paul has established man's guilt before a holy God, and God's eternal plan to bring salvation to His people culminating in the coming of Christ, through whom the believer is firmly established and irrevocably saved. It is on this basis that Paul can say that God's plan has not failed, as it might appear given that many Jews have rejected

[29]Fee, New Testament Exegesis, pp. 19-20.

the gospel. Indeed, it is not one's physical descent that makes one an "Israelite"—at least in the spiritual sense—but it is God's election.

Issues Specific to Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation)

Apocalyptic literature is identified as such because it purports to be divine revelations of forthcoming events by means of dreams, visions, or words from heavenly messengers. The events described normally culminate in some kind of end-time crisis.[30] Examples of such literature abound in both Jewish and Christian circles outside of the Bible. The Old Testament has a number of examples, particularly in Ezekiel and Daniel. The New Testament does not contain as much apocalyptic material, the main work of this kind being Revelation.

The contents of Revelation have long been considered too mysterious to fully understand, an attitude that has led some to take great liberties with its interpretation. However, a fundamental rule-of-thumb when approaching this book is to remember that the writer is still communicating to an audience, so no matter how odd the imagery may appear, one must presume that his readers would have understood, at least to some extent, what he was saying.[31]

For this reason, one should approach Revelation armed with an understanding of the historical context of John's time, and also the history behind the imagery he uses. One should attempt to determine whether John is appealing to already-known symbols or are they things that his audience would know from their own environment. Are they old symbols being used in a new way, and if so, why? Fee notes that while John rarely cites any explicit Old Testament passages, "there is hardly a sentence that does not have very

[30]See D. S. Russell, "Apocalyptic Literature," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (eds.), The Oxford Companion to the Bible (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 34.

[31]Indeed, in Mark's "little apocalypse" (Mark 13), Mark adds a parenthetical note when Jesus speaks of "the Abomination of Desolation standing where it should not be" saying "let the reader understand" (13:14). This comment might indicate that the Gospel was written after the events Jesus is describing took place and he expects his readers to get the reference, or that the reader will understand when these things happen.

clear echoes of OT passages."[32] Identifying these references will greatly enhance one's ability to understand the text.

Fee also cautions the exegete not to get too focused on details but to see each vision as a whole. He notes that often, the details of a vision are not there to be allegorized, but are to add to the overall impact of the vision and do not necessarily have any particular meaning in themselves. He cites Revelation 9:7-11 as an example where

> the locusts with crowns of gold, human faces, and women's long hair help to fill out the picture in such a way that the original readers could hardly have mistaken what was in view—the barbarian hordes at the outer edges of the Roman Empire, whom Rome greatly feared (even though the vision as a whole is adapted from Joel 1 and 2).[33]

Textual Issues

Most modern English New Testaments are based on the NA[27], or Nestle-Aland's twenty-seventh edition of the Greek New Testament. This is a critical text, which means it is a compilation of readings from manuscripts considered by the editors to be the best and most representative of what the original autograph actually said. Since the original Greek texts of the New Testament books no longer exist, the practice of textual criticism has arisen to answer the need for those original readings to be restored. Using the thousands of Greek manuscripts available, scholars are able to apply some basic rules to help decide what the authors originally wrote. In many cases, the choice of text is obvious, but there are plenty of situations where it is not, and evidence has to be carefully weighed before a decision is made.

The implications of this for exegesis are obvious: the exegete should be aware of any textual issues in the Greek of his or her passage, and be able to explain the textual choices made—especially where that choice could impact the meaning of the passage.

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[32]Fee, New Testament Exegesis, p. 29.

[33]Ibid., p. 30.

As Fee points out, not all the textual variants in a given passage will have exegetical significance; indeed, in some passages there may be none that impact the meaning of the text.[34] However, the careful exegete will be sure to discover what those variants are, and determine for himself their exegetical significance.

Paragraph/Sentence Context

Simply stated, this principle insists that the passage or sentence under consideration needs to be placed within the context of its immediate argument. Where there is confusion regarding the meaning of the passage, on many occasions the true meaning can be found simply by asking which of the possibilities best fits the surrounding context. If it is part of the flow of an argument, which interpretation fits the argument best? This is known as "Discourse Analysis," and it reminds the exegete that the author is a rational human being who, under the inspiration of the Spirit, is writing according to a coherent thought process. With this in mind, one should not expect leaps of logic and *non sequiturs* within the flow of a train of thought.[35]

Given that the original Greek text did not have indented paragraphs, one does not have to rely upon the decisions of translators and critical text editors regarding the location of paragraphs. If one understands a paragraph to contain "an assertion of a thematic proposition together with supporting propositions,"[36]—that is, it contains a single idea or a series of thoughts or events around a single idea—then one can see how that idea fits with the ideas around it. The paragraph may start with a grammatical structure that shows its complete dependency upon the preceding paragraph(s)—the use of the word "therefore" or a participle phrase, for example. On the other hand, the paragraph may begin with a change of thought, a vocative, or some other indication that the topic has changed or the argument has moved in a different direction. In such instances, the preceding argument may still provide assistance to the exegete since it can give the context for the new thought. However this is not always the case. In 1

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[34]Ibid., p. 61.

[35]See James R. White, Scripture Alone, pp. 86-87.

[36]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology, p. 96.

Corinthians 7, Paul addresses a question brought to him by the Corinthian church in a letter. The chapter begins with a very definite break in thought: "Now concerning the things about which you wrote…" In this case, the immediately preceding paragraphs may not be of much assistance exegetically—though the context of the letter from chapter one to this point might, since it establishes the relationship Paul had with the Corinthian church and gives some insight into the issues within the church at that time.

Each paragraph is made up of sentences, and each sentence is usually constructed of one or more clauses. One would expect that the sentences within a paragraph will relate somehow to one another, and each clause within a sentence will have a logical connection. When taking exegesis down to the level of paragraph analysis, the exegete needs to be aware of the relationships between the various clauses and sentences. Is the main idea of the sentence contained in that clause, or is it dependent on the previous clause or sentence? Is it an adversative, and hence one needs to discern to what the clause or sentence is taking exception? By noting main ideas, types of clauses, antecedents, and so forth, the exegete can build a more accurate picture of what the paragraph is attempting to express.[37]

Grammatical Considerations

Beyond the analysis of paragraphs, sentences, and clauses, one needs to pay close attention to the grammatical forms used for the words within each sentence. Also, given that Greek is an inflectional language where the meaning of a sentence does not depend so much on word order, the positioning of words within a sentence may be significant. When a word that does not usually stand first in a sentence is put in that position by the writer, it is probable that he is giving significance to that word, and it should, therefore, have emphasis for the exegete.

Most of the time, people use words and phrases with deliberation, especially if most long distance communication is by letter in the time and culture in which they live. It matters to the exegete, therefore, whether the author chose to use a perfect tense as opposed to an aorist tense, or to use a participle phrase instead of an adjectival phrase.

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[37]Ibid., pp. 98-99.

As James White notes, "The words used by the writer are the vehicles of meaning, and by selecting their forms and arrangements he intends to communicate in a *particular* fashion."[38] It should be noted that sometimes these choices are purely stylistic; but one's knowledge of the author should help to determine whether the usage is simply his style, or whether it is more likely he is trying to make a point.

Verbal Considerations

Lexical semantics is a branch of study that investigates word meanings, and how one can determine word meanings. Many words in most languages have more than just one meaning; in fact, it is more correct to say they have a "semantic domain," or a range of meanings that may be shades of nuance, or seemingly unrelated to one another. For example, according to the standard Greek New Testament lexicon,[39] the semantic domain for the word πρεσβύτης is "an old man," or "an aged man." Yet the semantic domain for the word λόγος starts with "a communication whereby the mind finds expression," or "word," and continues through "computation," "reckoning," "matter," "thing," and so forth for three pages. How is one able to determine from a given range of meanings which one applies for a particular word?

The first thing to appreciate is the fact that words change their meanings over time. While it is interesting to note that a certain Greek word had a particular meaning for Herodotus, that particular writer is removed from the New Testament writers by several hundred years, and it is possible that the word's meaning has changed since then. Examples of this are obvious in English: the word "gay" does not mean today (at least in common parlance) what it used to mean a few generations ago. Moisés Silva relates a fascinating example of this kind of change with the word ἀγαπᾶν, which in the New Testament had become the common word meaning "to love":

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[38]James R. White, Scripture Alone, p. 84.

[39]Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick Danker (eds.), Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Christian Literature 3rd ed. (Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

> ἀγαπᾶν was becoming the standard verb for "to love" because φιλεῖν had acquired the meaning "to kiss." Furthermore, [Robert] Joly explains that the change of φιλεῖν was itself due to the disappearance of the older word for "to kiss" (κυνεῖν) and that this verb disappeared because of a homonymic clash (in the aorist ἔκυσα) with κύειν ("to impregnate").[40]

In this instance, the choice of word for love was based upon structural change within the language. In other cases, however, Greek words were adopted by Christians and given meaning within a Christian context. For example, the word ἐκκλησία literally means "the called-out ones," and was used in ancient times with the meaning "assembly." However, by the time of the New Testament, the word had a specific meaning pertaining to the congregation of believers, possibly by means of the LXX, which often translates the Hebrew קָהָל referring to the "assembly of Israel" with the word ἐκκλησία.[41] To be fair to the author, unless one can positively demonstrate that the writer was aware of the history of the word, it is unlikely he is using it in any other sense than the one that would have been known to him in his time and cultural environment.[42]

The exegete must, therefore, be alert to whether certain terms in the text have developed a technical meaning, in which case it would make no sense to interpret those terms according to their etymological root since the author probably did not intend them to be used in that way. One way to establish this is to trace the use of that term by the author elsewhere to see if he uses it in the same way every time. Paul's use of the term πρεσβύτερος, for example in 1 Timothy, for the most part is in the technical sense of "elder," an office of leadership within the church. Historically, the word also refers to an elder in the Jewish synagogue, and also generally to a person of senior years. In 1 Timothy 5:1, Paul clearly uses the term with this latter meaning, which is evident both from the context and from the following verse where the feminine form of the adjective is used to refer to older women.

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[40]Moisés Silva, Biblical Words and their Meaning Revised and Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 96.

[41]See, for example, Deuteronomy 31:30, Joshua 8:35, and 1 Kings 8:22.

[42]Moisés Silva, Biblical Words and their Meaning, p. 48.

This example also serves to make the point that one cannot simply assume that words have single meanings. This is not true in English, and neither is it true in Greek. Just as in English, Greek word meanings are largely determined by context. The word "book" can be used as a verb to refer to making a reservation, or to a police officer making an arrest as well as, in its noun form, a piece of literature. The Greek word κόσμος also has a variety of meanings depending on its context. In John 7:7, the "world" hates Jesus because He testifies that its deeds are evil; in John 12:19, the Pharisees remark that the "world" has gone after Jesus. In John 12:47, Jesus says that He came to save the "world," yet in John 14:17, Jesus says that the "world" cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. Clearly, in each of these instances, one cannot simply assume the word "world" refers to exactly the same thing. The semantic range of the word must be established by use of a lexical source, and then the best meaning selected depending upon how it is being used within the sentence.

The Application of Exegesis

Exegesis does not end with an understanding of the passage in question. As Bloesch points out, the object of exegesis is "to determine the grammatical or historical meaning of the text" primarily, but then "we need to go on to synthesis—relating the text to the central meaning of the Bible, which is the gospel—and then to application—relating the text to our life situation."[43] Indeed, Walter Kaiser goes further in saying that "Biblical learning goes to seed when it rests its case after it has disassembled the passage being examined into its various grammatical, syntactical, historical, and literary units, and then fails to go any further."[44] The work of exegesis is merely a preparation for the application of the truths mined from the text both in the pulpit, and in one's own life.

One must be prepared for the text to "speak" to one's theological presuppositions, and to be changed by it. This does not give one the authority to apply Scripture passages in allegorical and typological ways that would have been unknown to the original author.

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[43]Bloesch, Holy Scripture, p. 174.

[44]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology, pp. 131-132.

The exercise of exegesis should have already enlightened the exegete to the author's intent; it is that intent that must find meaning within one's current situation.

Exegesis is essentially, in the words of James White, "allowing God to speak."[45] When one engages in the exegetical process, one is forced to the text of Scripture, and it is the text itself that drives the interpretation of Scripture, not one's own theological persuasion, or some overarching tradition. The fact that proper hermeneutics may cause one discomfort when one finds cherished beliefs challenged by Scripture is ultimately of enduring value. It is through the Scriptures, properly interpreted, that God speaks to the believer, and that should be more important than holding on to potentially unbiblical traditions.

Common Exegetical Mistakes

The preceding discussion has already drawn attention to some common exegetical errors. It will be helpful to draw some of these into one place so that they may be properly identified with the hope that they might be avoided.[46]

First, there are various issues to do with the historical circumstances surrounding the text. The interpreter may, for instance try to recreate the historical situation to an extent that is not warranted by the information available. This is usually done to satisfy a preconceived theory of events. Carson provides some examples of these, such as the church initially looking forward to Christ's return, and then settling down and constructing "delayed parousia" theories when it became apparent that Christ's was not returning imminently, or the assumption that it was the old Jewish church that called Jesus "Messiah," and the Gentile church that called Him "Lord" and "God."[47] There is also what has become known as "parallelomania," which is the unrestrained search for, and identification of, parallels where such parallels do not necessarily exist. This can occur with both conceptual and literary or verbal parallels.[48] Certainly, one can find

[45]James R. White, Scripture Alone, p. 91.

[46]This section is based on the various discussions found in D. A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 1996).

[47]Ibid., p. 131.

[48]See ibid., pp. 43-44, 135-136.

parallels in the New Testament with other parts of the Bible, and even with other literature. Indeed, sometimes it is not so much the discovery of parallels, but the conclusions drawn from their existence that are problematic. One might find parallels between passages in Scripture and texts from ancient authors, and draw the conclusion that they are addressing the same thing, or coming from the same viewpoint. Alternatively, one might find parallels between, for example, the story of Apollonius of Tyana and the story of Jesus, and then wrongly assume that because one can forge (or even force) parallels between two stories, that the one is derived from the other. However to do this, one has to ignore the fact that Apollonius' story has been preserved by a third century biographer who may have fabricated details of the first century philosopher's life.[49]

Another common error is to import modern concepts into New Testament words, or what Carson calls "semantic anachronism."[50] The classic example of this, as cited by Carson, concerns the Greek word δύναμις, which is etymologically connected to the English word "dynamite." While there is this connection between the English and the Greek, it would be wrong to suppose that the connotations the modern English speaker gives to the word "dynamite" were in any way in the mind of the first century Greek writer using the word δύναμις. This is reading back into the text a modern development of the word. Indeed, as Carson points out, not only is the concept of "dynamite" anachronistic to the New Testament use of δύναμις, but it is inappropriate:

> Dynamite blows things up, tears things down, rips out rocks, gouges holes, destroys things. The power of God concerning which Paul speaks he often identifies with the power that raised Jesus from the dead (e.g., Eph. 1:18-20); and as it operates in us, its goal is εἰς σωτηρίαν… aiming for the wholeness and perfection implicit in the consummation of our salvation. Quite apart from the

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[49]Dan Barker raised this parallel in debate against James White. Video of this debate can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00WOGeGcjYo. See also the Wikipedia entry on Apollonius at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollonius_of_tyana. Also the entry "Apollonius of Tyana" in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1974), which states that the parallels between Apollonius and Christ, though often used by Christianity's detractors "are generally admitted to be unconvincing."

[50]D. A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, p. 33.

> semantic anachronism, therefore, dynamite appears inadequate as a means of raising Jesus from the dead or as a means of conforming us to the likeness of Christ.[51]

Another popular exegetical mistake is to suppose that a word is capable of bearing its full semantic range regardless of the specific context in which it is used. This is, in fact, a denial of the principle that a word's meaning is determined by its context. The error supposes that context is irrelevant to meaning and the word can receive any meaning available within the totality of its range of meanings, hence the term "illegitimate totality transfer" which is given to this error.[52] As noted previously, when the word κόσμος is used in John's Gospel, one is not free to pick and choose whatever meaning of the word is available in the lexicon. One must choose the meaning that best fits the context in which it is employed.

Conclusion

It has been the assertion of this paper that, while not every part of the New Testament is equally clear, the Scriptures are sufficiently clear that anyone reading it, applying one's common sense, naturally-given capacity to comprehend written material, is able to discover how to attain salvation and how to live a life that is pleasing to God.

The necessity for setting forth rules of interpretation has arisen due to the fact that people often forget to apply common sense rules of interpretation to Scripture. There is a tendency, at least with some people, to act as if the rules one uses to properly interpret the instruction manual for one's computer somehow do not apply to the text of the New Testament. There are certainly interpretational issues that arise specific to the New Testament, but in terms of examining context, understanding words and phrases according to their usage within a sentence, and following logical trains of thought, there is little difference.

As Grudem rightly says, "We affirm that the teachings of Scripture are clear and able to be understood, but we also recognize that people often (through their own

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[51]Ibid., p. 34.

[52]Ibid., p. 60.

shortcomings) misunderstand what is clearly written is Scripture."[53] Misunderstanding of Scripture is, therefore, not a deficiency of God's Word, but a deficiency of the reader. It is up to the reader to study the text, apply proper hermeneutical principles, and come to a determination with regard to the meaning of the text. God inspired the Bible to be understood and used by the church for the preaching of the Gospel and training of believers (Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). In light of this the Christian exegete should be encouraged to apply himself to the task of exegesis. He should make use of the resources available from scholars of the original languages and historical backgrounds to supplement and support his study of the text. One might not be able to solve all the difficult passages, but one will at least be able to come to informed decisions, and better appreciate the amount of clarity there is in God's Word.

[53]Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 109.

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