



# Out of Context

How to Avoid  
Misinterpreting the Bible

RICHARD L. SCHULTZ



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# Introduction

## Why I Am Swatting the Beehive When I Know It Will Upset the Bees

**H**ave you ever sat in the stands at a sporting event or in front of your television while a game was being broadcast with the score tied and time running out? The game-deciding play was set up—and executed poorly. And your team lost! Your immediate response may have been to yell (perhaps at the television), telling the athletes what they should have done. After all, you have played the sport yourself, so you should know.

My experience as a professional student and teacher of the Bible has been similar. Through years of in-depth training and nearly three decades of studying the Scriptures and teaching students how to interpret them well, I have become increasingly aware of how frequently Christian writers—as well as secular politicians—use the Bible. I have noticed that sometimes they use it well, but far too often they use it poorly. And in the latter case, like the sports fan, I wish I could tell them what they should have done. It's not just a matter of taste and familiarity—like when I find it difficult to get used to a favorite hymn that I grew up singing with organ accompaniment now being played by the worship band with a very different rhythm and tempo. Rather, these writers understand Bible phrases or individual verses in ways that are contrary to their original meaning, suggesting meanings

that the wording and immediate context of the text do not support, meanings not found in any standard commentary.

Sometimes these Bible interpreters read contemporary concerns, values, associations, and word usage into the ancient biblical text. And often that misinterpretation is accompanied by misapplication. At other times they claim a promise made in a very specific situation to one individual in ancient times as if God had delivered it personally to them. Or they view themselves and their readers as another Moses figure. For example, their problems with an ungrateful and rebellious teenager are treated as virtually identical to Moses's struggle with the recently liberated but murmuring Israelites who voted to head back to beautiful Egypt. Admittedly, what counts as an appropriate application and what is far-fetched may to some extent be a matter of opinion, but it is fair to ask in such a case what basis the interpreter has for making such an application.<sup>1</sup>

I began to notice misinterpretation and misuse everywhere: not only in popular Christian books but also in blog posts, Christian magazines, radio broadcasts, sermons, and adult Sunday school lessons. They began buzzing around me like bees at a muggy July picnic, seemingly taunting me, until I had to take a swat at them. The first swat came in April 1997 at the annual theology conference cosponsored by Wheaton College and InterVarsity Press. In a paper I critiqued a series of misused texts that I had found in various Christian self-help books by well-known evangelical authors. This led to an invitation to express my concerns in a workshop at the annual Christian Book Editors Conference in March 1998 and a much later invitation to suggest a “solution” to the problem at a conference cosponsored by the Society for Christian Psychology and the American Association of Christian Counselors in September 2008.

In the meantime, a former biblical interpretation student of mine, then one of the leaders of a Christian parachurch ministry, emailed me, asking if I had read Bruce Wilkinson's bestselling *The Prayer of Jabez* (2000). Every employee of his organization had been given a copy of that small book to read, and he was disturbed by Wilkinson's interpretation and application of an obscure verse from 1 Chronicles. After reading the book I was equally disturbed and wrote a brief critique. The resulting article, originally intended for the Wheaton College student newspaper, ended up being published in *Trinity Journal* in 2003. Finally, a few years ago, I decided that it was time to swat the beehive, writing a full-length book to further expose the widespread and blatant misuse of Scripture by bestselling Christian authors.

It is my conviction that the Bible often suffers as much abuse at the hands of its friends as at the hands of its enemies, and I feel the need to do something about it. I realize that some of my readers will consider my efforts to be at best nitpicky, or at worst loveless. Some of the authors cited here might take the time to dispute my claims, but this book is unlikely to reduce the sales of their books. Too many Christian readers are blissfully unaware of the issues I will address below. They will buy and read what others recommend. And if they are blessed by a book's contents, it has to be right, doesn't it? How many churches are systematically teaching their members to be careful readers of Scripture? More often they encourage them to participate in the type of Bible studies that sometimes promote rather than reduce misinterpretation.

My goal in this book is not to dwell on what I consider to be the interpretive errors of others but rather to use them, beginning with *The Prayer of Jabez*, as negative examples as I set forth guidelines for properly understanding the Bible. I am not seeking to offer a complete guide to personal Bible study; many such guides are already available. I will focus instead on three central features of biblical texts—literary context, individual words, and literary genres (chapters 3–5). Then I will give detailed attention to the difficult task of moving from interpretation to application (chapter 6). But because of my focus on the interpretive errors of others, I will begin and end the book with lengthy treatments of why and how Christians misinterpret the Bible (chapters 1–2) and why this needs to be corrected (chapter 7). I will have succeeded if this book causes those who read it to begin evaluating how Scripture is used all around them and to seek out a more comprehensive guide to biblical interpretation to learn more.

I am grateful to Baker Books for the opportunity to put my concerns in print for a wider audience. D. A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*, also published by Baker (2nd ed., 1996), has been an inspiration and a model for me in preparing this book. Bob Hosack has been a patient and encouraging editor, believing in the importance of what I am presenting and in my ability to present it effectively. I have reused some materials from previous publications in this book. A more technical version of my critique of Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* appeared in *Trinity Journal* as "Praying Jabez's Prayer: Turning an Obscure Biblical Narrative into a Miracle-Working Mantra."<sup>2</sup> Some of the examples of misinterpretation included in chapters 3–5 appeared in "Responsible Hermeneutics for Wisdom Literature,"

in *Care for the Soul: Exploring the Intersection of Psychology and Theology*, edited by M. R. McMinn and T. R. Phillips,<sup>3</sup> or in “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God’: Biblical Theology’s Role within Christian Counseling,” in *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology*.<sup>4</sup>

My examples of faulty interpretation and application are drawn from a wide range of authors and publishers (including a few published by Baker). Although I have sought to use as many examples as possible from books and articles published during the past few decades, some go back as far as the 1970s. There are three reasons for this. First of all, I wish to demonstrate that this is not a new problem but an old one. (I suppose I could have gone all the way back to some of the interpreters of the early church!) Second, I wanted to use some of the books that were influential in my Christian life during my early adult years when I was in seminary and then took my first faltering steps as a young interim pastor of three different churches. I assume that these books have been influential in the lives of some of my readers as well. Finally, some of the examples were “discovered” on the dusty shelves of the Wheaton College library by students in my biblical interpretation course, which I have now taught for sixteen years. In a brief paper, they were required to do with one text what I have done with many—to critique and correct an author’s use of Scripture. Occasionally their analyses served to correct my own past misuse of specific texts.

I am grateful for my students’ company on my hermeneutical journey. I am always encouraged when alumni tell me that they continue to use what they learned in my course and to share it with others. This book is dedicated to them and to my wife, Carol, who has accompanied me on this journey for more than three decades. Over the years, she and I have discussed numerous examples of misused biblical texts, including many that she has discovered. She too is a student and teacher of the Word and has encouraged me to write this book. A number of student research assistants have contributed to the categorization of examples or to the proofreading of the manuscript. These include Brandon Levering, Laura Lysen, Hamille Chou, Steven Dunkel, and Brittany Kim. Brittany is now a biblical scholar in her own right, and her careful editing of my work has made it more coherent and readable. It has been our goal and prayer as we have worked together on this project that the church, which values God’s Word so highly, will honor its author by reading and using it with greater care.

# 1

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## The “Jabez Prayer” Phenomenon

Flunking Biblical Interpretation 101

Christians buy (and hopefully read) a lot of books. Perhaps this helps to explain why a number of books with an explicit faith focus have landed on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, such as *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper and the Tim LaHaye–Jerry Jenkins Left Behind series. But who would have thought that a brief exposition of an obscure verse plucked from the midst of nine chapters of boring “begats” could scale those lofty heights?

That is precisely what happened to Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, which was published in 2000.<sup>1</sup> After hearing a chapel message on 1 Chronicles 4:10 while a seminarian and praying and preaching the prayer for nearly three decades, Wilkinson, of “Walk thru the Bible” fame, decided that it was time to publish his thoughts on the prayer. The results were staggering: the book sold more than eight million copies in the first year and was declared by *Publishers Weekly* “the fastest selling book of all time.” Numerous Christian ministries distributed the book to their entire staff, membership, or interested broadcast listeners.

The phenomenal sales quickly spawned a cottage industry of Jabez boutique versions (for example, special versions for preschoolers,

preteens, teens, and women, as well as a leather-bound copy, journal, and worship music). An expanding line of Jabez kitsch soon followed: coins, fake rocks, and wooden crosses inscribed with “The Prayer,” as well as Jabez coffee mugs, bath gel, and neckties. Sadly, a proposal for Jabez candy bars was rejected because it ran the risk of “overcommercializing” poor Jabez! And plans for a full-length film based on the prayer of Jabez and featuring major Hollywood talent were also later scrapped.

An official Prayer of Jabez website gave scores of satisfied pray-ers a forum for sharing glowing testimonials regarding their most recent “Jabez blessings,” such as healing, new property, career advancement, investment gains, or “Jabez appointments” (for example, conversations). Only a few contributors complained that their Jabez prayers had not *yet* yielded any visible results. By every pragmatic measure, God was blessing Bruce Wilkinson (and his little ninety-three-page booklet) *indeed*. After all, hasn’t God promised that his Word will not return to him “empty”? Will it not rather “achieve the purpose for which [he] sent it” (Isa. 55:11)?

But was the recent Prayer of Jabez phenomenon really the purpose for which a divinely inspired author included Jabez’s brief prayer in 1–2 Chronicles shortly after the Jews returned from Babylonian exile? (Or could someone with Bruce Wilkinson’s evangelical pedigree have just as easily turned another obscure Bible verse—or even a “fortune” found inside a Chinese restaurant cookie—into a simple prayer with comparable results?) Apart from a few negative web-based reviews and Hebrew professor Larry Pechawer’s privately published *The Lost Prayer of Jabez*, Wilkinson’s book received very little public criticism. Kenneth Woodward, religion reporter for *Newsweek*, however, was troubled by the tendency to turn Jabez’s prayer “into a Christian mantra.” In Woodward’s opinion, virtually “any verse from the Book of Psalms, [or] the prayers Jesus himself recited, which ask only for forgiveness and the grace to do God’s will” would be better choices for a widespread readership.<sup>2</sup>

The real problem with *The Prayer of Jabez* lies elsewhere, and it is not merely *practical* but profoundly *hermeneutical* (hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation). In other words, Wilkinson’s interpretation, application, and specific suggestions for implementing the prayer are clearly flawed. Some biblical texts are notoriously difficult to understand, producing a variety of interpretive opinions (and, sometimes, speculations). Unfortunately, even seemingly clear passages are subject to misinterpretation, especially when practical concerns get in the way. Consider, for example, how easily some people (hopefully

not us!) are taken in by an online or mail offer for a discounted item or service. Eager to cash in on a rare opportunity, they send it in before carefully reading the “fine print” or considering what the “catch” might be.

Similarly, we can too quickly move to claim a desirable promise or assurance in Scripture, without pausing to consider whether it really is offered to us or simply to the ancient Israelites or to the church in ancient Corinth. Let us examine the various ways in which Wilkinson’s understanding of Jabez’s prayer may be problematic or questionable, after briefly summarizing his book’s message and claims. According to Wilkinson, the prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 4:9–10 “contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God” (7). Named Jabez (meaning “Pain,” according to Wilkinson) by his mother, this enterprising individual sought to counteract the ominous future that such a name anticipated by praying “the biggest, most improbable request imaginable” (22).

### The Message of the Prayer of Jabez

In Wilkinson’s interpretation, the four clauses of Jabez’s prayer form a sequence of four distinct requests:

1. *Oh, that You would bless me indeed:* God, impart your supernatural favor, your power to accomplish great things, on me this day but do so in whatever way you desire.
2. *and enlarge my territory:* As you continue to bless me daily, grant me more influence, more responsibility, more opportunity to make an impact for you.
3. *that Your hand would be with me:* Having thus stepped out of my comfort zone and realm of personal competence, I am utterly dependent on your help if I am to succeed.
4. *and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain:* Such successes will certainly attract Satan’s attack, so protect me from deception, dangerous misjudgments, or misleading feelings that could cause me to sin and thereby threaten my work for you.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, the prayer of Jabez, as analyzed by Wilkinson, offers a strikingly comprehensive series of requests, each of which represents a valid topic for prayer.

## Problems with the Prayer of Jabez

### *Interpretation*

What did Jabez request in his prayer and how did God respond?

*Translation.* Wilkinson’s understanding of the prayer’s fourth request is dependent on his choice of translations. Out of twenty published translations examined, only *one* supports his view, the New King James Version, for which Wilkinson served on the editorial board. The NKJV rendering, “that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain,” sounds strikingly similar to the final request of the Lord’s Prayer. Most translations, however, understand this request quite differently:

“keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain” (NIV)

“keep me from all trouble and pain” (NLT)

“keep me from hurt and harm” (NRSV)

(The KJV’s rendering, “keep *me* from evil, that it may not grieve me,” is somewhat ambiguous.)

In light of the precise wording and context here, it is most likely that Jabez is requesting protection from further pain.

*Sequence.* According to Wilkinson, each of Jabez’s four requests, in turn, must be fulfilled before the next is warranted: “Notice that Jabez did not begin his prayer by asking for God’s hand to be with him. At that point, he didn’t sense the need. Things were still manageable” (48). Another possibility is that there are two distinct but simultaneous two-part requests, which move from general (G) to specific (S). Such pairing of lines is typical of Hebrew elevated style and similar in structure to the high priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:24–26:

### The Prayer of Jabez

General	Specific	
Oh, that you would bless me	and enlarge my territory!	→ More land
Let your hand be with me,	and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.	→ Less pain

## Numbers 6:24–26

General	Specific	
The LORD bless you	and keep you;	→ Protection
the LORD make his face shine on you	and be gracious to you;	→ Favor
the LORD turn his face toward you	and give you peace.	→ Wholeness

If this alternative analysis of Jabez’s prayer requests is accepted, both Wilkinson’s interpretation and his subsequent application collapse.

*Filling in details.* Most biblical historical narratives offer a minimum of explanatory detail, focusing on the actions and words of the major characters. Thus there is a natural impulse for the reader to fill in the missing pieces of the story. This can lead, however, to a shift in emphasis from what the text actually states to what the interpreter has, often speculatively, added to the text regarding the characters’ thoughts and motivations. For example, Wilkinson suggests that Jabez was “weighed down by the sorrow of his past and the dreariness of his present” (22), presumably due to his name (which sounds similar to, but does *not* mean, “pain”<sup>4</sup>). He claims that Jabez’s request for more territory was motivated solely by his desire to “make a greater impact” for God (31).

It is more likely, however, that Jabez is simply seeking additional material resources in order to make his life easier. This is suggested by another incident recorded later in the same chapter (1 Chron. 4:38–43) in which several families from the tribe of Simeon, in search of more pastureland, destroy the non-Israelites living near the “outskirts of Gedor” in Judah and take control of their land. In addition, unlike his mother, who experienced a painful birth according to 1 Chronicles 4:9, Jabez requests that he might avoid pain in life. His prayer here may allude to Genesis 3:16–17, since these verses employ the same Hebrew root as occurs in 1 Chronicles 4:9–10 to refer to the pain of both childbirth and manual labor.

### *Application*

What should we learn from Jabez’s prayer and how should we apply it to our lives?

*Turning description into prescription.* Even though the Bible as an ancient Word is intended to inform and guide us in our contemporary life of faith, biblical texts do not always directly address our situation, especially since some types of texts (genres) communicate divine truths indirectly. Although Wilkinson focuses on a specific prayer attributed to a person named Jabez about whom we know very little, including when and where he lived, 1 Chronicles 4:9–10 is one of several brief anecdotes that are scattered throughout this genealogical section (chaps. 1–9) and that illustrate one of the major theological themes of 1–2 Chronicles, namely that God quickly punishes disobedience and spiritual infidelity but rewards those who trust him and seek his guidance (see, for example, 1 Chron. 5:23–26). Furthermore, Jabez’s requests in 1 Chronicles 4:10 present only one of about 165 speeches (prayers, sermons, and prophetic messages) in 1–2 Chronicles.

In other words, 1 Chronicles 4:9–10 is one of many illustrations of some basic theological principles. Wilkinson, however, transforms the details of this brief historical report into a universal instruction, that is, into a *model*. Jabez’s prayer is significant not because he discovered how to unlock the divine treasure trove, as Wilkinson claims, but simply because prayer is a significant subtheme in the book. Other answered prayers that, like Jabez’s, address physical circumstances are found in 1 Chronicles 5:20–22; 2 Chronicles 20:6–12; 32:24. There is no textual basis for concluding, as Wilkinson does, that Jabez’s prayer is more significant, either in its formulation or in its effect, than any other prayer recorded in the Bible or that he prayed it more than once or in stages.

*Spiritualization.* In order to make Jabez’s prayer relevant to every Christian, Wilkinson also must generalize and spiritualize his request for God to “enlarge his territory” from referring to farmland (dirt!) to representing any change in our circumstances that involves “more influence, more responsibility, and more opportunity” (30). Consequently, virtually anything could qualify as an answer to this petition, including giving birth to twins, witnessing to someone on a plane, and being promoted to CEO. According to Wilkinson, praying the prayer gives you “a front row seat in a life of miracles” (44), even though it is not clear that God’s original response to Jabez’s prayer was miraculous by any normal definition of the term. Wilkinson also assumes that, in praying this prayer, every Christian is motivated primarily by the same desire to make a greater impact for God that he

believes Jabez demonstrates, rather than by a desire for a less painful and problematic life.

### *Implementation*

How do we go about experiencing what Jabez experienced?

Here we can briefly note three of Wilkinson’s questionable recommendations for implementing Jabez’s prayer. (1) *Daily repetition*. Wilkinson encourages all readers to pray the prayer of Jabez daily for at least a trial month, and he recommends making this “a lifelong commitment” (29), just as he has done. (2) *Unqualified assurances*. This is linked with the promise that this is “a daring prayer that God always answers” (7). Thus, according to Wilkinson, through “a simple, believing prayer, you can change your future. You can change what happens one minute from now” (29). Such a claim could lead a person either to interpret every good thing that happens in their life as a divine answer to their prayer or to become frustrated, or even desperate, as expressed in this entry on the Prayer of Jabez website:

I wish I had a victorious tale to tell. I am now in my 4th reading of your book since I bought it in November. I have prayed Jabez’s prayer diligently, and at least once almost daily. I believe God wants to bless me. I am waiting to receive his bounty. I am still unemployed. . . . I want for nothing more than for God to show me what, if anything, is obstructing the flow of his blessings toward us. Please pray . . . for God to bless us. . . . Indeed!<sup>5</sup>

This comment reflects (3) the *one-sided focus on personal, especially material, blessing* that characterized the Prayer of Jabez fad and needs to be balanced with a biblical desire for the kind of spiritual growth that is best fostered by difficulties in life and a call for Christian contentment.

A striking postscript illustrating the problematic nature of the Jabez prayer phenomenon has been provided by Bruce Wilkinson himself. In 2002, he moved to Africa, announcing his goal to save one million AIDS orphans through his Dream for Africa organization. He planned to establish a facility in Swaziland for ten thousand children, to be funded by a bed-and-breakfast, game reserve, Bible college, industrial park, and a Disneylike tourist resort. In October 2005, however, he abandoned his plan. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article from 2005, despite initial successes and raising half a million

dollars toward his \$190 million goal in 2005 alone, a combination of negative publicity, (false) accusations, and difficulties in negotiating with Swazi officials caused Wilkinson's frustrations to grow. The article concludes:

Mr. Wilkinson says that he blames neither God nor man. He says he weeps when he thinks of his disappointed [orphan] acolytes, and is trying to come to grips with a miracle that didn't materialize despite his unceasing recitation of the Jabez prayer.

"I asked hard enough," he added, his gaze drifting upward. "All we can do is ask God what to do, ask him to help us in the doing of it, and work as hard and wisely as we can. Somewhere in this it's got to be all right to attempt a vision that didn't work and not to make it an overwhelming failure."<sup>6</sup>

This is a startling admission from the author who promised just five years earlier that the Jabez prayer is "a daring prayer that God always answers"!

## The Dilemma

In criticizing Bruce Wilkinson's use of the prayer of Jabez, I am not questioning his motivations or competence as an interpreter of the Bible. Nor am I suggesting that God would not (or did not) respond to the prayers of (some of) those sincerely praying "the prayer" at Wilkinson's encouragement. Such a well-publicized example of "enlarging" the meaning and application of the text, however, presents a serious dilemma for those charged with promoting sound biblical interpretation in the church.

Many Christians were excited to see a bestselling "biblical book" get considerable media attention, and various Christian ministries, especially Focus on the Family, enthusiastically promoted it. Since "you can't argue with success," most simply assumed that the book's success was a "God thing" and that its great impact on millions of Christians around the globe served to validate Wilkinson's "Scripture-based" assurances. Wilkinson dismissed his Christian and secular critics in a follow-up book, *Beyond Jabez*, and distanced himself from the "false teaching and preaching that surrounded the book,"<sup>7</sup> reaffirming his interpretation and recommending use of the Jabez prayer. Ironically, the nearly unparalleled sales of Wilkinson's little book *The Prayer of*

*Jabez* may tell us more about contemporary American evangelicalism than about the accuracy of Wilkinson’s interpretation of Jabez’s original prayer. How painful!

My seminary hermeneutics professor, Walter Kaiser, offered us an alternative explanation of much popular interpretation of Scripture: “Wonderful things in the Bible I see, most of them put there by you or by me!” He admonished us to always “keep our fingers on the text” and to become “Berean” Christians who “examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11 NRSV). In the wake of the Jabez wave, I looked in vain for a renewed interest in an in-depth study of 1–2 Chronicles or of other biblical prayers. But I should not have been surprised that this never materialized. After all, Wilkinson had already discovered the *one* prayer that would unlock the heavenly storehouses and had given its definitive explanation. All that remained for Christians to do was to take his word for it and start praying the Jabez prayer themselves.

What is important to note here is that biblical interpretation can go wrong at various points. When interpreting textual details, we can adopt a questionable translation of key words or phrases. Furthermore, we can ignore both the historical and literary contexts of the passage, which largely determine how the passage should be understood and how it functions within Scripture. We can also pay too little attention to the formal, structural, and stylistic features of a text and how these shape the communication of divine truth. Further difficulties are involved in the process of application, as we bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and our contemporary world and recommend concrete steps toward affirming and living out the truths and lessons of the Scriptures. Here we can move too quickly in universalizing a specific action or instruction, assuming that what one ancient Israelite experienced can and should be experienced by all contemporary Christians.

## Reasons for Misusing the Bible

Sadly, Bruce Wilkinson’s hermeneutical failure is not an isolated incident. Scripture abuse permeates both our Christian and secular culture. (I will offer abundant evidence throughout this book to support this disturbing claim!) But why do sincere Christians (including me) frequently misuse biblical texts—or fail to recognize their misuse by

others—despite acknowledging them to be the authoritative Word of God? In the concluding verses of his second letter, the apostle Peter offers a rather surprising answer to this question:

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:14–16)

After writing about God's purposes to be fulfilled in the coming destruction of the present cosmos and the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth" on the "day of the Lord" (vv. 1–13), Peter warns the recipients of his letter against being taken in by false teachers who will twist the Scriptures.

### *Difficulties in Interpretation*

The first reason for misinterpretation that Peter mentions relates to the nature of the text itself. Peter describes some biblical texts or statements as "hard to understand." Now if the apostle Peter considered some of the writings of his fellow apostle Paul difficult to understand, we should expect much of Scripture to present us with interpretive challenges, since we are separated from the biblical authors by two to three millennia. Without the help of trained teachers and preachers and reliable books and reference tools, we are very unfamiliar with much of the culture, language, history, and literature of the Bible. Therefore, we are inclined to read biblical texts in light of our modern customs, values, and language use. The extensive diversity that we find in the Bible also complicates interpretation. We begin with the more readily understood teaching of Jesus and instructions in the letters of Paul and Peter and then expect to find equally clear statements about God's nature and purposes for us in the midst of Leviticus's laws, in the image-rich psalms, in the prophetic visions of the near and distant future, in terse proverbial sayings, and in the lengthy narratives of the history of Israel and of the early church.

But Peter reminds us that some biblical texts are inherently more difficult due to their subject matter or wording. Such texts will take

more effort to understand accurately and can be more easily misinterpreted. In light of his preceding description of the false teachers, Peter might be suggesting here that texts that deal with the ethical implications of Christian liberty (2:19) or the return of Jesus Christ (3:4) are difficult to understand unless, as New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham suggests, “they are interpreted in the light of the rest of Paul’s teaching and of the apostolic teaching generally.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Human Limitation and Error*

The second reason relates to our finite and fallen human nature. As human beings, we are subject to many limitations. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter describes the false teachers as “ignorant” (NIV) or “untaught” (NASB). As just noted, they may have lacked the necessary framework for understanding Paul’s specific teachings or simply been unskilled interpreters. In interpreting Scripture, ignorance is definitely *not* bliss! Instead, it can be the source of interpretive distortion. Careful instruction regarding how to interpret the Bible and how to access essential background information for the Bible may prevent many interpretive missteps.

Interpreters also may misinterpret a text because they devote too little time and effort to studying it or because they focus only on some of the details of the text while overlooking others. The interpreters and their followers that Peter has in mind may be prone to misreadings due to a superficial grasp of the Christian faith and its demands. This may be Peter’s point in describing these individuals as “unstable,” or spiritually and morally weak, in 2:14 and 3:16.

More problematic are those interpreters who intentionally misinterpret a text. Assuming that Peter is referring to the same individuals in 3:17, where he warns his readers to beware of “the error of the lawless,” their “distorting” (3:16) of the text does not appear to be so innocent or harmless. Peter further describes their faulty interpretive practices as habitual (“as they do the other Scriptures”). Their motivation in doing so is unclear, but if these individuals are the false teachers described in 2 Peter 2, they are deliberately spreading false teaching in order to justify their own misguided convictions and self-indulgent, ungodly lifestyles and to greedily exploit naive believers. Not all willful misinterpretation will have a negative impact on an entire Christian community. Some interpreters consciously or unconsciously impose an unlikely meaning on a text in order to blunt its painful or offensive

message so that they will not be convicted of their sinful behavior or troubled by the implications of its theological claims. Others may seek too eagerly for “biblical” affirmation of their personal views, standards, and beliefs. Similarly, ministry leaders may seek “biblical” support or a scriptural slogan for a new program they are launching. Finally, there are other interpreters who have a bias against the supernatural and therefore reinterpret biblical prophecies and miracle accounts in order to remove all divine involvement from the process.

### *Poor Training*

The third reason why readers misinterpret biblical texts relates to their faulty spiritual conditioning. In other words, they have been trained to do so! It is not clear that Peter has this reason in mind in 2 Peter 3:14–16. However, the false teachers, as described in 2 Peter 2:21, “have known the way of righteousness” only to later “turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them,” although we do not know who or what led them to do so. Apparently they also are seducing others, who may have been within the community of faith, to embrace their teachings and take this radical step away from their Savior (2:14). In fact, Peter’s opponents in 2 Peter may have been recognized as teachers by the churches, which would account for Peter’s stern warnings. Most Christians are inclined to imitate the interpretive practices of those whom they respect as their spiritual mentors and teachers, both in the local church and through Christian print, broadcast, and electronic media. If they are regularly exposed to sloppy hermeneutics, it is not surprising if their own interpretive work is also flawed.

A related, widespread problem is an incorrect view of the Spirit’s work. Citing a verse like John 16:13, which assures Jesus’s disciples that the Spirit of truth “will guide you into all the truth,” they confidently assume that proper biblical interpretation is a by-product of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence. Accordingly, there is no need to receive any instruction regarding proper interpretive practice, nor any danger of misinterpretation. (We will explain why this viewpoint is incorrect in the next chapter.) And, finally, seduced by the extreme pragmatism that pervades modern Western cultures, Bible readers, like the Prayer of Jabez fan club, are often inclined to believe that whatever sounds good, works well, and sells briskly must be correct.

These claims that I have derived from 2 Peter 3 may strike you as extreme and unjustified, perhaps even as arrogantly harsh and

self-righteously critical. However, the following summary of 2 Peter 3:14–16 by Richard Bauckham sounds alarmingly similar to our contemporary situation:

For all their pretensions to be teachers, they have never bothered to acquire sufficient knowledge of Christian teaching to be able to understand either Paul or the other Scriptures which they also misinterpret. . . . Whatever their misinterpretations of Paul and of the “other scriptures” were, they used them to justify immorality.<sup>9</sup>

Stick with me for another chapter as I seek to defend the claim that interpreting the Bible is a difficult, demanding, and spiritually dangerous task. This flows directly from the Christian confession of Scripture as both a divine book and a human book and from a proper understanding of how God “speaks” to us today through Scripture.

In the concluding chapter I will offer a detailed explanation of why it is so important to interpret and apply the Bible correctly. In the meantime, however, consider the following: we don’t like it when someone (e.g., one of our children) misquotes or misinterprets something we have said, wrongly deriving from our words permission to do something or support for their viewpoint. This is even more upsetting when that child in the process skews what we intended to communicate. For the same reason, we should be careful to use Scripture in ways that respect the biblical author’s intentions. (In this case, there is no basis for concluding that the author of 1 Chronicles wanted us to pray Jabez’s prayer repeatedly.) Otherwise we are merely misappropriating biblical authority to support our own ideas.

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### Think about It

1. How should we evaluate conflicting claims regarding the accuracy of Bruce Wilkinson’s interpretation and application of the prayer of Jabez? What role should the record sales of his book and the positive testimonies of individuals who have prayed this prayer play in such a debate?
2. Consider the prayer in Genesis 24:12–14, which God answered in a remarkable way. Is this a prayer that we should pray today, especially if we are looking for a spouse? If so, how much of the prayer is a model for us? Why?

3. Have you encountered false teachers similar to those described by the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:14–16? How did you determine that their teachings involved a distortion of Scripture?

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Read about It

1. Robert Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). Stein, a seminary professor, compares biblical interpretation with a sport or game that only works if you follow the rules.
2. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). A prominent New Testament scholar claims that even Bible “professionals” (including himself) can make mistakes in interpreting the Bible.
3. James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980). Sire, a senior editor, examines many of the ways in which false teachers rely on misinterpretation of the Bible to bolster their beliefs.

# 2

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## The Roots of Faulty Interpretation

### Examining Our Convictions about Scripture

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . . .”

Acts 15:28

**B**ack in 1974, during a national conference for religion professors, I saw a man passing out free materials. Not wanting to miss out on a “bargain,” I hurried over and got a copy for myself. What was he distributing? A self-published, personally autographed book entitled *I Have Found an Elephant in the Bible*. My first impression as I skimmed through this 130-page work was that this author was playing a joke (and a rather expensive one) on the hundreds of stuffy scholars who eagerly grabbed his book. But as I read his introductory comments, it became clear that he was very serious about his interpretive conclusions. Examining the description of the *behemot* (the Hebrew word for “bestly beast”) in Job 40:15, which he takes to be an elephant, he asserts with confidence that “Behemoth and JESUS CHRIST are the one and same thing” (or, the elephant symbolizes Jesus). After all, both Behemoth and Jesus spent time in the Jordan

River (Job 40:23; Matt. 3:13) and both are “first among the works of God” (Job 40:19; compare Col. 1:15). Thus his study of the elephant in the Bible offers “the key that will unlock the Hebrew Scriptures and give us a complete picture of JESUS CHRIST.”<sup>1</sup> This man’s book presents a rather unusual expression of a conviction that is widespread within the Christian church, namely, that Jesus Christ is the subject and center of the entire Bible and not just of the New Testament. Many Christians thus seek to “find” him on virtually every page of the Bible—even in the description of the *behemot!*

A second conviction commonly held by Christians is stated briefly and absolutely by David Barton: “There is no issue that the Bible doesn’t address” (referring in context to the capital gains tax).<sup>2</sup> In other words, since the Bible is the Christian’s operating manual for life, God must have packed it chock-full with everything we need to inform all of our attitudes and actions. There is a comparable theological claim that is usually labeled the “sufficiency” of Scripture, but Barton’s conviction is not necessarily based on any specific biblical texts. For centuries, Christians have been known as “people of the Book,” a description that expresses how important the Bible is for them in everyday life. Sometimes, however, total, unquestioning reliance on its words is coupled with a tendency to cite them unreflectively. This can lead to serious confusion and misuse when it is not grounded in an accurate understanding of the nature and proper interpretation of Scripture.

A third conviction about Scripture is less problematic but requires further discussion: the Bible is both a divine *and* a human book. For many theologians, this has prompted a comparison with the two natures of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus was fully human and fully divine, so Scripture is both completely human and completely divine in origin. To be sure, this analogy has its limitations. For example, even if an error were to be discovered in the Bible, that would not have the same moral weight as a sin committed by Jesus. But it may help us to grasp some essential characteristics of the Bible.

Throughout the centuries the church has been forced to combat unbalanced understandings of the relationship between Jesus’s two natures. These heresies emphasized one nature at the expense of the other, for example, claiming that Jesus only *seemed* to be human (or divine) but did not really bear that nature. Similarly, over the course of the centuries, the pendulum has swung back and forth regarding how Scripture should be viewed. Some have so emphasized its divine origin that the human authors are reduced to the Holy Spirit’s “pen.”

Others focus so much attention on the human authors that God’s involvement is even denied or reduced to a creedal affirmation that they don’t really believe. In their opinion, the human authors wrote about God, but God did not contribute directly to the actual writing process.

Neither one-sided emphasis does justice to passages such as 2 Peter 1:20–21 and 3:15–16. The former claims that prophetic Scripture did not originate in human interpretive efforts but resulted from the Holy Spirit’s initiative. Therefore, the prophetic authors truly “spoke from God.” The latter passage affirms the apostle Paul’s dependence on divinely granted wisdom in writing his epistles. (It also notes that his various writings are theologically consistent.) This is not the place for a full exploration—or defense—of the nature of Scripture as a divine and human book.<sup>3</sup> Our goal here is rather to consider the implications of this doctrine for how we *interpret* the Bible since how we *view* what we are interpreting greatly affects how we *read* it. Consider how differently we read a love letter than a phone book!

### Reading the Bible as a Divine Book—Like No Other

Theologically speaking, the Bible is the uniquely inspired Word of God. In both its origin and its perfection it is distinct from all other “religious” books, no matter how devout and inspiring their authors are. As a result, it displays a number of significant features.

First of all, the Bible has a unique Spirit-produced unity. This is not to deny the remarkable diversity found in the Bible. After all, the Bible resulted from many different *authors* at different *times* and in different *places* employing different *styles* and different *literary forms* to address different *audiences* with different *concerns*. For example, the style and contents of Proverbs and 1 Corinthians are quite diverse, but both arguably promote the same sexual ethic.

All of these writings together form a sacred anthology—the “canon,” that is, the theological norm or standard for the community of believers. All of its books bear testimony to the one God, who is both our Creator and the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Despite various emphases in the individual books, we can expect there to be a shared coherent message running through the Bible from beginning to end. This message reveals God’s unfolding “rescue plan” for humanity. And if the Holy Spirit guided the human authors of the Bible, then we should expect the Bible to be consistent. Therefore, we may legitimately

seek to resolve or harmonize apparent conflicts. We may also expect to find numerous interconnections between books as later authors allude to earlier events in Israelite history, cite authoritative writings, and reuse prior traditions. Some of these interconnections involve a biblical author announcing that an earlier prophecy has now been fulfilled because God, according to Scripture, is able both to predict the future and then to bring it about (Isa. 44:26; 45:21).

Second, the contents of the Bible are unique. Although the Bible shares some features with other ancient texts, it is unique both in its claims and in its scope (covering all of human history from the original creation to the new heavens and new earth). It also makes unparalleled assertions about its own authority and truthfulness. Some believe that God does not intervene in human affairs (thus holding to a “closed universe”), or they simply view the Bible as an influential but exclusively human book. Such people may reject the Bible’s claims to reveal God’s true nature and to recount (sometimes miraculous) divine involvement in human history.

In seeking to explain, summarize, and apply the teachings of Scripture, all Christian literature may share some common goals of inviting and nurturing faith. Scripture, however, possesses a unique spiritual value and capacity to change lives. But this, in turn, requires that anyone who reads the Bible must be able to understand its basic message. Furthermore, understanding must be followed by application. The interpretation of any text that does not lead to a personal engagement with its message is incomplete.

It is because so many Christians share these convictions about the Bible that they instinctively turn to it to explain their actions and decisions and, more formally, to defend their policies and programs. In whatever they say and do, they want to be “biblical.” And if they pay close attention to how others use Scripture, they soon discover, much to their surprise and delight, that there is a handy verse for every occasion—yes, “for every activity under the heavens” (Eccles. 3:1). But that is precisely the reason why we must consider the implications of reading the Bible as a human book.

## Reading the Bible as a Human Book—Like Every Other

Despite its “heavenly” message, the Bible shares many features with most other books and therefore must be read in a similar manner. For

example, it uses normal human language. As recently as the nineteenth century, it was widely held that New Testament Greek was a unique “Holy Ghost” language. But it was then demonstrated that the New Testament authors simply used the everyday language of the people. Although not many ancient Hebrew texts from outside the Bible have been found, it is clear that they use words and grammatical structures similar to those of the Old Testament. It is the contents of the Bible that are “holy”—not the language.

Most Christians, however, can’t read Greek or Hebrew. As a result, the Bible is the most translated book ever written. It is a fundamental conviction of Christianity that the teachings of Scripture must be accessible for every believer to read rather than just for the elite religious leaders. This conviction drove people like John Wycliffe to bravely face persecution and death on the eve of the Protestant Reformation in order to make the Bible available in the common language. The fact that we generally read the Bible in translation has two main implications for interpretation.

First, since there is no perfect correspondence in words or grammar between the biblical languages and any modern language, every translation represents a compromise between clarity and conformity to the original. This makes it necessary to consult more than one translation of a biblical text in order to become more aware of interpretive options and nuances in meaning that we would miss if relying on only one translation—regardless of which one.

Second, since divine truths are communicated in *our* language in our translated Bibles, the better we understand our own language, the more clearly we will hear God’s message. That might require us to review the basic grammar categories, such as verb tenses, the function of conjunctions (linking words such as “although,” “but,” “since,” “unless”), and the difference between adverbs and adjectives. Furthermore, as we seek to understand the basic building blocks of communication, we need to be aware that a single word can have a wide range of meanings. These meanings develop over time and are determined by how the word is used in a specific context (this is known as *semantics*).<sup>4</sup>

As biblical scholars began to discover and translate a growing number of texts from the ancient Near Eastern world in the third to first millennia BC and the Mediterranean world of the first century AD, they realized that the biblical authors frequently use the literary forms and conventions of their contemporaries. Some Old Testament laws

and proverbs are virtually identical to Mesopotamian or Egyptian versions. And New Testament letters contain the same basic features as the everyday correspondence in secular society. Comparing parallel genres from the biblical world and noting how they have been adapted to serve *divine* purposes can give us valuable insights into how the timeless message was communicated in culturally relevant ways.

These considerations all point to a crucial fact that we sometimes forget when reading the Bible: the timeless words of God were written by human authors in time and space.<sup>5</sup> Since biblical authors could assume that their readers had a sufficient knowledge of their own history and culture, they did not need to explain related details when mentioning them in their writings. We, however, need to learn as much as we can about biblical times, lest we read our own cultural and historical understanding into biblical texts. Furthermore, we have no indication that the biblical authors took dictation from God. Therefore, we should expect that their writings will reflect their individual personalities and unique uses of language rather than exhibiting a uniformity of style and content. The resulting diversity in the Bible presents us with an interpretive challenge as we seek to reconcile apparently contradictory claims and to discover theological unity. But this is a legitimate undertaking, given our conviction that the whole Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, as discussed above.

Finally, we must affirm that God communicates with us through the way human language normally functions, that is, through the plain sense of the text. To be sure, some biblical texts use everyday situations to express profound spiritual truths (for example, the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13). Others use vivid descriptions of blaring trumpets and unearthly beasts to paint a metaphorical portrait of future events without explaining exactly how they will unfold (Rev. 9). In both cases, the authors usually signal how they intend their words to be taken. Normally, no effort should be made to look for a hidden or mystical sense *behind* the clear words of Scripture. That, however, does not keep new individuals from claiming every few years to have discovered the interpretive key that unlocks the mysteries of God's Word. Such "Bible code" crackers even argue that this hidden key provides evidence that the Bible is, in fact, divinely inspired.<sup>6</sup> I received an unsolicited email earlier this summer from someone who concludes, after decades of study, that Psalm 128:3 offers undeniable proof that the divine Trinity includes a *mother*. (Read the text for yourself and see if you are convinced!)

God wants to speak directly to people today without requiring them to find 3D reading glasses or join the inner circle of some all-knowing teacher. In many cases, this means that we need to *unlearn* some bad reading habits so that we can read the Bible the way we read other texts, like one of Shakespeare’s comedies, for example. Some parts of the Bible may require more effort on our part, and footnotes explaining unfamiliar expressions may be helpful. But we *can* understand the Bible on our own. That is one of the convictions underlying this book.

### **Cloning Balaam’s Donkey—Strange Ways God Allegedly Speaks Today**

I have to admit it—Numbers 22 is a strange text! According to the author of Numbers, “The LORD opened the donkey’s mouth” so that it could complain to Balaam about being beaten. And without any hesitation, “Balaam answered the donkey” (vv. 28–29). I don’t know whether the donkey’s or Balaam’s speech is more surprising. In any case, the donkey had more insight into the true state of affairs (that is, who was in charge of blessing and cursing) than did either Balaam or Balak, king of Moab.

Recently I have heard some even stranger claims regarding how God speaks to us today, especially through Scripture. We have already mentioned the first one—the claim that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament contains hidden messages, including the name of the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph I and the cure for diabetes, as well as predictions of the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, the rise of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, the date of his first attack using Russian scud missiles, and the opposition of US General Schwarzkopf. These can be discovered by means of ELS (equidistant letter sequences), which involves repeatedly skipping the same number of letters before writing down the next letter (for example, selecting every fiftieth letter) and then discovering words in the sequence of letters thus isolated.<sup>7</sup> It is relatively easy to find a specific word in the Hebrew text, for example, “scud.” But we must ask how this type of “word search” for the predictive voice of God relates to the primary purpose of the Bible, which is not to warn Israel about a modern-day enemy rocket attack but to reveal the redemptive covenantal plan of God for delivering his people from the consequences of their sinful rebellion through the work of the Messiah.

A second questionable way in which God allegedly speaks is when a person randomly selects a Bible verse and takes it as God’s specific guidance. A man prays for God’s direction for overseas missionary service and, while reading the book of Isaiah, lands on Isaiah 18:2—“Go, swift messengers, to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers.” This must be God’s guidance, he concludes, but he may or may not end up going to the Ethiopians, the people to whom the verse refers (ancient Cush). At the same time, a woman is trying to decide whether to give an unexpected ten-thousand-dollar inheritance to her local church or build a family room. Also reading Isaiah, Isaiah 54:2 catches her eye—“Enlarge your house; build an addition. Spread out your home, and spare no expense!” (NLT). “That was easy!” she exclaims. Now I would not presume to know all the ways God can work in the world, but if these are good examples of how God speaks to us today, then he could use the *Chicago Tribune* or the *AT&T Real Yellow Pages* just as easily as the Bible to do so. (By this method you could speed up the process by closing your eyes, letting the Bible fall open, placing your finger randomly on the page, and claiming whatever it touches as a word from God just for you.)

A third strange approach involves sweeping through the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation and identifying every verse that contains a promise as God’s personal word of blessing on our life. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight calls these “sanctified morsels of truth.” He describes this practice as taking “random verses, with blessing on top of blessing or promise on top of promise.”<sup>8</sup> To be sure, some of these promises clearly apply to us today, such as 2 Peter 1:3—“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” But the same cannot be said of Mark 14:13—“Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.”

A fourth approach turns all of Scripture, especially the storylike historical narratives, into marching orders for Christians today. “In this story God is telling me directly how I should think, act, and speak since the Bible is God’s inspired Word.” Accordingly, a wife treats her husband like Abigail treated Nabal because the Bible says to do so: “Please pay no attention, my lord, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name means Fool, and folly goes with him” (1 Sam. 25:25). And a husband demands that his wife call him “her lord” (1 Pet. 3:6). Such an approach, however, can lead to a reader

confusing *sinful* or downright *stupid* actions recorded in the Bible with divine instructions.

We already mentioned a fifth approach, finding Jesus under every textual leaf, in our discussion of the book *I Have Found an Elephant in the Bible* at the beginning of this chapter. This approach is experiencing growing support today and is based on the twin convictions that (1) Jesus is the central theme of the Bible and (2) all of Scripture points to him. The former is true to a degree, although Old Testament scholar Gerhard Hasel is probably more accurate in declaring that “God is the center of the OT as its central subject.”<sup>9</sup> The second conviction is based on an overinterpretation of Luke 24:27—“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” This led a pastor to declare in a sermon I heard recently, “If you don’t find Jesus on the page of Scripture you are reading, keep reading it until you find him there.”

This goes well beyond finding Jesus in predictive prophecy; it turns all Old Testament texts into predictions of or, more precisely, pictures foreshadowing the coming of Jesus. Accordingly, in Numbers 11:8 (“The people went around gathering it [the manna], and then ground it in a hand mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil”), the manna represents Jesus. After all, John 6:33–35, 48 teaches that he is the Bread of Life. Moreover, the grinding, crushing, and cooking in Numbers 11:8 represent Jesus’s sufferings on our behalf. But what does the olive oil taste represent in the case of Jesus? And how did the people gather him up? The book of Hebrews and other New Testament texts give a warrant for some degree of christological (that is, Christ-centered) interpretation of Old Testament texts. This is usually called *typology* (see chapter 5 for further explanation). But there appear to be no limits on the creative and speculative interpretation to which this can lead.

What exactly does Luke 24:27 claim? A similar verse later in the same chapter may help to clarify the point Jesus was making: “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). Jesus points here to the scope of the Old Testament’s anticipation of the Messiah’s coming: all three major subdivisions of the Hebrew canon look forward to him. In Jesus’s postresurrection Bible study, he was not asserting that *every* biblical text is “about” or “pointing to” him. Instead, he was explaining to his disciples those passages throughout the Scriptures

that spoke of him in order to clarify the world-altering nature of the prior week's events.

The sixth and final approach that we will mention here is the most difficult to deal with: a person simply tells the rest of his Bible study group that the Holy Spirit revealed to him what the text means or how we are supposed to apply it to ourselves today. How can we argue with God, even if a close reading of the text suggests that this interpretation is unlikely to be correct?

### How the Holy Spirit “Turns on the Light”

This final approach—an individual claiming a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit—is quite common in the church today. It rests on the claim that God has promised in the Bible that he will guide us in all our spiritual interpretive work in such a manner that we cannot go wrong. He will show us the true meaning of each text regardless of how much or how little we heed the principles of sound interpretation or consult the interpretive work of godly biblical scholars. A textbook on biblical interpretation relates the following incident:

One seminary professor tells how a crying student once interrupted a seminar on principles for understanding the Bible. Fearful that he might have offended the student, the teacher asked if anything was wrong.

Sobbing, the student responded, “I am crying because I feel so sorry for you.” “Why do you feel sorry for me?” The professor was perplexed. “Because,” said the student, “it is so hard for you to understand the Bible. I just read it and God shows me the meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

This viewpoint probably stems from a faulty interpretation of John 16:13—“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” John 14:26, part of Jesus’s same teaching session, helps to clarify the nature of the Spirit’s guidance: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” In this address to his disciples given just hours before being betrayed and crucified, Jesus refers repeatedly to his “teaching” (vv. 23, 24). Therefore, he is probably speaking narrowly of the role the Holy Spirit will play in safeguarding the disciples’ weighty responsibility to accurately preserve the Gospel records of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. In that case, he is not describing the ongoing ministry of the

Spirit in the lives of individual believers. According to John 15:26, however, the Spirit's task is to testify about Jesus, and he can clearly do this for believers today as well. The Spirit confirms the truthfulness of Jesus's claims and teachings in our hearts so that we are willing to commit ourselves to believing and obeying them.

This ministry of the Holy Spirit is commonly referred to as *illumination*. But there is some disagreement among Christians regarding *how* he shines light on the biblical text, or more specifically, what effect this illumination has on the interpreter. Theologian Millard Erickson emphasizes that the "Holy Spirit's role is not to convey new information that is not in the biblical text but to give insight or deeper understanding of the meaning that is in the biblical text."<sup>11</sup> He then goes on to explain in more detail what this involves, lest his words be understood as supporting the sixth approach noted above:

It is not opposed to the careful study of the text. In a sense, the Holy Spirit is able to work more effectively, the more objective knowledge one gains of the meaning of the vocabulary and syntax of the text, for he works through the information, not independently of it. His work is more like that of tutor than of a lecturer.<sup>12</sup>

## The Beginning and End of Faulty Interpretation

These strange claims about how God speaks today through Scripture lead to misinterpretation and misapplication. If I am correct that such problems are widespread in the church and in popular Christian publications today, when did this practice begin? Some would claim that the New Testament authors were the first culprits. Speaking of the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, Old Testament scholar Peter Enns writes: "It seems to run counter to the instinct that context and authorial intention are the basis for sound interpretation" and is "unappealing . . . for *our* eyes." Enns goes on to claim that the New Testament authors, though "commenting on what the [Old Testament] text actually *meant*," made no effort "to remain consistent with the original context and intention of the Old Testament author." Instead, they sought to explain what the Old Testament "means *in light of Christ's coming*"—and so should we.<sup>13</sup>

Enns's conclusions concerning the New Testament use of the Old Testament are not shared by all.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, some of the New Testament texts do use the Old Testament in puzzling ways. An example

of this is 1 Corinthians 10:2–4—“They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” Paul refers here to several well-known events following Israel’s departure from Egypt: the cloud that guided and protected them (Exod. 13:21–22; 14:19–20), the crossing of the sea on dry land (Exod. 14:21–22), and the miraculous provision of manna and water in the wilderness (Exod. 16:35; 17:6). His claims regarding Moses and Christ, however, are unexpected. Most of the time, though, the New Testament authors use the Old Testament in a straightforward manner, as in the quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12 in Hebrews 12:5–6—“And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.’”

Other scholars might trace faulty interpretation—or interpretation that is overly creative and speculative but edifying—back to the early Jewish and Christian interpreters. The early Jewish interpreter Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) explored the significance of the Israelite dietary law that declared “clean” those animals that have divided hooves and chew the cud (Lev. 11:1–8, 26; Deut. 14:3–8). He suggested that “both these signs are symbols of the methods of teaching and learning most conducive to knowledge.” Cud chewing thus represents the student “repeating in his memory through constant exercises” that which he has been taught, while the divided hoof represents the twofold path of life with the call to turn away from vice and stick to the path of virtue.<sup>15</sup>

About two centuries later, also in Alexandria, the Christian interpreter Origen offered the following explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:25–37:

The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the [inn], which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. . . . The manager of the [inn] is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s second coming.<sup>16</sup>

Allegorical interpretations such as these continued to flourish, developing in the Middle Ages into an emphasis on the “fourfold sense” of Scripture—(1) the literal or historical, (2) the allegorical or doctrinal, (3) the moral or ethical, and (4) the future or eschatological. In the Reformation period, however, this approach was brought into question. As Luther put it, “allegory is like a beautiful harlot” whom “idle men” in particular find irresistible.<sup>17</sup>

Now by no means did all early interpreters abandon an interest in the literal meaning of the biblical text, nor did the Reformers completely distance themselves from spiritualizing approaches. Theologian David Steinmetz suggests that the three nonliteral senses correspond to the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope.<sup>18</sup> In other words, in seeking the “fourfold sense” of Scripture, highly trained interpreters attended to the literal meaning of each text, while also guaranteeing that it addressed the interpreter’s world and fulfilled its God-given purpose to be “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).<sup>19</sup>

As we look back on how the Bible has been interpreted in the past, it should provide us with both a warning and a challenge. On the one hand, the drive to edify the church through scriptural interpretation, which continues unabated up to the present, does not justify every hermeneutical somersault undertaken in order to achieve this end. On the other hand, the learned allegorizing commentaries of prominent medieval interpreters often have little in common with small group Bible studies in which everyone does what is right in their own eyes. The purpose of this present book is not simply to decry the excesses of contemporary interpretive efforts. It seeks also to encourage us to imitate the best efforts of previous generations of Christian interpreters. We too should use the Bible to address our own questions concerning who we are, what we should believe, and how we should live as the people of God, while paying careful attention to the original context and meaning of these ancient, divinely inspired texts.

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### Think about It

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1. How do you understand the Holy Spirit’s role in helping you understand the Bible? Can you cite any biblical support for your position? How would you respond to a friend who claims that

God told her what a specific verse means when you strongly disagree with her interpretation?

2. How should we evaluate the allegorizing interpretations of earlier (or contemporary) interpreters, such as Origen's explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan cited above? Is it acceptable as long as it is spiritually edifying and not contrary to sound theology? Can we conclude that the Holy Spirit led him to interpret the text in this manner?

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### Read about It

1. Jacques Berlinerblau, *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) offers many fascinating—and exasperating—examples of how political candidates misuse the Bible in an effort to win votes.
2. In *Three Views of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by K. Berding and J. Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), biblical scholars Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Darrell L. Bock, and Peter Enns present, illustrate, and defend their view and critique the views of the other two contributors.
3. Moisés Silva, in *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), and Henry Wansbrough, in *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), offer a focused survey of the history of biblical interpretation.