



How Scripture *Interprets* *Scripture*

What Biblical Writers Can Teach Us
about Reading the Bible

MICHAEL GRAVES

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Introduction

Interpreting Scripture and Inner-Biblical Interpretation

Many people today doubt that the Bible has anything meaningful to say in our contemporary context. Even within the church, the usefulness of Scripture for helping Christians to navigate today's complex world is often not fully recognized. It is my belief and the testimony of Christians throughout the centuries that the Bible remains relevant and teaches what is essential for human well-being. Christians have traditionally accepted the truthfulness and usefulness of Scripture as necessary corollaries of believing in Jesus. Our confidence in Scripture is grounded in the testimony of Jesus and the early church. Jesus accepted Israel's Scriptures (that is, the Old Testament) as sacred and authoritative. Christians who lived after the apostles commended these same sacred books as Scripture, together with other books pertaining to Jesus that eventually became the New Testament. Moreover, the Bible has continued to "work" in the lives of Christians to instruct, encourage, warn, and comfort. The purpose of this book is to illustrate and explain what we can learn about biblical interpretation by paying attention to how Scripture interprets Scripture. This kind of interpretation aims to help us grow closer to God, cultivate Christian virtues, and make wise decisions that demonstrate love for God and for our neighbors.

Within Scripture, we find examples of "inner-biblical interpretation"—that is, passages in which a biblical author appropriates and reapplies an older biblical tradition. Such passages often handle their biblical sources with striking

sensitivity to context and theological imagination. In certain cases, only one facet of the older meaning is brought into the new setting. Sometimes an early biblical tradition is applied in different ways by later biblical writers. Core theological ideas typically stand behind both the earliest form of a scriptural tradition and its reapplications in later biblical texts. The phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation provides insight into how we should interpret Scripture generally and also contributes to our understanding of Scripture's teaching on specific topics.

The first chapter of this book will present four key concepts that provide an entryway into the process of biblical interpretation. These concepts are as follows: (1) Scripture was meant to be interpreted with an attitude of reverence and with the expectation that we will learn divine wisdom; (2) we understand Scripture best when we pay attention to the ancient contexts of biblical statements as the starting point for our process of interpretation; (3) we need to read widely in the Bible to hear the whole counsel of Scripture, because the Bible contains a variety of perspectives on complex topics and each of these biblical perspectives conveys important insights; and (4) we should seek not just the contribution of each individual text but also a coherent picture of what Scripture as a whole has to say in addressing any given topic. These concepts suggest a process of interpretation that leads from the study of individual texts to a coherent statement of biblical teaching. As we will see, this process represents an application of principles learned from how Scripture interprets Scripture. It also allows insights gained from inner-biblical interpretation on specific passages to inform our present-day application.

After this first chapter on the key concepts of interpretation, five chapters follow that apply these concepts to specific topics in Scripture. The purpose of these chapters is to show how the phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation illuminates both the topic in question and the nature of reading the Bible. The chapter topics are as follows: corporate and individual responsibility; insiders and outsiders; marriage, polygamy, and divorce; sacrificial offerings; and the afterlife. Although none of these can be addressed comprehensively, and other topics could be discussed, these chapters will be sufficient to illustrate the approach suggested by this book and show the need and value of this kind of interpretation.

In the final chapter, I will sum up key insights from each of the chapters. I will also make general observations about how Scripture interprets Scripture and suggest specific principles that can guide contemporary biblical interpretation. I hope to make clear why it is so important that we read both deeply and widely in Scripture. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that the historical tradition of inner-biblical interpretation that grows out of the Old Testament

and blossoms in the New Testament finds an authentic continuation in the early church. Finally, I will argue that the Bible, even though it contains ancient texts from cultures very different from our own, equips us with the insights we need to apply biblical teaching wisely today. By interpreting Scripture well and putting it into practice, we can grow in our knowledge of God, live out our Christian calling, and help shape our world to be better, in many ways, than the one in which the biblical writers lived.

Scripture Was Meant to Be Interpreted with Reverence and Expectation

The term “interpretation” can be used in different senses. For example, if an ancient Greek letter written in an obscure style with a number of rare words was found, scholars trying to reconstruct the letter’s original meaning as intended by the author could be said to be “interpreting” its meaning. In other words, they are interpreting the linguistic and cultural evidence in order to reconstruct the historical sense of the document. In this book, I typically mean something more than this by “interpretation.” What I have in mind is closer to the interpretation offered by judges when they are interpreting a law to settle a contemporary dispute. The historical sense can (some would say “should”) serve as the foundation for how the law is applied, but what the judge must decide is how the primary idea of the law bears on a present circumstance. To take another example, professional historians must interpret the past in order to write history; that is, they must look at the evidence and decide what was important, which events caused others, and how this should be told to present-day readers. Two good historians might offer different narrative accounts of the same period because many important things could be selected to recount, different themes could be emphasized, and audiences change. When I talk about interpreting the Bible, I have in mind the whole process, from studying biblical texts in their historical contexts, to ascertaining what ideas and values are present in the text, to discerning what is important for a certain audience to know, and perhaps to stating how the audience should respond. It is in this broad sense of “interpretation” that the Bible was meant to be interpreted. This has been the belief of Christians from the beginning as part of believing in biblical inspiration.

A challenge for contemporary readers of the Bible, and perhaps a reason why the Bible is not more widely read, is that biblical texts do not speak directly to our specific circumstances. For example, the Bible does not give us direct, context-specific instructions, such as “Go to this store and buy that

shirt,” or “Take this job, not that one.” If God sent messages of this sort through the Bible, there would be little need for interpretation. The original context of each message would be our context, and the directions would be perfectly clear. We could simply do as we were told and know that we were following God’s will. But as it is, the Bible does not contain messages written directly to us. Instead, the Bible is filled with various kinds of prose and poetry that address situations from the past. Some comments here and there feel directly relevant, but much of the Bible concerns ancient peoples, unfamiliar rituals, and cultural practices that are foreign to our present experience. In fact, it is common even for Christians who hold the Bible in high regard to turn primarily to other sources for guidance on how to live.

It should be stated, of course, that good advice that derives from or appropriately supports biblical teaching is valuable. Nevertheless, there is no substitute for directly encountering the Bible for ourselves. The very process of reading the Bible cultivates wisdom, orients our love in the proper direction, and inspires us to act rightly. We cannot obtain these benefits at the same level simply by listening to someone else report to us what Scripture teaches. Christians who are blessed with the opportunity to study the Bible should exercise responsible stewardship of this blessing. Still, how can reading ancient biblical texts, which do not speak directly into our present circumstances, help us to grow closer to God and other people? The answer is that we are meant to interpret them. Through interpretation the Bible is translated into wisdom that can shape us as people and guide our specific choices. The very idea that God inspired biblical texts for our instruction requires that we are meant to interpret them and apply them to our lives.

By way of example, we can contrast the ancient Code of Hammurabi with the US Constitution. Although the Code of Hammurabi sets forth ideals and values, no community still looks to it for binding law, and consequently no tradition of contemporizing interpretation surrounds it. The US Constitution, on the other hand, remains authoritative for citizens of the United States, and consequently it has been and continues to be interpreted for its contemporary relevance. Another example from US history is the phrase “All men are created equal” from the Declaration of Independence. It contains a core idea that is central to US civic thought (that is, the fundamental equality of all people) but has continued to be interpreted and applied more broadly (for example, to include women and people of all races) in light of later insights. The key point is that when a text from the past remains meaningful, people mediate its meaning to their present circumstances through interpretation.

A few moments of reflection on the Bible’s content make clear that it was meant to be interpreted for later times. This is evident, for example, where

the Bible relates stories and codes that assume cultural elements that no longer exist for most of us, such as polygamy and slavery. Biblical passages that involve these topics presumably have something to teach us without requiring that we revive these practices. Again, the need for interpretation is obvious when we consider issues in today's world, such as "How should I vote?" or "Is genetic science good or bad?"—which the Bible does not speak about directly but which can be addressed using biblical teaching. At a deeper level, the important role of interpretation becomes apparent when we see biblical texts that seem to lean in opposite directions. For example, on the basis of what the men of Judah did in Ezra 10:3–5, one might suppose that it is biblical teaching to divorce a spouse who is outside the faith. However, because of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:12–14, one would think that it is not biblical teaching to do this. Both Ezra 10 and 1 Corinthians 7 have specific contexts, and we need to interpret these texts in light of their contexts, in light of each other, and within the framework of the Bible as a whole. The best Christian response to complexity in the Bible is to interpret it with reverence and faithful expectation.

As this book will illustrate in detail, that the Bible is meant for interpretation is made perfectly clear from how biblical writers interact with prior biblical traditions. Many examples will be given in the following chapters. For the present, I can mention the interpretation of Deuteronomy 23:3 ("No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD, even to the tenth generation") reflected in Nehemiah 13:1–3, and Paul's application of Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is threshing") to his own situation of laboring as an apostle (1 Cor. 9:7–12). While biblical texts have specific contexts that should be understood as part of responsible interpretation, biblical writers themselves testify to the fact that divinely ordained values, principles, and practices can be faithfully applied to new settings.¹

An important dimension of interpreting Scripture for contemporary application is exploring all the facets of meaning that a text contains. Abraham's binding and near sacrifice of Isaac serves as a good example (Gen. 22). In this passage, God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on a mountain, but at the last minute, God tells Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac. A literal account of the narrative would describe the events

1. For examples where New Testament writers derive lessons from Old Testament narratives, see 1 Cor. 5:6–8; 10:1–13; Rom. 4:16–25; Heb. 11; James 2:25; 5:10–11, 17–18; 2 Pet. 2:4–10, 13–16; 1 John 3:11–12; Jude 7, 11. On God's intent that Old Testament texts should teach later generations, see Rom. 15:3–4; 2 Tim. 3:14–17. Biblical references are given in the order of their importance wherever this is helpful for a given point. Otherwise, they are given in canonical order.

that take place. But at a deeper level, what is this narrative about? Because it begins by saying that God was testing Abraham (v. 1), we might surmise that we are to learn something from how Abraham responds. Abraham's willingness to obey (vv. 16–17: "Because you have done this, . . . I will bless you") suggests that the patriarch's obedience is being commended to the reader. Abraham also demonstrates trust in God, and Hebrews 11:17–19 uses this passage to commend the virtue of faith. James 2:21–24 interprets this passage to show that faith is brought to maturity in our actions. Within its broader literary context, this narrative confirms God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 22:17–18), serves as a model for sacrifice as substitution (v. 13), and provides a vivid pictorial rejection of human sacrifice. Even these facets of meaning do not exhaust what could be said about this remarkable passage.

At the same time, we cannot validly claim that a text is about anything we wish. There are limits to what a text might mean. For example, the story of Abraham binding Isaac in Genesis 22 is not in any recognizable sense about socialism or capitalism. Even if numerous facets of meaning interlock in the unfolding of a narrative, only those facets with solid basis in the wording and ideas of the text are valid. Moreover, even some interpretations that could conceivably be derived from a text should be rejected because of the broader contexts that surround the passage. For example, someone might claim that Genesis encourages child sacrifice. Such an interpretation might suggest itself to a reader who encounters this text in isolation, but in the context of the Pentateuch it does not hold up. The process of interpretation helps us to see the abundant richness of the text's meaning, but it does not allow for any and every meaning imaginable.

Biblical interpretation can be challenging. On difficult topics, serious disagreements sometimes arise between Christians. Nevertheless, the process of biblical interpretation is too important not to discuss. If we are to benefit from the teaching of Scripture, we need to articulate an interpretive approach that is faithful to the text and equitable to one another. To this end, the principles of biblical interpretation must go beyond advice on what not to do with the Bible. We do not want an environment in Christian education where the more we know about the Bible, the less it applies to our lives. This does not make for useful sermons or healthy Christians, and it does not reflect historical Christianity. The goal of this book is to suggest a positive approach to biblical interpretation that takes its cues from how biblical authors interpreted prior biblical traditions. In order to put this approach into practice, we need to come to the Bible ready to participate actively in the interpretive process, with a humble spirit of obedience to God and a trusting expectation that God has something to teach us from every biblical text.

The Starting Points for Interpretation Are the Ancient Contexts of the Bible

Christian biblical interpretation can be thought of as a process. The best starting point for this process is careful study of each biblical book against the backdrop of whatever we can surmise about its original context. Modern biblical scholarship has brought sharper focus to this aspect of biblical interpretation, but the intentions of the Bible's human authors as envisioned in their historical contexts was likewise a concern for the best interpreters in the early church.² Words have meaning in specific linguistic-cultural contexts. For example, when a nineteenth-century English Christmas carol refers to birds that "sing loud their carol gay,"³ the sense of the word "gay" in this historical setting is different from the sense it normally carries in the twenty-first century. If we want to give an accurate account of why the text before us uses the specific words that it does, we need to conceptualize a human author who lived in a certain time and place and who wrote with a specific audience in mind.

It is true that different kinds of literature express the writer's aims in different ways. In an expository text, such as the book of Amos or the book of Romans, the writer presents a certain persona and sets forth an argument in a relatively straightforward manner. In other types of literature, such as the narratives in 1–2 Samuel or the poetry of the Psalms, the writer's aims are often suggested rather than stated outright. Moreover, literature can convey more than just ideas. The Psalms, for example, can stir up feelings, invoke memories, and rouse the reader to action. We should not be simplistic about what authors intend when they write or how much access we have to their inner thoughts. Nevertheless, meaningful literature exists because writers employ linguistic conventions at their disposal to create compositions that resonate with an audience. We should seek to interpret texts in light of the writer's conventions as best we can.

The study of biblical books in their ancient contexts is important for several reasons. First, attention to the historical settings of biblical books allows us to see the distinct contribution that each passage makes. This opens up the rich variety of the Bible and is preferable to seeing the entire sacred text as a series of figurative articulations of the same three or four points over and over again. Second, making the historical sense the basis for interpretation keeps us in contact with the text's ideas. When interpreters become untethered from the Bible in its historical contexts, they often miss out on important lessons because the only ideas they hear are the ones they brought with them. Third,

2. See Graves, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 73–75, 162–63.

3. See "The Sun of Righteousness," in *Christmas Carols*, 60.

by grounding ourselves in the concrete world of biblical texts, we can learn to reapply Scripture's core ideas to our own context in ways that are equally concrete. For example, when we take the time to understand what Paul meant when he admonished Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss,⁴ we are reminded that our greetings to one another should not only flow from deep affection but also manifest themselves in tangible ways that are suited to our context.

The method of biblical interpretation that I explain in this book takes as foundational the meanings of biblical texts in their historical contexts. By the word "context," I have in mind (1) the cultural contexts of the biblical writers, (2) their specific historical circumstances, (3) the types of literature they composed, and (4) their location within the Bible's narrative of creation and redemption. I will say something brief about each of these.

1. The various books of the Bible were written in specific cultural contexts. These contexts become evident to us when we read about aspects of these cultures that are different from our own. The writers of most biblical books lived in cultures that, in one way or another, assumed that temples should be built for deities and animal sacrifices should be made to those deities, that some form of slavery was acceptable, and that women did not have the same status as men. In the Old Testament, individuals are told to "gird up their loins." This presumes a certain type of clothing and communicates something specific in its context (often, "Make yourself ready"). In the New Testament, Jesus washes his disciples' feet (John 13:5). This presumes certain customs related to footwear, hygiene, and status, and what Jesus did expresses a special kind of service in that context. Sometimes the words we use in our English translations fail to make clear the cultural difference between the world of the text and our world. For example, the ancient Greek word *gynē*, "woman," could be used for the female participant in the institution of *gamos* (or in Latin, *matrimonium*), akin to our "marriage," and the word *anēr*, "man," could be used for the male participant. When we translate *gynē* as "wife" and *anēr* as "husband" in the New Testament, we may forget that the institution addressed in these passages is not the same as marriage in contemporary Western countries. But to equate the ancient institution of *matrimonium* with today's practice of marriage is no more valid than to equate the master of a slave with an employer, or the ancient emperor of Rome with a modern president. Comparisons can be made, but the cultural situations differ and matter for interpretation.

Most readers perceive instinctively that acknowledging the Bible's authority does not require that we bring the entire cultural world of the Bible into

4. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26.

our own. This perception is confirmed by the fact that there is not just one culture represented in the Bible, but many. The cultural setting of Abraham is not the same as that of David and Solomon, which differs from the world of King Josiah, which differs from Daniel's context in Babylon, which differs from the Persian setting of Esther. The Greco-Roman world of the New Testament is different too, and one can distinguish between the Roman Judea of the Gospels and the Greco-Roman environment presupposed in 1 Corinthians. All of this shows that we who believe in the inspiration of the Bible should not try to reproduce biblical culture in our world, because there is no single "biblical culture" to imitate. Instead, we need to discern what Scripture teaches as interpreted against the backdrop of the biblical writers' cultures and then apply this teaching to our context.

2. The specific historical circumstances of the writer constitute another dimension of a biblical text's context. In today's world, if the mayor of a town gave a public address in the aftermath of a forest fire, the content of the mayor's speech would make better sense to us if we knew about this event. In the Bible, the book of Haggai illustrates how the message of a biblical book is illuminated by the understanding of its specific historical setting, which for Haggai is the postexilic period as described in the book of Ezra, when the temple was rebuilt.⁵ It is evident that if we know something about the specific occasion that prompted an author to compose a text, we will gain some insight into the text's meaning.

One complicating factor for much of the Old Testament is that we have little evidence to use in identifying when the books were written and under what circumstances. Because Samuel dies in 1 Samuel 25, it is safe to assume that he did not write 2 Samuel. The book of Judges, which narrates events that took place before the reigns of Saul and David, refers to something that held true "until the day of the exile of the land" (Judg. 18:30), which shows that this text reached its final form later and through some sort of editorial process. The book of Psalms is another biblical book that contains early material, including Davidic psalms and a "prayer of Moses" (Ps. 90), and also material written in response to the Babylonian exile (e.g., Ps. 137). The book of Psalms was evidently put together out of a variety of sources from different periods, as shown also by the editorial seams that have been added at the end of the book units.⁶ With these and most Old Testament books, we cannot know for sure when exactly they reached their final form or what circumstances led

5. See Hag. 1:1, 14–15; 2:1–2, 10, 20; Ezra 5:1; 6:14.

6. See Pss. 41:13; 72:19–20; 89:52; 106:48; 150:1–6 (and all of Pss. 147–50). Although not a tightly edited book, the book of Psalms seems to have received some editorial attention as part of its composition. See Tucker and Grant, *Psalms*, 2:19–29.

to their promulgation and acceptance as finished books. Moreover, the fact that Old Testament books were composed in stages means that any given text might have engaged more than one historical circumstance. In the case of a psalm, for example, the text might have initially addressed a situation in the life of David, and later the editor of the Psalms made intentional use of it in giving shape to the whole book. Although the value of knowing the specific circumstances of the writer is undeniable, with the Old Testament we typically do not have enough information to be precise.

Even for the Old Testament, however, we occasionally get clues as to when a certain unit of text might have been written. Such clues include passages in which the writer comments on a previous condition that no longer holds (e.g., Gen. 12:6) or mentions something that remains “until this day” (e.g., Josh. 16:10). Moreover, earlier language is sometimes distinct from later language (e.g., Joshua is older than Esther), and the rhetorical aims of the writer give us some sense of what circumstances are being addressed. With the New Testament, the time frames within which books were written are better known. In terms of the circumstances of composition, we have a clearer understanding for the New Testament letters and are less clear about the Gospels and Acts. For the New Testament to some extent, and especially for the Old Testament, we will often have to be content with a general sense of the times and circumstances in which the authors or editors wrote. I will return to this topic of composition and chronology below when I explain how biblical writers interpret older biblical traditions.

3. In a given cultural context, writers may compose different types of literature that serve distinct purposes and follow specific conventions. More importantly, the types of literature employed in one culture may not correspond to those used in another. A type or category of literature is referred to as a “genre.” The idea that biblical writers composed their books according to the conventions of ancient literary genres is another aspect of exploring the Bible’s ancient context.

We can understand the concept of genre by reflecting on the different sets of expectations we bring to different kinds of writing, such as a piece of serious journalism, a comic book, historical fiction, a fable, a repair manual, or an autobiography. The key idea is that when an author chooses to write in a defined genre, the conventions of the genre create a set of expectations that are shared between the author and the readers. Readers then know what to expect and can evaluate the work according to the genre’s conventions. For serious journalism, a competent reader will know to ask, Is it factual? Does it lead off with major ideas? Is the writing clear and appropriately concise? This same reader will bring different sets of expectations to a comic book

or fable (both highly inventive, but distinct), or to a repair manual or autobiography (both purportedly factual, but quite different). As for the Bible, to the extent we can understand the conventions assumed by the writer and intended readers, we will better grasp what the biblical writers communicated in their historical contexts.

Much profit is to be gained by thinking about literary genres in the Bible. But the types of literature we find in the Bible do not necessarily correspond to the literary genres with which we are most familiar today. We should pay careful attention to clues within each biblical book to determine as much as possible how the author expected the text to be read. Parallels with ancient literature inside and outside the Bible provide examples of possible literary types. Some of the genre categories applied to biblical books and units within books include law, historical narrative, vision report, short story, lament, proverb, parable, letter, and apocalyptic.⁷

At the same time, we should not overestimate how much we know about the genres of biblical literature. First, most biblical books do not bear enough resemblance to other ancient sources to suggest that they belong to the same genre or follow the same conventions. For example, there is nothing in ancient Near Eastern literature that appears to be the same genre as the Pentateuch or Isaiah or 1–2 Samuel. Some sections of a biblical book may resemble other literature (e.g., parts of Gen. 1–11 resemble certain ancient hymns, epics, and myths),⁸ and this can offer help in identifying the type of source material used. But it does not necessarily tell us how the material is employed in its new context. Second, even where substantial literary connections exist at the book level (such as between Egyptian proverbs and the biblical book of Proverbs), we cannot conclude from the points of similarity that the texts are similar at every point, especially because the texts in question come from different cultures. Third, the conventions that governed how ancient texts outside the Bible were interpreted are often no clearer to us than the conventions that guided biblical writers. All of these ancient texts, biblical and nonbiblical alike, are difficult to interpret. In raising these concerns, I do not wish to minimize the contributions that the study of ancient history, languages, and cultures makes to our understanding of the Bible. We should be cautious, however, in what we claim to know about ancient genres and the rules that supposedly governed them.

The need for caution may be illustrated with reference to biblical law and ancient Near Eastern law. Much of the concrete legal material in the

7. E.g., see Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 92–94; Chapman and Sweeney, *Cambridge Companion*.

8. For these terms, see Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 1:v–x.

Pentateuch (e.g., the ox that gores, theft, murder, etc.) belongs to a tradition of ancient Near Eastern law that goes back to the third millennium BC.⁹ Around a dozen legal texts from this tradition have come to light, the most famous being the “Code” of Hammurabi from the Old Babylonian period (eighteenth century BC). In all probability, this document did not function as a law code in the modern sense. It leaves many essential topics untreated and is not cited in the numerous legal decisions preserved from the Old Babylonian period.¹⁰ Different theories have been proposed to explain its purpose—for example, that Hammurabi’s law collection served as royal propaganda to show that the king had ruled justly or that it was compiled for the purpose of training scribes. Raymond Westbrook suggests that Hammurabi’s law collection served as a reference work for royal courts in deciding difficult cases.¹¹ It is noteworthy that this text was copied for a thousand years with very little change in the substance of its laws. Perhaps this shows that Hammurabi’s collection was more like a work of literature or philosophy, intended not to settle individual cases (since it was not updated, even though practical laws must have changed) but rather to inspire right thinking in the judicial sphere.¹² Interestingly, Westbrook also points out that, for certain Hittite law collections, scribes did update the legal content, as if these Hittite codes played some role in the practical judicial process.¹³ To sum up, the purpose and usage of the Code of Hammurabi is not entirely clear, and in any case, there is reason to think that Hittite law collections were used differently. Ancient Near Eastern law collections provide excellent paradigms for thinking about how legal material might have functioned in ancient Israel, but there is no obvious genre with fixed conventions or rules that the biblical texts must follow. The best way to discover how this material was employed in the Bible is to look at the biblical passages themselves.

The legal material in the Bible shares much in common with the substance of ancient Near Eastern law, but it also has its own unique framework and reception history. Key collections of biblical law that parallel ancient

9. See Westbrook, *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber*, 300, 306; Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal*, 23–24.

10. See Westbrook, *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber*, 320–22; Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” 247–64; Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal*, 23–25; Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 156–69. Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” 249, cites two cases that may represent some kind of practical application for Hammurabi’s collection.

11. Westbrook, “Biblical Law and Cuneiform Law Codes,” 254.

12. On Hammurabi’s collection as literature or philosophy, see Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal*, 24. On the Code of Hammurabi as a model intended to inspire, see Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 167. As Bottéro states, “It was instructive and educative in the judicial order.”

13. Westbrook, “Biblical Law and Cuneiform Law Codes,” 255–56.

Near Eastern law are found in Exodus 21–23 and Deuteronomy 15–25. As with other ancient law collections, biblical law is far from comprehensive; therefore, it probably did not function as a law code in the modern sense. We may assume that judges in early Israel looked to these laws as models of justice to help them adjudicate in a wide variety of cases. In this way, the use of Mosaic law in ancient Israel may have been similar to the use of law in one or another surrounding culture. The setting for Israel’s laws, however, is unique. Biblical law is located within a framework that emphasizes God’s covenant with Israel, and the laws in Exodus are presented as coming from God (Exod. 21:1), not from a human king. In the context of the Sinai revelation, the legal “ordinances” (*mišpāṭîm*, Exod. 24:3) in Exodus 21–23 are given by God through Moses to the people of Israel, who say, “All the words that the LORD has spoken, we will do” (24:3). The Pentateuch therefore portrays Israel at Sinai as a community that has entered into covenant with God to observe these legal rulings in some sense. At first, Moses and his immediate assistants (18:25–26) may have implemented the specific rules given at Sinai, using judicial discretion informed by core values (e.g., 22:21). Beyond this, they probably made rulings on other cases based on principles derived from revealed laws and fresh Mosaic revelations (see Num. 15:34–35; 36:5–9). After the death of Moses, the legal traditions found in Deuteronomy may have served as authoritative elaboration on the earlier legal material in order to provide further values and principles to help judges make rulings (see Deut. 26:16–17). Biblical laws came to be included in the books that ultimately formed the Pentateuch, where they could serve not only as inspiration for good legal decisions but also as records of God’s justice and as witnesses to Israel’s covenant obligations.

As for the reception of Mosaic legal material in other biblical texts, much remains uncertain, but a few significant points are worthy of mention. Although the narratives of Judges (e.g., Judg. 4:4–5) and 1–2 Samuel (e.g., 1 Sam. 7:15–17) refer to figures who served as judges in a judicial sense, they do not indicate how Mosaic law functioned in this process. The basic orientation and tone of what these biblical texts commend is in line with Mosaic law, but there is no indication that specific laws were being cited to justify particular rulings.¹⁴ This lack of verbatim reference to Mosaic law also holds true for

14. The book of Ruth shows how Israel’s legal traditions could function as moral guidance or legal precedent, even when not explicitly cited. Not only does Ruth 2 illustrate principles of gleaning and generosity (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–22), but Ruth 4 presupposes the laws of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5–10) and land redemption (Lev. 25:25–28; cf. Num. 27:8–11), albeit practiced in a way that appears idiosyncratic from the perspective of preserved biblical law. According to Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah*, 137–47, the structure of the book of Ruth was

most prophetic literature. Nevertheless, we see in the prophets clear indications that legal traditions were known and recognized as authoritative; for example, Amos 2:8 condemns those who lie down on garments taken in pledge (Exod. 22:26–27), Hosea 4:2 presupposes the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17), Jeremiah 2:34 assumes a specific Mosaic law about theft (Exod. 22:2–3), and Ezekiel 18:5–18 alludes to a number of legal principles (e.g., Lev. 18:19, 20; Exod. 22:21, 25–27; 23:2–3).¹⁵ According to 2 Kings 22–23, King Josiah ordered the people of Judah to follow the “commandments, decrees, and statutes” contained in a “scroll of the Torah” that was found in the temple (2 Kings 22:8, 11; 23:3).¹⁶ During the Persian period, Nehemiah the governor (Neh. 8:9) and Ezra the priest and expert in the Torah (Ezra 7:6, 10, 12, 21) received Persian imperial authorization to institute Mosaic law as part of their management of the province. Ezra was directed by the Persians to appoint judges and magistrates to teach and enforce “the law of your God” along with “the law of the king” on penalty of death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment, as appropriate to the offense (Ezra 7:6, 12, 25–26). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the implementation of Mosaic laws related to sacrifice (Ezra 3:2), putting away foreign wives (Ezra 10:1–17; Neh. 13:1–3), and Sabbath observance (Neh. 13:15–22).¹⁷ In the New Testament, the exact status of Old Testament law is not always clear, but Jesus sometimes invokes a specific Mosaic commandment as authoritative (e.g., Matt. 15:3–4), as does the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 9:8–9).¹⁸ As the reception history shows, biblical laws were interpreted as applicable and authoritative in a variety of ways in different contexts.

In considering the historical context of the Bible, it is important to remember that the types of literature represented in Scripture are not precisely the same as those we use today. As we study the Bible, we should pay careful

shaped by laws in Deut. 24:16–25:10. But the author of Ruth felt free to modify how the legal ideas were applied, because these laws were seen not as sources of fixed rulings, but as resources for the legal reasoning of later jurists. Berman invokes as a parallel case the relationship between the Neo-Babylonian work “Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice” and the Code of Hammurabi.

15. Other examples where the book of Jeremiah presupposes legal material known from the Pentateuch include Jer. 3:1, on divorce (Deut. 24:1–4), and Jer. 34:8–9, on slave release (Lev. 25:10; Deut. 15:12–18). Ezekiel shows special interest in traditions related to the temple, ritual purity, and sacrifice.

16. The scroll of the Torah that inspired Josiah’s reforms probably corresponded in substance to the book of Deuteronomy. On the relationship between Josiah’s reforms and the book of Deuteronomy, see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 21–33.

17. For historical studies of the Persian context, see Fried, *Priest and the Great King*, 217–27; and Cataldo, *Theocratic Yehud?*, 101–17.

18. For a brief survey of how Christians have understood the relevance of Old Testament laws, see Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance*, 1–27.

attention to textual clues that signal how the text might have functioned in its original context. Ancient literature related to the Bible can be valuable for our understanding. Two important points, however, should be emphasized: (1) What we know about the genres and conventions of ancient literature is limited. Therefore, whether we are trying to label a text as history, myth, epic, or something else, our conclusions should be measured to fit the evidence. (2) As shown by the reception history of biblical law across the canon of Scripture, biblical texts contain principles, values, and images that can be reapplied in new contexts beyond what might be expected from their original usage.

4. The Christian Bible presents a story of creation and redemption. Major events in this story include the rebellion of Adam and Eve, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the exile in Babylon, and the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we study the Bible, we should pay attention to how each biblical text fits into this story, especially in relation to the ministry of Jesus.

Within the story of the Old Testament from creation to the return from exile, it is often useful to remember where a specific narrative is located vis-à-vis other revelatory events. For example, given biblical prohibitions against child sacrifice (Deut. 12:30–31; 18:10; Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5), it may be surprising that Abraham does not question the command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1–14) in the same way that he questions the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:22–33). It must be remembered, however, that Abraham’s binding of Isaac takes place before the revelation at Sinai. Within the narrative of the Pentateuch, Abraham did not yet know what to think about this practice.

The most important factor in properly recognizing the redemptive-historical context of a biblical text is its location before, during, or after the ministry of Jesus. According to the Bible’s story of redemption, the coming of Jesus both fulfilled the ideals of the Old Testament and also transformed the significance of its rules. For example, Old Testament regulations pertaining to animal sacrifice and food taboos no longer apply to Christians as they did to Israel prior to the coming of Jesus, even though the texts that discuss these topics remain sacred Scripture for the church. The period of Jesus’s earthly ministry constitutes a unique theological-historical context. For example, Jesus can still direct someone to make an offering according to Mosaic law (Matt. 8:4), although his death and resurrection will render these offerings unnecessary. As another example, Jesus’s disciples do not fast while he is present with them, but they will fast again when he is taken away (Matt. 9:14–15). I will return to the subject of Jesus and biblical interpretation below. For the present, it suffices to say that when interpreting the Old Testament, we must take into consideration the fact that these texts were written before and in preparation for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Bible Addresses Complex Topics by Giving a Variety of Perspectives

As the following chapters will show, the Bible sometimes offers a variety of perspectives on particular topics. This does not mean that various biblical texts stand in irreconcilable contradiction to one another. One could imagine a collection of texts that are so diverse in their underlying values and trajectories that no coherent way of life could emerge from them. The Bible is not such a collection. Part of the reason for the Bible's diversity is that scriptural revelation is contextual; that is, the message of Scripture was contextually appropriate at the time when it was written. Biblical books addressed specific audiences, dealt with particular circumstances, and were suited to the recipients' capacity to comprehend and act. The variety of contexts partly explains the variety we see in the Bible. At the same time, the presence of diverse perspectives in the Bible should not be seen as an unfortunate by-product of its historical rootedness. On the contrary, the fact that Scripture offers different angles on certain topics contributes significantly to its didactic usefulness. The variety of perspectives contained in the Bible helps us to understand complex realities so that we can respond to these realities with wisdom.

The constructive value of diversity is evident in passages where a biblical writer affirms two different perspectives in proximity, as if to challenge the reader to sort out the precise nuance of each statement and discover their harmonization or appropriate applications. For example, in the narrative of Saul's rejection God "regrets" making Saul king as the just response to Saul's disobedience (1 Sam. 15:11), and yet God does not "regret" in human fashion (1 Sam. 15:29) when Saul pleads for another chance as if God has acted rashly. Similarly, Proverbs 26:4–5 offers contrasting advice on how to respond to a fool, so as to challenge us to consider the potential outcome when deciding whether to answer, and the Gospel of John presents the paradox of Jesus's earthly identity, that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) and also "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

It should be recognized, of course, that there are different kinds and degrees of diversity.¹⁹ In some cases, discrepancies in detail between biblical passages probably reflect nothing more than different sources that variously achieved the conventional level of detail needed for accuracy and vividness. Examples include simple discrepancies in calculating numbers (e.g., 1 Kings 9:28; 2 Chron. 8:18) and the question of one or two angels at Jesus's empty tomb

19. This subject is dealt with in a slightly different and useful way by Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*.

(Matt. 28:1–7; Luke 24:1–8). In other cases, the diversity between passages is substantive and reflects the specific aims or context of the author. Thus, the Gospel of Matthew recounts the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, with the tree withering immediately to emphasize the power of faithful prayer (Matt. 21:18–22), whereas Mark adds to this story the account of Jesus cleansing the temple, with the tree withering the following day so as to emphasize the theme of judgment (Mark 11:12–26). The diversity here stems from the aim of each Gospel writer. As for context, a famous example is the contrast between (1) the LORD inciting David to take a census, as narrated in an earlier period when the call to monotheism was the dominant concern (2 Sam. 24:1), over against (2) Satan inciting David to take the census as narrated at a later time, when the dominant concern was David’s enigmatic disobedience (1 Chron. 21:1). Both perspectives have something to contribute (cf. the roles of God and Satan in Job 1–2), but each writer explained the account in a way that best suited the needs of the specific context. In some situations, biblical writers may have advocated for positions that were seen at the time as opposing sides of a dispute (e.g., Ruth vs. Ezra-Nehemiah on foreign wives). Even in these cases, regardless of how much coherence the human writers might have recognized, the reception of all these books as Scripture means that each passage contributes in its own way to the coherent message of the Bible that we are responsible to discern.

Belief in the unity of Scripture does not require that all biblical texts say the same thing; rather, the expectation is that the various things Scripture says can be put together into a meaningful whole. One should not think of the Bible as a painting that is “unified,” in the sense of a canvas covered with solid green or solid red. Instead, the Bible is like a painting made up of many colors: blues, greens, reds, browns, and so forth—all of which come together to make a coherent and meaningful picture. We learn to perceive this picture as we become more practiced in the art of biblical interpretation.

We Should Seek a Coherent Picture of What Scripture Teaches

Christian belief in biblical inspiration leads us to expect that all biblical texts fit together into a coherent theology. Therefore, if the Bible exhibits some measure of diversity in its content, how do we organize all biblical texts into a unified theological whole? The answer is that we need to identify the core values that stand at the center of biblical teaching. As we identify these values stated explicitly in Scripture, we will be able to recognize them throughout the Bible as the values that underlie other passages, until we see a network of

values that unite all biblical texts and fit together harmoniously. We can have confidence that we are on the right track with our theological interpretation when (1) we ground our core values in the life and teaching of Jesus and (2) the unity of the Bible manifests itself in the network of core values more clearly than it does when we merely line up every statement in the Bible side by side without interpretation.

The place to start in identifying Scripture's core values is the life and teachings of Jesus. As for his life, Jesus the divine Word willingly humbled himself to take on the form of a servant and chose to suffer death on a cross for the sake of the world, even though the world did not recognize him. Rather than striking out in vengeance, Jesus asked for forgiveness on our behalf. Jesus was raised by the Father and given all authority in heaven and on earth, and he will return as the righteous judge of all. The narrative of Jesus's miraculous birth, life, death, and resurrection establishes a paradigm for Scripture's core values.

Moreover, Jesus made several statements about Scripture that bring the core of biblical teaching to light. According to Jesus, the principle "Whatever you want people to do for you, so also you should do for them" is equivalent to the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12). Elsewhere, Jesus states that all the Law and the Prophets depend on two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (cf. Deut. 6:5), which is the greatest and first commandment, and "love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. Lev. 19:18; Gal. 5:14), which is the second. Jesus says this with some variation in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–27), with the concept "love your neighbor" explained in Luke through the parable of the good Samaritan, so as to include anyone who may need neighborly care. When the rich young ruler asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus lists several of the Ten Commandments and then tells the young man to sell everything, give to the poor, and follow him (Luke 18:18–22; Matt. 19:16–21; Mark 10:17–21). When challenged about his work on the Sabbath, Jesus justifies himself by appealing to David (1 Sam. 21) and citing Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt. 12:1–8). In discussing ritual purity, Jesus lists the sins that come from the heart that make us unclean, such as sexual immorality, theft, murder, greed, malice, deceit, and envy (Mark 7:17–23). While rebuking the Pharisees for hypocrisy, Jesus refers to justice, mercy, and faith as the "weightier matters of the law" (Matt. 23:23–24).

The above passages show how Jesus summed up the core values of the Old Testament. In terms of content, Jesus focused on dispositions and actions that flow from proper reverence for God and right moral behavior, showing clear ethical standards and abundant mercy. As for interpretive methodology,

according to Jesus not all commandments function in the same way. Some commandments sum up others. Certain commandments depend on others. Specific commandments are weightier than others. The weightier commands on which others depend express Scripture's core values. All biblical passages, of course, are inspired and meant for instruction (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But some passages articulate the Bible's core more clearly.²⁰ Core biblical values should guide our interpretation of Scripture, especially of “less weighty” passages that show how the Bible's core teaching manifests itself in specific circumstances. Although not all biblical passages play the same role, as part of inspired Scripture they complement one another.

In biblical interpretation, a careful balance must be struck between reading each passage through the lens of core biblical teaching and allowing each text to make its own unique contribution. On the one hand, every biblical text offers special insight. This is why we start with the specific wording of the text in its historical context. The fact that different passages come at topics from different angles is part of what makes the Bible useful. On the other hand, what we interpret any biblical text to be teaching must reflect the fact that all Scripture was inspired by the one true God. We should expect certain points of tension, and of course there will be issues we do not fully understand. But in the end, the purpose of Scripture is to lead us to God and guide our steps. Therefore, as we ask what key ideas, values, and principles contained in this passage represent the divinely intended teaching, we should be searching for an interpretation that can serve as part of one coherent theological message.

For Christian readers of Scripture, interpretation involves certain goals and guardrails that keep them on track. The goals of biblical interpretation are expressed by Jesus in his statements on Scripture—for example, that we are to love God and our neighbor.²¹ This can be articulated in other ways, as when Paul speaks in light of Christ's resurrection about his own aim in life: “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death so that in some way I might attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11). As for guardrails, church families and reason are especially important.

20. This is why Bible readers have always been especially drawn to favorite passages, such as Exod. 20:1–17 (the Ten Commandments); 1 Pet. 1:16 (“Be holy, because I am holy”); Jer. 9:23–24; Mic. 6:8; Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22–25; James 3:17–18; 1 John 4:10; and many others. Generally speaking, these texts are presented as summative or foundational principles in their literary contexts, but what marks them as core teaching is their content—that is, the clarity with which they express Jesus's embodiment of Scripture and the underlying values that hold all Scripture together.

21. See Augustine's comments on the goal of biblical interpretation in *On Christian Teaching* 1.36.40.

In ways understood differently by different groups of Christians, but that are essential in some way for all, church tradition and our church families function as guardrails for biblical interpretation.²² It has never been seen as the task of Christians to invent a new religion out of the Bible, but rather to believe and practice the gospel as taught by the apostles and preached in the churches in accordance with biblical teaching. Churches and traditions should be reformed on the basis of Scripture, but our interpretations of Scripture should also be guided by the guardrails of the whole Christian family, past and present. Within the context of church life, we also gain wisdom from our Christian experience. In a host of ways pertaining to the practical application of Scripture, how we experience God can help us discern between competing possibilities. This experience, however, should itself be interpreted and weighed in the context of our church families.

Another guardrail for biblical interpretation is reason. The idea of scriptural revelation presupposes that human beings collectively (although not every person) are equipped with sufficient reasoning powers to transmit, read, translate, and interpret texts. Our capacity to think clearly and with moral rectitude enables us to examine the Scriptures and deal justly with one another. Due to our human limitations and sinful proclivities, the concept of reason as a tool for biblical interpretation should not be construed in an exclusively individual way. Because other people are endowed with reason, and the scope of every individual's understanding is limited, each interpreter should be eager to learn from others, and humility is always in order. Furthermore, although reason serves as the "operating system" for interpretation, it does not generate the "data" out of which theology is constructed. Our role as thoughtful interpreters is to organize the authoritative materials that are given to us, which are found primarily in the canon of Scripture but also include truths known from nature (natural revelation) and Christian witness (tradition). Among these sources of theology, Scripture functions as the unique standard for the others.

To sum up this section, if we are to apply biblical texts in a responsible manner, we should interpret them in a way that is informed by the coherent theological message of Scripture. The network of core values that unify the Bible will reflect God's values as revealed in Jesus. Theological interpretation is not simply reading all biblical texts in the light of a single formulation of

22. For example, Christian sources in the second and third centuries mention a "rule of faith" that succinctly summarizes core Christian teaching as transmitted in churches founded by the apostles. These "rule of faith" statements probably served as baptismal confessions (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1; 3.4.2), although they could also function as brief outlines of scriptural teaching on Jesus. See Ferguson, *Rule of Faith*.

doctrine; it requires that we pay attention to how each biblical text fits with the rest of the Bible. The discovery of this theological interconnectedness is an important dimension of interpreting Scripture. Special insight into the Bible's interconnections can be gained by paying careful attention to how one biblical text interprets another.

How Scripture Interprets Scripture

In certain places in Scripture, a biblical writer may show that he is aware of an older biblical tradition and reapply it to his own context.²³ Such instances provide instructive case studies for how a theme embedded in one setting can be redeployed in a different setting. Each biblical text gives a proper application of the theme, but we also learn something enlightening about the interpretive process by seeing what the later writer does with the earlier tradition. In a general way, the phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation serves as a paradigm for our entire approach to interpreting Scripture theologically with an eye toward fresh application. More specifically, the insights gained from how Scripture interprets Scripture can offer valuable assistance as we seek to find the theological unity underlying all biblical passages on a given theme.²⁴

Although the benefits of studying inner-biblical interpretation seem obvious, it is not always a simple task to identify where in Scripture one biblical text interprets another. Of course, where New Testament texts quote the Old Testament, we clearly see inner-biblical interpretation at work.²⁵ It would be unfortunate, however, to overlook the many ways that Scripture interprets Scripture even within the Old Testament. To ignore this aspect of inner-biblical interpretation is not only to miss out on numerous insights that individual Old Testament passages convey but also to leave unappreciated how

23. Given the customs related to gender in the ancient cultures of the Bible, and especially the lack of opportunities for women to engage in literary activity, I am assuming that biblical writers were male. In the end, however, we do not know that all biblical writers were male. My translations of Scripture in this book are meant to reflect the culturally embedded dimension of biblical texts so as to highlight the gap between the biblical world and our world, and thus one key aspect of interpretation. Therefore, I do not employ gender-neutral language for biblical translations in this book, as I would do in other contexts.

24. An important historical study of "inner-biblical exegesis" is Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. See also the bibliographical essay on inner-biblical exegesis in Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal*, 95–181. For a recent book on Deuteronomy's "amendments" to the Covenant Code (Exod. 20:22–23:19), which include new formulations that supplement and sometimes replace earlier statutes, see Mattison, *Rewriting and Revision as Amendment*.

25. This subject has benefited from many insightful studies, including Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*; Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament*; Moyise, *Paul and Scripture*.

interpretive trends already evident in the Old Testament find their consummation in the New Testament. The major challenge in studying this phenomenon in the Old Testament, however, is that we do not have as clear a picture as we would like of when each Old Testament text was written. This makes it hard in many cases to be sure which text is interpreting the other. Still, as noted above (point 2, under “The Starting Points for Interpretation”), there are sometimes clues in biblical texts that allow us to identify a general time frame for composition, and often the nature of how a given tradition is used in two texts allows us to determine with some certainty the relative chronology of the texts. Thus, even if we cannot state with absolute certainty the date of final composition for Exodus or Amos, it is reasonable to conclude that the law about taking a garment in pledge in Exodus 22:26–27 predates the allusion to this law in Amos 2:8. Through cautious historical judgments based on biblical scholarship assessed through the eyes of faith, I will attempt to identify general chronological relationships between texts where possible and try to learn what lessons I can from inner-biblical interpretation in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In order to manage these historical challenges responsibly, I will discuss examples of inner-biblical interpretation at two levels. First, I will highlight any passages where I think that one biblical text is aware of a prior biblical tradition and makes interpretive use of it. In some cases, the later writer may be familiar with an earlier biblical book very much as we have it, and in other cases the later writer might know the earlier tradition even though the completed version of the biblical book that transmits this tradition to us was not available. Second, in certain cases I will suggest that different biblical texts that come from roughly the same time period and take up the same topic from different angles are in dialogue with each other. It is likely, in many cases, that one text or the other knows a specific tradition from the other stream of thought, but at the very least, such instances point to a dialogue on the topic where each text is responding to the position of the other. These parallel biblical texts that appear to be in dialogue with one another represent another form of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

In treating specific cases of inner-biblical interpretation, I will not interpret these texts in such a way that later texts are seen as simply rejecting or subverting earlier biblical traditions. There is always some kind of “commentary” on the inherited tradition that is expressed through the new usage, which can include reapplying, supplementing, answering, and countering the earlier tradition. But I will be looking for the didactic value of *each* text, not just the later one. Moreover, in the end I will ask how these texts fit together theologically in the context of the Bible’s core values.

As mentioned above, it should be kept in mind that both earlier texts (inherited traditions) and later texts that offer comment (interpreting texts) are located in specific cultural and historical contexts. This means that all the texts require interpretation for application. I will not argue that we can always find a single theological trajectory that is moving in a specific direction. Because ideas develop over time, even within the Bible (for example, regarding the afterlife), it is often possible on a given topic to observe development of thought toward a certain end.²⁶ Such developments will naturally manifest themselves in how later biblical texts interpret received biblical traditions. Still, in principle there is no reason why a later biblical writer cannot apply an earlier biblical tradition in a way that fails to adhere to a specific trajectory—if, for example, the needs of the later writer require an application that does not exhibit development. I will point out movements of thought where I think they exist, but I see this kind of movement as a product of developments in the historical contexts of the writers, not necessarily as divinely ordained trajectories that lead to an ideal goal.

One of the primary reasons for studying inner-biblical interpretation is to set the stage for our own contemporary application. The following chapters will draw on insights gathered from specific examples of inner-biblical interpretation in order to help guide this process.

How Each Chapter Below Is Organized

In the following chapters, I provide overview discussions of themes that are addressed in Scripture from a variety of angles where inner-biblical interpretation plays an important role. These chapters show how the phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation can inform our general approach to interpretation. They also illustrate how specific instances of inner-biblical interpretation can help us to perceive the Bible's coherent message on complex topics. Two of the chapters deal with broad conceptual categories that represent opposite poles on a spectrum and can be emphasized in different ways: "Corporate and Individual Responsibility" (chap. 2), and "Insiders and Outsiders" (chap. 3). The next two chapters address concrete practices that were basic to the ancient societies of the Bible and yet could be understood and lived out variably: "Marriage, Polygamy, and Divorce" (chap. 4), and "Sacrificial Offerings" (chap. 5). The final thematic chapter discusses a topic of central interest in Christian theology: "The Afterlife" (chap. 6).

26. A useful book in this regard is Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*.

Each chapter presents three sections: (1) *Biblical Perspectives*: This is an overview of important biblical treatments of the theme, organized in such a way as to highlight diversity of perspectives where they exist. Biblical texts are discussed with reference to their cultural, historical, and literary contexts. At this stage, I do not attempt to resolve any tensions that may exist among the various texts. (2) *Inner-Biblical Insights*: In this section, specific passages are discussed that exhibit inner-biblical interpretation. Emphasis is placed on how the interpreting text applies or qualifies its inherited biblical tradition. To sum up, I identify key theological insights about the theme that emerges from these passages. (3) *Putting the Pieces Together*: I conclude each chapter by proposing an interpretive framework for the chapter's theme that is informed both by the inner-biblical insights and by Scripture's core values as exemplified in Jesus. Based on this framework, I suggest ways to interpret the various biblical perspectives so that (a) each makes its own distinctive contribution and (b) the different passages fit together into a coherent theological whole.

My goal in these chapters is to explain what biblical writers can teach us about how to read the Bible with faithfulness to its inspired message and with wisdom in applying that message today. Clearly, the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture cannot be taken to mean that the Bible comes already interpreted, with no role for human interpreters. On the contrary, the manner in which biblical writers make use of prior biblical traditions suggests a process of interpretation that involves contemporary readers who receive the message of Scripture and mediate it to the present world.