

Bible Interpretation – Best-practice Principles

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The following study on Bible interpretation was prepared for the adult Sunday School class in the Toronto Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Unless otherwise noted, direct Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Contents

A. Challenges in Bible interpretation	2
B. Assumptions.....	4
1. We interpret the Bible so that we can know what we are to believe and how we are to act	4
2. The Bible is its own final authority.....	5
3. The original language texts are the word of God	7
4. No bible version is perfect	9
5. Scripture has one meaning	10
6. The entire Bible is to be applied in Bible interpretation.....	12
7. We must apply logical reasoning	13
C. Guidelines for best-practice Bible interpretation	13
1. Understand the literary genre	14
2. Accept the plain sense meaning	15
3. Determine the meaning for the original audience	16
4. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture	17
5. Interpret a text within its context.....	21
6. Avoid allegorical interpretations	23
7. Interpret figures of speech correctly	26
Idioms and puns.....	27
Euphemisms.....	28
Metaphors.....	28
Paradoxes (and apparent contradictions).....	30
Proverbial statements.....	33
Hyperbole.....	35
Purpose of figures of speech.....	42
Round numbers.....	42
8. Be aware that grammar rules may differ.....	43
9. Do not read an interpretation into the text.....	44

10.	Consider the historical context.....	48
11.	Apply the wisdom of the ages	50
12.	Watch out for (post-)modernistic interpretations and interpretation methods	52
	Deep-time, evolution, false science, and myths.....	53
	Dispensationalism	54
	Theological Liberalism.....	56
	Feminism and cultural sexual 'norms'	56
	Postmodern interpretations	57
D.	Interpretating different (representative) Biblical literary genre	58
	Historical Narrative	58
	Law	60
	Prophecy	62
	Poetry.....	66
	Psalms	68
	Wisdom / Didactic.....	70
	Gospels.....	75
	Parables of Jesus	77
	Theological treatises	80
	Letters	81
	Apocalyptic.....	82
E.	Biblical interpretation case studies.....	83
	Leviticus 19.19; Deuteronomy 22.9-11.....	84
	Exodus 23.19; Deuteronomy 14.21	85
	Luke 3.35-36; Genesis 11.12	86
	John 13.12-15.....	88
	Romans 5.18-19; 1 Corinthians 15.22.....	89
	Romans 16.16	90
	Revelation 9.16-17, 19	91
	Revelation 16.16	92
F.	Bible References	93

A. Challenges in Bible interpretation

1. What contributes to the challenge of interpreting the Bible correctly?

1.1. *Iniquity* – The human heart is plagued with sin. Because of this, people will think and do whatever is right in their own eyes.

- Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart. (Prov 21.2)
- You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes. (Dt 12.8).

1.2. *Ignorance* – Most people in our society have no knowledge about the contents of the Bible.

- They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Eph 4.18)

Likewise, many Christians have only limited knowledge of the contents of the Bible and are unable to provide a cohesive interpretive framework in which to consider Bible passages which they may be reading or studying.

- So Philip ran to him [the Ethiopian Eunuch] and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8.30-31).

Even though a person can read, that does not necessarily mean that he has the ability to understand what he is reading. For example, you could read an article in a medical, science, or engineering journal and understand most (all) of the single words, without being able to understand what is being communicated. Consider the following ‘randomly’ selected textual extract:

- Genomes encode scores of enzymes responsible for catalyzing various chemical modifications on tRNAs. These modifications can occur on tRNA precursors or fully processed tRNAs. Nucleotide insertions or substitutions are often necessary to ensure base pairing within the tRNA in the three kingdoms of life and that the modifications occur in a stepwise fashion.¹

Most people proficient in English could smoothly read the extract but would not have a clue what the extract is talking about unless they had done some background study in biology and genetics. This illustrates why a disciplined study of the Bible will help us overcome our native ignorance and help us better able to interpret the Bible.

1.3. *Irrationality* – People in our society know that there is a God and have an innate sense that they are morally accountable to him. However, they have suppressed and rejected his truth. As a result, they have forfeited the ability to think rationally and logically and have replaced truth with myths.

- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (Rom 1.18)
- For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. (Rom 1.21–22)

Examples of irrational interpretations of physical evidence include belief in a flat earth and in biological evolution from microbes to man. Likewise, people misunderstand sinful human nature and believe that socialism would actually work. Similarly, foolish interpretations are imposed on the Bible. Examples include the belief that the Jubilee principle given to ancient Israel (Lev 25.8-55; Lev 27.16-25) provides a justification for across-the-board cancellation of student debt or that the Golden Rule given by Jesus (Lk 6.31) should be applied to animals, as PETA claims²; or that Genesis 1.27 and Galatians 3.28 provide support for transgenderism.³

¹ Royal Truman [The complex tRNA subsystem: part 2 - creation.com](http://The.complex.tRNA.subsystem:part.2-creation.com)

² www.peta.org/features/what-peta-really-stands-for/

³ familypolicyalliance.com/issues/2017/01/19/what-the-bible-says-about-transgender-ideology-2/

- 1.4. *Independence* – A spirit of independence runs through modern culture. People think that their opinions are all that they need to consider and that they do not need to be taught or corrected by anyone else.
 - The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. (Prov 12.15)
 - Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! (Isa 5.21).
 This spirit of independence is supported by modern thinking that all truth is relative. The idea that there is a correct interpretation of a Bible passage is scorned because it is claimed that one person's interpretation can be as valid as another's. Thus, declaring an interpretation to be true, makes it true for the one making the declaration—i.e., truth is subjective and relative; not objective and absolute.
- 1.5. *Inconsistency* – It has been said that if you bring two economists together and ask for their opinion on the direction of the economy, you will get three opinions. The study of scientific facts is filled with interpretive biases—e.g., about topics ranging from 'climate change', to the efficacy or effectiveness of SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, to star and galaxy formation, and the total life-time economic cost of electric vehicles *vs* those which operate exclusively with an internal combustion engine. Likewise, there is a raging debate in the US about how the Constitution should be interpreted. So, it is not surprising that on almost every topic and Bible passage there are inconsistent interpretations among professing believers in Jesus. Examples include, matters related to eschatology, the rapture, and the return of Christ; how a person can be saved; who are the right subjects for baptism and what are the right modes; and the nature of God-honouring worship.
2. These challenges (iniquity, ignorance, irrationality, independence, and inconsistency) are displayed everywhere in our culture—including in educational settings (schools and universities), the media, and government policy. Because of their prevalence, they have overflowed into and infected the minds of believers and handicapped them when they approach a study of the Bible. Therefore, we need to establish a baseline for proper interpretation of the Bible.
3. In this study, we plan to:
 - 3.1. Identify seven assumptions that we need to accept when we interpret the Bible.
 - 3.2. Consider twelve best-practice guidelines for Bible interpretation. We will note examples of how to apply each guideline as we consider it.
 - 3.3. Consider the application of the guidelines to different major genres of Biblical literature.
 - 3.4. Apply the guidelines to a few representative case-study passages which are considered by some to be difficult to interpret, or which are commonly misinterpreted.

B. Assumptions

1. We interpret the Bible so that we can know what we are to believe and how we are to act
1. Why should we study—and thus, obviously, interpret—the Bible?
 - 1.1. Our goal should not be to interpret the Bible as an academic exercise, to dazzle our associates with our erudition, to support fanciful opinions (e.g., that a current prominent personage is the Antichrist and that Armageddon is around the corner), or to provide rationalizations for aberrant behaviour.
 - 1.2. Rather, our objective for interpreting the Bible must be so that we can know the truth that God has revealed to mankind.
 - 1.3. We should desire to know what God has chosen to say to us, because the Bible teaches “what man

is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”⁴

2. What are other reasons we should interpret and study the Bible? Study of the Bible:
 - 2.1. Glorifies God because when we read and study the Bible we reflect on his revelation to mankind.
 - 2.2. Demonstrates God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises.
 - 2.3. Provides a corrective to humanistic secularism, with its falsehoods about deep-time, evolution, socialism, idolatry, psychology, and morality.
 - 2.4. Teaches us how to think rationally.
 - 2.5. Helps us to trust God’s word in every area of faith and life, and not to question it as Eve did (Gen 3.1, 4-6).
 - 2.6. Declares truth, which we should desire to understand because truth sets us free (Jn 8.32).
 - 2.7. Provides sufficiently detailed guidance for how we are to live lives which are pleasing to God (1 Tim 3.15).
 - 2.8. Helps us draw closer to our Saviour (Lk 24.32).
 - 2.9. Is a matter of life and death, since in the Bible we find the way to everlasting life (Jn 20.31; 1 Jn 5.13)

2. The Bible is its own final authority

1. How can we know that the Bible is true?
 - 1.1. Ultimately, we know that the Bible is true because the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts so that we accept it as the word of God. As Paul states,
 - And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor 2.13-14).
 - 1.2. Another reason is because the Bible says that it is the word of God and is true (Ps 18.30; Ps 33.4; Ps 119.160; Prov 30.5; Col 1.5; 2 Tim 2.15; 2 Tim 3.16).
 - 1.2.1. Many people reject this answer and accuse Christians of applying circular reasoning. However, claiming that the Bible is self-authenticating is not irrational, since any attempt to *prove* that the Bible is true would require that we select a system of proof to demonstrate truthfulness. For example, if we subjected the historical statements of the Bible to a test of their historicity by comparing them with non-Biblical accounts of history or archeological artifacts, we would have to ask how we could prove that the non-Biblical writings are accurate, or our understanding of artifacts is correct. Any form of proof brought forward to defend a lower level of proof would have to be subjected to another, higher-level proof; and the argument would proceed into an infinite regress, with no hope of a solution.
 - 1.2.2. In addition, it is necessary to apply ‘circular reasoning’ to validate *all* instances of ultimate authorities. For example, it is impossible to prove that logic is logical or true without assuming that the rules of logic are logical and true.
2. The Bible invites open and honest cross-examination (1 Thess 5.21), affirms the major principles by which cross-examination should be conducted (e.g., Dt 17.6; Jn 5.31-47; Acts 17.10), and stands up under scrutiny, so far as such tests can be applied. What evidence demonstrate that the Bible is true? Although we cannot prove that the Bible is true, and must accept the presupposition that it is true, there are evidences that the Bible is true, including:

2.1. *Precision.* The Bible is entirely consistent with extra-Biblical history, where the facts relating to

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer to Question 3.

the past are known. Factual archaeological findings have never contradicted the Bible. Rather, the Bible can be used as a textbook for guiding archaeological and historical studies.

2.1.1. We can contrast the Bible's accuracy with the claimed revelation the *Book of Mormon*, which supposedly recounts the journey and subsequent events of the lost ten tribes of Israel who left the Middle East around 600 years before Christ and migrated to the Americas. However, a Mormon lawyer, Thomas Ferguson, conducted extensive archeological work in Central America beginning in 1948. He stated that, "The *Book of Mormon* is either fake or fact. If fake, the [ancient] cities described in it are non-existent. If fact—as we know it to be—the cities will be there." His investigations failed to demonstrate that any of the book's account can be aligned with history or archeological finds.⁵

2.2. *Prophecies*. There are hundreds of prophecies in the OT which have been fulfilled—many through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

2.2.1. As God's revelation unfolded many of the prophecies became more specific. For example, Isaiah, writing about 740 to about 700 BC provided the specific name—Cyrus—of the monarch who would issue the decree allowing the people of Israel to return from their captivity (Isa 44.28; Isa 45.1). The fulfillment of this prophecy occurred about 150-200 years after it was written.

2.2.2. Daniel, in chapter 11, provides incredibly specific detail of events which were to occur between his time (around 540 BC) and the arrival of the Messiah (4 BC). It is as if he wrote an historical account of events which have passed, but he wrote it hundreds of years before the events occurred. In addition, a copy of the book of Daniel was shown to Alexander the Great when he came to Jerusalem, to show him that God had prophesied about his arrival in Jerusalem.⁶

2.2.3. There are so many prophecies about the Messiah in the OT that were fulfilled, that it is impossible for additions to have been injected into the OT texts after the fact (e.g., by Christians). For example, the Messiah would: be born of a woman (Gen 3.15), a virgin (Isa 7.14), in Bethlehem (Mic 5.2); be a descendant of David (Isa 9.7); be called out of Egypt (Hos 11.1); live in Nazareth in Galilee (Isa 9.1, 2; Isa 11.1); be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Ps 41.9; Zech 11.12–13); and be crucified with criminals (Ps 22.16; Isa 53.12), have people gamble for his clothes (Ps 22.18), receive vinegar to drink (Ps 69.21), die with words of forsakenness (Ps 22.1), be raised from the grave (Ps 16.10; Ps 49.15), and ascend into Heaven (Ps 24.7-10).

2.2.4. God gives a test to determine the truthfulness of his word or the word of any pretend prophet. He declares that if a prophet speaks about the future and the prophet's word does not come true then he is a false prophet (Dt 22.18). This is the test to determine if any other book or writing, considered to be sacred or holy, is true. If it cannot predict the future with explicit accuracy, it is not a word from God.

2.2.4.1. For example, defenders of the Qur'an claim that it presents prophecies which have been fulfilled (e.g., "They will alter Allah's creation" [4:120] refers to genetic engineering, "[W]hen the wild beasts are gathered together" [81:6] refers to zoos, "[W]hen various souls are paired" [81:8] refers to modern communication systems, and "By the heaven containing pathways" [51:8] refers to air transportation. It is clear from these examples that the Qur'an does not include specific prophecies about the future which have been realized. In addition, what 'history' it records is often a fairy tale—for example, claiming that Jesus was not crucified [4:157], referring to Mary as the sister of Moses and Aaron [19:28], and portraying Alexander as a righteous man [8:83-99].

⁵ [How a Mormon lawyer transformed archaeology in Mexico—and ended up losing his faith | Science | AAAS](#)

⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities* (translated by William Whiston), book 11, chapter 8; <http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-11.htm>

- 2.2.4.2. Other religious texts tend to be mystical ramblings that have little connection with history or the future. The Bible is unique among all religious texts, being absolutely accurate in its predictions of the future.
- 2.3. *Pronouncements.* The Psalmists speaks of the Bible as being true (Ps 119.160). Paul says that all Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Tim 3.16). Peter refers to Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Pt 3.16), and Jesus and the writers of the NT validate the OT by referring to it as the word of God (Mt 4.4; Jn 10.35; 2 Pt 3.5).
- 2.4. *Plan.* Although it was written over a 4,000-year period, the Bible has an amazing unity and consistency as it unfolds God's plan for mankind.
- 2.5. *Propositions.* The Bible informs us of things that it would be impossible to know without God's communication (revelation) to mankind, including:
- 2.5.1. Attributes of God (e.g., a Trinity).
 - 2.5.2. How the universe was created.
 - 2.5.3. God's plan of salvation, which is based on a crucified and risen redeemer, not on a person's supposed meritorious works.
- 2.6. *Preservation.* The Bible's contents have been preserved for over 6,000 years. As someone said, "the Bible is not a 'book of the month' but a book for the ages." Its preservation goes beyond, by orders of magnitude, the preservation of any other ancient text.⁷ This preservation is miraculous and clearly the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 2.7. *Power.* The Bible changes lives. The Holy Spirit can use nothing more than a person reading the Bible as the instrument leading to his salvation (2 Tim 3.15).⁸ Also, people are saved from hearing the word preached—i.e., a proclamation of what the Bible teaches—from attending a Bible study, or by having the way of salvation taught in the Bible explained to them. Studying the Bible also informs, educates, and encourages believers. As Paul states,
- All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3.16-17)
- The Bible is the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17; Heb 4.12) which empowers believers to do extraordinary feats for the cause of Christ and his kingdom.
3. All of mankind's problems began when Eve entertained Satan's question and fell into his trap, 'Did God actually say ... he couldn't have meant it.' (Gen 3.1, 4-5). The Bible is the word of the omniscient and omnipotent God. Each part of the Bible is a true statement of God's declared will or of what happened in space-time history. It is true and must be believed to be true by all men.

3. The original language texts are the word of God

We noted that one of the evidences for the truthfulness of the Bible is its miraculous preservation. God the Holy Spirit has ensured that there are multiple witnesses to the text of the Bible and that the accuracy of the text has been maintained.

1. OT manuscripts were hand copied with remarkable fidelity. This was demonstrated with the discovery

⁷ answeringgenesis.org/the-word-of-god/the-preservation-of-the-bible/

⁸ bernidy.net.com/how-a-gideon-bible-literally-saved-my-life/

of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940's.

- 1.1. Although there are differences between the text in the Dead Scrolls and the Masoretic manuscripts⁹, the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate the consistency between the hand-copied versions that were produced during an approximately 1,000-year period and the versions that remained buried during that period.
- 1.2. For example, comparing a Dead Sea scroll of Isaiah and the Masoretic text, it has been found that:
 - 1.2.1. Most of the variants are spelling differences.
 - 1.2.2. Some are variant words (e.g., Isa 19.18; Isa 45.2; Isa 33.8; Isa 45.2; Isa 49.12, 17; Isa 53.11; Isa 60.19; Isa 61.8; Isa 65.1). These differences are usually identified in the ESV with footnotes.
 - 1.2.3. A few of the differences have enabled modern Bible translators to clear up confusing words in the Masoretic text. For example, in Isaiah 14.4; Isaiah 21.8; Isaiah 40.6; Isaiah 49.24 (with Isa 49.25).
 - 1.2.4. There are no substantive differences between the teaching communicated in the Dead Sea scroll and the Masoretic text. There are no theological differences.
2. Similarly, there is extensive manuscript support for the NT text. There are thousands of Greek manuscripts, some texts or portions of NT books dating to the 2nd century (and at least one fragment possibly to the 1st century), which, when compared together, provide multiple witnesses to the text of every verse in the NT.
3. Textual variants do exist in the NT.¹⁰ However, most (~99%) are insignificant, being variants in spelling or different forms of words with the same root. Very few of the variants, if any, can be used to argue that a different theological position is presented in the published eclectic text that has been the accepted form of the text for almost five hundred years of Bible translation into English. The advocates for the NT *Received Text* (TR, *Textus Receptus*¹¹)—that is an edition of the Greek text prepared by the Roman Catholic humanist, *Desiderius Erasmus* (1496-1536), and published (as the third edition, 1550) by the printer Stephanus—cannot identify any differences which present true theological concerns.¹² A few examples, which some people might raise as being problems in the published eclectic text of the NT are the following.
 - 3.1. Manuscripts vary the wording of the end of the Gospel of Mark. Regardless, the eclectic text includes the pericope as assembled from the manuscript evidence.
 - 3.2. There is a question about the placement of the account of the woman caught in adultery, in John 7.53-8.11. The ESV footnote states, “Some manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations in the text.” Regardless, the eclectic text includes the pericope.
 - 3.3. In 1 Timothy 3:16, the eclectic text has ‘he’; some manuscripts have ‘God’. The difference can be explained by the possible introduction of a small dash in the omicron in the relative pronoun (ος) which changed it to an abbreviation for God (‘theos’; θες).
 - 3.4. 1 John 5.7-8 has more text in the TR. It has been argued (demonstrated) that the additional text was added during the Middle Ages and is not part of what John wrote.
 - 3.5. There are some instances where a verse (or phrase) has been dropped from one of the Gospel accounts in the published NT text (e.g., compare Mk 11.26 [KJV] with Mt 6.15 and Mt 18.35). However, the verse (or phrase) usually appears elsewhere in the same Gospel or in a parallel Gospel account. The addition of the verse (or phrase) in some manuscripts was likely an

⁹ Texts copied and edited by Jews known as the Masoretes in 7th to 10th centuries AD.

¹⁰ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_variants_in_the_New_Testament

¹¹ Ironically, the term ‘received text’ first appeared in the preface to an edition of the Greek NT published in 1633, *after* the KJV translation had been made.

¹² www.zeolla.org/christian/alt/variants/important.htm

interpolation made by a copyist who had a good memory and added the verse (or phrase) during the copying process without realizing that it was not in the manuscript from which he was copying.

4. Since most of us do not have a full understanding of how the editors of the printed editions compared manuscripts, we need to believe that God the Holy Spirit providentially superintended the preparation of the printed editions from which the Bible has been translated so that God's purposes for his word will be accomplished:
 - "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55.11)It is true that this requires a degree of trust in fallible and sinful humans and majority opinion can be radically wrong. Thus, while we are interpreting a passage in the Bible, we should avoid getting into debates which are based on textual variants. For example, some argue that the reference to "the number of a man" in Revelation 13.18 can be used to identify a specific individual if the text variant '616' is used instead of the standard reading of '666'.
5. Contrary to those (e.g., some in the KJV-only or TR-only factions) who suggest there has been a conspiracy to undermine the correct interpretation of the Bible with the modern published texts, we can be confident that the published eclectic texts of the OT and NT are essentially verbatim what the authors wrote or dictated.¹³ The published texts do not just 'contain' the word of God, they are the Word of God.

4. No bible version is perfect

1. Most Christians cannot read the Bible in its original (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) languages. Thus, we are dependent on using translations for our study of God's word. We need therefore to be aware of challenges associated with translation. What are some of these challenges?
 - 1.1. Source words in any language can have shades of meaning and can (and should) be translated into another language using different target words, depending on the context, for example:
 - 1.1.1. The Hebrew word 'evil' is translated as 'grievous' in Deuteronomy 6.22 and into a number of different English words elsewhere. 'create evil' → 'create calamity' [ESV], Isa 45.7; 'evil beasts' → 'wild beasts', Ezk 34.25.
 - 1.1.2. Some words can be nuanced in the Bible including, 'Sheol' (e.g., 'grave', 'death'), 'soul' (e.g., 'body', 'spirit', 'person', 'corpse'), and 'word' (e.g., 'word', 'thing', 'act', 'answer'). A person can become confused if not careful when digging too deeply into original-language word studies.
 - 1.2. We should be cautious and not make claims that translations are word-for-word. People who make such claims are often ignorant of the nature of translation. They need to consider that:
 - 1.2.1. Some idioms in the Bible's languages cannot be translated word-for-word into another language and still have meaning, for example:
 - 1.2.1.1. Deuteronomy 20.8: 'soft of heart' → 'fainthearted'.
 - 1.2.1.2. 1 Samuel 24.3: 'cover his feet' → 'relieve himself'.
 - 1.2.1.3. Psalm 17.8: 'apple [of] son [of] eye' → 'the apple of your eye' [ESV] or possibly 'pupil'.
 - 1.2.1.4. Proverbs 22.9: 'good' → 'bountiful'; Matthew 6.22: 'whole' → 'healthy'.
 - 1.2.1.5. Matthew 1.25: 'knew her not' (ESV) → 'did not have sexual relations'.
 - 1.2.1.6. Matthew 5.22: 'speaks Raka' → 'insults'.

¹³ openoureyeslord.com/2014/10/09/the-eclectic-text-of-the-new-testament-a-conspiracy-against-the-word/

- 1.2.1.7. Luke 1.69: ‘horn of salvation’ (ESV) → possibly, ‘strong deliverance’ or ‘mighty saviour’.
- 1.2.1.8. Romans 12.11: ‘boiling in spirit’ → ‘fervent in spirit’.
- 1.2.2. Sometimes verbs are not present in Hebrew and must be added in the target language. We will note this again when we consider the concise nature of the text in the poetry and Psalms.
- 1.2.3. Tenses in Greek and Hebrew do not map easily to tenses in a target language such as English.
- 1.2.4. Word order varies across languages, for example to emphasize a point.
There cannot be an exact word-word-for-word equivalent when translating from one language to another, or language translation would be merely simple symbol replacement.
- 1.3. No translation can ever be the final one in any ‘living’ language. The meaning of words change, new words are created or borrowed from other languages, and words become obsolete.
- 1.4. Theological biases can be introduced into translations. For example, the word ‘Psalm’ is not visible in most modern English translations in 1 Corinthians 14.26 and James 5.13. And some translations have tried to eliminate masculine inclusive gender terms such as ‘him’ or ‘his’ and ‘man’ (e.g., the New NIV 2011¹⁴).
2. How should we address the fact that no translation is perfect?
 - 2.1. It is wise to use multiple translations when conducting an interpretive study of the Bible.
 - 2.2. If you read regularly through the Bible, you can vary the translations you use.
 - 2.3. We should avoid being dogmatic about the rendering of a particular verse where reliable translations vary widely.
5. Scripture has one meaning
 1. In a group Bible-study you might hear the leader ask the participants, “What does this verse mean to you?” This is not the best question to ask when interpreting the text of the Bible. What are the correct questions to ask?
 - 1.1. “What does the verse (pericope) mean?”
 - 1.2. “What did the author mean?”
 - 1.3. “What did the Holy Spirit mean?”
 2. Alternatively, you may hear someone say, “That’s just *your* interpretation.” In response to this statement, what questions can we ask?
 - 2.1. Is there (can there be) a correct interpretation to the verse?
 - 2.1.1. If the answer is ‘no’, then we are not dealing with Bible interpretation but with fundamental questions of epistemology—e.g., What is truth? Can anything be true? How do we know if something is true?
 - 2.2. If the answer is, ‘yes’, then we can ask: What is the correct interpretation?
 3. What do these questions tell us about the meaning of a Biblical text?
 - 3.1. There is only one *correct* meaning to a text. It is what the author, guided by the Holy Spirit, intended to communicate through the written word. In this regard, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “... the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, *but one*) ...”¹⁵
 - ... knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God

¹⁴ krisispraxis.com/archives/2015/07/the-niv-2011-gender-neutral-translation-controversy-and-new-gold-standard-bible/

¹⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith*; chapter 1, *Of the Holy Scripture*, section 9.

as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pt 1.20-21).

- 3.1.1. Once the correct meaning of the text has been established, the person presenting a question to Bible-study participants could then ask, “How might we *apply* this in our lives?”
 - 3.1.2. The *meaning* of a Biblical text can never change because there is only one meaning. However, the *application* of it may vary in different cultural settings and for different individuals.
 - 3.1.3. How can we illustrate the concept of one meaning with possible different applications? When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified thinking that they saw a ghost. Jesus told them not to be afraid (Mt 14.22-27). The meaning is clear, the disciples saw a real man walking on the water in the midst of the storm-tossed sea of Galilee. The message was clear for the disciples: “Do not think that you are seeing a ghost, for I am not a ghost.” One meaning, one message, but applications may vary:
 - 3.1.3.1. Do not fear the unknown and what may appear to be a ghost.
 - 3.1.3.2. Do not be superstitious.
 - 3.1.3.3. Do not be afraid during tempestuous physical storms, since Jesus is with us through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.
 - 3.1.3.4. Do not be afraid of any circumstance that might arise in our lives. We should not be afraid when spiritual and psychological storms arise in our lives because Jesus knows what is going on, cares about us as his people, and will provide comfort and deliverance if that is what is best for us.
4. Since the Bible communicates the words of God the Holy Spirit, what does that tell us about God and the Bible?
 - 4.1. God is a communicator who directs a message to his rational creation, mankind (Jn 20.31; Rom 10.17; 2 Tim 3.16; Rev 1.1).
 - 4.2. The Bible is unique. Now that the Bible is complete, it is the only written or verbal communication from God that we have. There are other forms of communication from God such as the Holy Spirit dwelling in us and stirring our consciences and circumstantial communication through nature (Ps 19.1). However, these other forms of communication do not supersede the communication we have received in the Bible.
 - 4.3. God intended for his word, the Bible, to be understandable and to be understood by mankind. Understanding (interpreting) the Bible is not reserved for an elite cadre of educated ‘priests’. The Bible is perspicuous, which means that it is clearly expressed and easy to understand.
 5. Since there is only one valid interpretation of a Bible passage and the Bible is perspicuous, we might wonder why:
 - 5.1. There are so many divergent interpretations on many passages in the Bible.
 - 5.2. God didn’t just communicate everything we need to know with simple propositional statements or historical narratives.
 - 5.3. God used different genres (e.g., poetry, stories, parables, and hyperbolic language) and strange imagery in visions and dreams (e.g., in portions of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation) to communicate prophecies.
 - 5.4. For example, we might think that if Jesus wanted us to understand the future challenges the Church was going to face, he could have said in Revelation something like this, “Thirty years after the death of Emperor Nero, such and such will happen.” Since God could name Cyrus (Isa 44.28; Isa 45.1), about 150 years before he was born, he could have done the same with the Roman emperors, such as Nero and Titus.
 6. What are possible reasons why God included more than just narrative accounts and straightforward propositional statements in the Bible. Reasons include the following:
 - 6.1. To engage our minds, as rational beings, created in his image.

- 6.2. To make us dependent on God the Holy Spirit for illumination and understanding, and to remind us that we are finite creatures.
- 6.3. To make the contents interesting, stimulating, and memorable. God isn't boring. His creation isn't boring. His communication isn't boring.
- 6.4. To increase our faith, by making us acknowledge that we cannot know everything that God has done or plans to do.
- 6.5. To reinforce the fact that men suppress truth (Rom 1.18). Jesus taught that even when God provides clear instruction with explicit statements, men rationalize why they do not have to believe and obey (Lk 16.31).
- 6.6. To encourage us to approach the study of his word as a systematic whole, not over-focusing on a single word, verse, or even passage; but putting everything into the context of progressive revelation and historic fulfillment.
- 6.7. To remind us that our hope is to be placed in the living Christ, not in our abilities to decipher a text or belief that we can predict the future.

6. The entire Bible is to be applied in Bible interpretation

1. All of Scripture is to be our final authority for faith and practice:
 - All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3.16-17)
 - Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (Jn 17.17)

We need to apply ourselves to interpretation as whole-Bible Christians, and not merely NT-Christians. Therefore, all Bible interpretation needs to consider what is taught in every, relevant, portion of the Bible. For example:

- 1.1. To properly interpret portions of Revelation, it is necessary to consider portions of Daniel and Ezekiel.
- 1.2. Jesus' most-often used self-designation, "Son of Man", is likely derived from Daniel (Dan 7.13). When understood in that context, the title is not referring to Jesus' humanity but to his divinity.
- 1.3. How we understand Genesis 1-2 (as history) must consider how Jesus and the NT writers understood Genesis 1-2 (as history).
- 1.4. How we apply Biblical law must take into account what Jesus teaches about the law in Matthew 5.17-20. We shouldn't espouse 'Christian ethics' but 'Biblical ethics'.
- 1.5. It is necessary to consider passages which teach that Jesus is both a man (Gal 4.4; Phil 2.7; 1 Tim 2.5; Heb 4.15) and God (Jn 10.30; Phil 2.5-6; Col 2.9), the God-man; that teach that God predestines all things that happen and yet people are responsible for their actions (Ex 8.15; Ex 9.12); or that there is only one God (Dt 4.35, 39; Dt 32.39; 1 Ki 8.60; Jn 17.3; Eph 4.6; 1 Tim 2.5), in three persons (1 Cor 8.6; 1 Cor 12.4-6; 2 Cor 3.17; 2 Cor 13.14).
2. What are some conclusions that we can draw from the assumption that we are to use the entire Bible when interpreting the Bible?
 - 2.1. The entire Bible has applicability to all people, in all nations, in all generations.
 - 2.2. The Bible we use is to contain only the Protestant canon of books. Our subordinate standard states, "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise

approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”¹⁶

2.3. The 66 books of the Protestant canon alone are authoritative.

2.3.1. The 39 OT have the endorsement of Jesus and the Apostles (e.g., they quote from the Hebrew OT canonical books¹⁷ but never from the Greek apocryphal books.

2.3.2. The 27 NT books were written by Apostles (members of the original twelve disciples and Paul), sponsored by them (e.g., the Gospels of Mark and Luke) or received by them as apostolic because of their immediate relationship—half brothers—to Jesus (e.g., James and Jude).

2.3.3. Under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, the 66 books in the Protestant canon were received by the Church and widely accepted throughout the Church as canonical, and have been continuously used for the past 2,000 years.

2.4. Other writings—‘sacred’, historical, philosophical, confessional, catechetical, theological, etc.—are not to be used as *authoritative* for interpreting the Bible. Some Bible ‘scholars’ have attempted to broaden the scope of authoritative books. For example:

2.4.1. Some (in ancient and modern times) have claimed that books such as the *Epistle of Barnabas* should be considered canonical.¹⁸

2.4.2. Wayne Grudem, in his book, *Christian Ethics*, includes in the text and in Scripture Index references to the Apocrypha, OT Pseudepigrapha, and other ancient writings. These are not Scripture and have no authoritative role for establishing ethical principles

7. We must apply logical reasoning

1. The Bible is not a ‘cookbook’ for life, giving detailed step-by-step instructions for how to believe and behave. So, it is necessary for us to interpret it so that we can apply it in our lives.

1.1. This means that we need to use logical reasoning.

1.2. In this regard, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word”¹⁹

1.3. Therefore, at times, our efforts for determining a correct interpretation of a passage will require deduction by “good and necessary consequence”.

1.4. We should always ask of any interpretation; does it make sense? For example, interpreting the wormwood (Rev 8.11) as poisonous radiation (e.g., from the Chernobyl accident²⁰) and the locusts (Rev 9.7) as assault helicopters²¹ is simply nonsense.

C. Guidelines for best-practice Bible interpretation

As we consider guidelines for best-practice Bible interpretation, we:

- Must keep in mind the challenges and assumptions we have already considered.
- Should identify a general hierarchical precedent to the guidelines. For example, observing the plain

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of the Holy Scripture*, chapter 1, paragraph 3.

¹⁷ Although they do quote from Greek translations.

¹⁸ www.evidenceunseen.com/theology/historical-theology/the-epistle-of-barnabas/

¹⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of the Holy Scripture*, chapter 1, paragraph 6.

²⁰ www.bible-studys.org/Discoverrevelation.com/Revelation%20Chapter%208.html

²¹ www.21stcenturyrevelations.com/my-2nd-interpretation-pictographic-relationships/

- sense of what the author has written is more crucial than identifying the majority interpretive opinion.
- Should note that the guidelines are not absolute. They are not rules or commands. Nor are they a checklist like that used before flying an airplane. They are human-defined guidelines to assist us when we study God's word. We need to appeal to the Holy Spirit to give us his guidance.

1. Understand the literary genre

1. In our culture what are some of the different genres in literature, drama productions, and movies/TV shows?
 - 1.1. We make distinctions among classes of story telling and descriptions of events. For example, we use terms such as documentaries, fiction, science fiction, mystery novels, graphic novels, comics, cartoons, crime dramas, horror, dystopian fiction, romance novels, westerns, poetry, plays, tragedies, comedies, fantasy adventure, witness statements (e.g., in a court), technical articles, user manuals.
 - 1.2. Likewise, the Bible contains a number of literary genres. Also elements of the genres which are used outside of the Bible are also found in the Bible.
2. What are major literary genres used in the Bible? In what books do we find representative examples of these genera?
 - 2.1. Historical narrative (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Chronicles)
 - 2.2. Covenant (Deuteronomy)
 - 2.3. Law (Leviticus and Deuteronomy)
 - 2.4. Prophecy (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, and Micah)
 - 2.5. Poetry (Psalms and Song of Solomon)
 - 2.6. Wisdom (Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs)
 - 2.7. Didactic (1 & 2 Corinthians)
 - 2.8. Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
 - 2.9. Parables (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
 - 2.10. Theological treatises (Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews)
 - 2.11. Letters (Ephesians, Philemon, and Titus)
 - 2.12. Apocalyptic (Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation)

We will consider these genres later in this study and address specific approaches for interpretation related to each genre.
3. Individual books in the Bible can contain more than one genera? What are examples?
 - 3.1. Deuteronomy contains some historical narrative, covenant documentation, and law.
 - 3.2. Isaiah and Daniel contain both historical narrative and prophecy.
 - 3.3. The first portions of Romans and Hebrews are theological treatises, but they both have didactic components in the latter chapters (Romans chapters 12 to 16; Hebrews 13).
4. Why should we understand the differences among Biblical literary genera?
 - 4.1. We need to apply different ways of interpreting the different genera.
 - 4.2. For example, we should understand historical narrative as providing a description of actual events that occurred in the spatial-temporal realm and not apply approaches used for interpreting symbolic, figurative, or poetic forms. Likewise, we should interpret clearly apocalyptic sections of the Bible as figurative or symbolic and not attempt to turn them into historical accounts described in the future tense.
5. Once we have completed our overview consideration of the best-practice guidelines we will return to a consideration of the different Biblical genres and apply these and some other guidelines to these genres.

2. Accept the plain sense meaning

1. Once we understand what is the genre for a verse (pericope/passage) which we are interpreting, what is the next logical step?
 - 1.1. Accept the plain sense meaning of the text within its genre.
2. What does it mean to accept the plain sense meaning of a text? It means, for example:
 - 2.1. If a passage is historical narrative, then we are to understand the account to be relaying information about what occurred in space-time history. What are examples?

When a historical narrative states that:

 - 2.1.1. A dead person came back to life (2 Ki 13.21)
 - 2.1.2. The sun stood still (the earth paused in its rotation (Josh 10.13)
 - 2.1.3. Jesus fed 5,000+ individuals by multiplying the loaves and fishes (Mt 14.13-21)

we are to accept these as statements of historical fact with eyewitness evidence of their having occurred.
 - 2.2. If a passage is poetry, then we are to understand the use of metaphors and similes as speaking figuratively. For example, when Psalm 114.4 says, “The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.” we are not to think that mountains and hills began to run around the land of Israel. Rather, we are to understand the imagery as speaking metaphorically about the nations’ fear over the approach of God’s people, Israel, as they marched out of Egypt (Josh 2.8-11).
 - 2.3. If a passage is a parable, then we are to determine the *primary* lesson and its application, and not to project a spiritual meaning or temporal entity onto *every* detail in the parable.
 - 2.4. If a passage is a proverb, we are to understand the general rule taught by the proverb and not make the proverb state an absolute truth. For example, a proverb states, “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.” (Prov 10.3) From this proverb, we are to understand that in general God protects and provides for his people (Mt 6.25-34) and sends calamity to those who rebel against him. Even so, there will be true believers who will suffer from a lack of temporal resources and unbelievers who will be filled with the ‘fat of the land’ (Lk 16.19-23).
 - 2.5. If a passage is apocalyptic then we must accept it as using figurative and symbolic language to describe (temporal or spiritual) events, and not expect to see the events occurring as described in physical terms. For example, Revelation 8.7 states, ‘The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.’

How are we to understand such a statement?

 - 2.5.1. Interpretations which have been offered include the following:
 - 2.5.1.1. A judgement on heresies in the Church, with the judgement falling on a third of the clergy (‘earth’) and laity (‘grass’); with the trees representing people of high rank (either in government or the church hierarchy).
 - 2.5.1.2. A hail (icy coldness) in men’s souls toward spiritual matters and a fire of superstitious passions mingled with a fanaticism resulting in blood. This could be a description of a heretical movement in the Church or of Islam.
 - 2.5.1.3. Years of burning drought, erratic weather, and accompanying famine that afflicted the central and eastern parts of the Mediterranean in the 1st century (63-68 AD).
 - 2.5.1.4. The invasion of the western portion (a ‘third’) of the Roman Empire by Alaric, king of the Goths (a ‘hailstorm’ from the north), at the end of the fourth century.

- 2.5.1.5. A figurative illustration of the fire of false devotion (e.g., of Islamic jihad) and the hailstorm of hatred against Christians, issuing in bloodshed.
 - 2.5.1.6. The wars of the Roman emperors, Trajan and Hadrian; or World War I, that incorporated a portion (a 'third') of the nations of the earth.
 - 2.5.1.7. A pending ecological catastrophe (e.g., a nuclear bomb delivered from the sky on an ICBM) that will affect a major portion of the earth, and that will occur shortly before Christ returns.
 - 2.5.2. It is best to take our guidance for how to interpret this verse from how Peter understood and applied the prophecy of Joel, which he quoted on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.19). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Peter tells us that the prophecy of Joel, which speaks of "wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke" (Joel 2.30), was not referring to physical phenomena in the sky but of a spiritual revolution wrought by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the judgement in Revelation 8.7 is probably not referring to a chemical fire that will burn up parts of the earth. Rather it is likely speaking in metaphorical terms about a general temporal judgement against God's enemies, which may include war, famine, and economic collapse.
3. What are examples showing that Jesus accepted the plain sense of historical narrative passages in the OT?
 - 3.1. The creation of Adam and Eve (Mk 10.6-9).
 - 3.2. Noah's building an ark before the Flood (Mt 24.38-39).
 - 3.3. Jonah being confined in the belly of a large fish (Mt 12.39-40).
 - 3.4. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt 10.15; Lk 17.28-29).
 4. What are examples which show that the NT writers accepted the Genesis account—in its plain sense, as historical narrative—that speaks of the creation of the earth and its inhabitants and the introduction of sin into the world?
 - By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb 11.3)
 - For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4.6)
 - For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Tim 2.13-15)
 - The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, (Acts 17.24-26)
 - And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ..." (Acts 4.24)
3. Determine the meaning for the original audience
 1. We believe, based on the word of God thorough Paul, that all of the Bible has timeless relevance and application for everyone—believer and unbeliever (2 Tim 3.16-17). However, that does not mean that the Bible was not written to a specific audience. For example, Deuteronomy was given to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan, Hebrews was written to the scattered Jews in the 1st century, and Revelation was addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor in the early seventh decade of the 1st century.

2. Secondly, we believe that every verse and portion of the Bible has one *meaning*—that is, what the Holy Spirit intended to communicate through human authors. However, this does not mean that a verse or passage cannot have more than one *application*, depending on different cultural and social contexts and situations. An example is the case law that required the Jews to put fences around their roofs (Dt 22.8). This was required to provide for the safety of people who walked on and worked on the flat roofs (Josh 2.8; Judges 3.20; 1 Sam 9.25-26; Dan 4.29). An application of this requirement is for us to erect fences around swimming pools and construction sites to protect the lives of children and passersby.
3. So, questions we need to ask of a verse or passage, are:
 - 3.1. Who was the first primary audience?
 - 3.2. What did the Holy Spirit wish to communicate to them?
4. Why is it important to ask these questions?
 - 4.1. So that we don't read into the text an interpretation which is not intended by the Holy Spirit.
 - 4.2. A clear instance of reading into the text is found with many (most) of the ways Revelation is interpreted. For example, a claim that a 20th or 21st century world-leader is directly portrayed in a vision which John saw is simply absurd since that would have had no meaning for the churches in Asia Minor 2,000 years ago. Whereas understanding the reference to be speaking about someone like Nero or Titus would have had direct relevance for the original audience.
5. Determining the meaning of a text for the original audience has relevance not just for Bible interpretation.
 - 5.1. For example, it is sometimes the case that readers of a legal document such as a contract or will must ask, what did the author intend to say to his readers.
 - 5.2. Likewise, there is debate among jurists about how to read constitutional documents and how to understand the original intent of what was written.
 - 5.2.1. Different ways of reading a constitution have been given labels such as:
 - 5.2.1.1. Originalism (the intent of the authors),
 - 5.2.1.2. Textualism (what the text says, regardless of the original intent),
 - 5.2.1.3. Pragmatism (a consideration of the interpretive consequences), and
 - 5.2.1.4. *Stare decisis* (bringing new meaning to the document through judicial decisions).
 - 5.3. This consideration has been applied to questions about how to read the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. For example, does the statement, "in the space of six days" mean that the authors meant six 24-hour days? And, does the statement, "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" in religious worship mean only Psalms and excludes mere-human compositions?

4. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture

1. The Bible was not delivered to mankind at one time, as a single complete publication. It includes accounts that were recorded before the Flood (Gen 1-6) and other parts that were recorded during the patriarchal period (Genesis 7-50 and Job). From about 1500 BC until about 400 BC the remainder of the OT was delivered from the time of Moses until into the time of the Persian Empire. Then God's revelation through his written word went silent until the arrival of Jesus. The NT was written in about a 25-year period from about 40 AD until about 65 AD. Thus, God's written revelation was delivered during a period of over 4,000 years. At least 40 people wrote parts of the Bible during these four millennia. Yet, the Bible is a cohesive whole, with a consistent message.
2. What does the fact that God delivered the Bible progressively teach us?
 - 2.1. God did not communicate everything in a single instance. At each point in his communication he gave the information which mankind needed at that time.
 - 2.2. We cannot obtain a full understanding of God's word to mankind if we read or study only a single

- (small) portion of the Bible We need to consider all that the Bible says about a particular topic.
- 2.3. Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture (Acts 17.11; 2 Tim 2.15; 1 Pt 1.10-12). For this reason, we should always compare Scripture with Scripture when trying to determine the meaning of a passage (e.g., Mt 4.6 with Dt 6.16).
 3. Since verses and passages are composed from words, it is important that we understand how the particular words are being used.
 - 3.1. Some words appear only once (or rarely) in the Bible. In some instances, these are words that are coined by the writers—Paul does this sometimes, e.g., with ‘overflowed’ (ὑπερεπλέονασεν) in 1 Timothy 1.14. In other instances, translators (and commentators) are required to do additional study into the usage of the word in contemporary extra-Biblical writings or in the Septuagint translation of the OT, to determine the meaning of the word. An example of the latter is the word ‘arsenokoitai’ (ἀρσενικοῖται) used in 1 Corinthians 6.9 and in 1 Timothy 1.10 as part of the phrase, “men who practice homosexuality”.
 - 3.2. The best way to determine how a writer uses a particular word is to consider how he uses the word elsewhere in his writings.
 - 3.3. Another way to determine how a word is used in a particular context is to use a concordance which provides insight into the different ways the word is translated.
 4. Some words can be translated with different meanings depending on their context.²² What are examples?
 - 4.1. The word ‘all’ (ἅ, > 3,000X; πᾶς, πάντες, > 1,200X) can mean ‘every instance without exception’ or ‘every instance within a class’—for example:
 - 4.1.1. “All men are liars” (Ps 116.11; ESV. ‘All mankind are liars’) does not include Jesus even though he is a man, and does not exclude women even though they are not men.
 - 4.1.2. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Cor 15.22). In each case the ‘all’ speaks of the class represented by the covenant mediators. In the first instance all mankind represented by Adam; and in the second, all mankind represented by Christ.
 - 4.2. The Greek words ‘allos’ (ἄλλος) and ‘heteros’ (ἕτερος) can both be translated as ‘another’ in English. They can be treated as synonyms (1 Cor 12.9) or can be translated in a way which indicates ‘another of the same type’ (Heb 4.8) or another of a different type (1 Cor 15.39). We have to depend on translations to make the distinction.
 - 4.3. There are two Greek words (καινός and νέος) which are generally translated as ‘new’ into English. They can be understood as:
 - 4.3.1. Interchangeable synonyms (Lk 5.37-39),
 - 4.3.2. Speaking of ‘new in form’ (Mt 9.17 [N]; Mt 26.29 [K]; Jn 13.34 [K]; Jn 19.41 [K]; 1 Cor 5.7 [N]; Col 3.10 [N]; 1 John 2.7-8 [K])
 - 4.3.3. Referring to ‘of a new in type’ (Mt 13.52 [K]; Mk 1.27 [K]; Mk 16.17 [K]; Acts 17.19, 21 [K]; Rom 7.6 [K]; Rev 2.17 [K]; Rev 3.12 [K]; Rev 21.1, 2, 5 [K]).
 Some people claim that ‘new song’ (Rev 5.9; Rev 14.3) must be understood as ‘new in kind’ (which it may; Ps 33.3; Ps 144.9) rather than as ‘new in form’ or ‘with a new spirit’ (Ps 40.3; Ps 96.1; Ps 149.1)
 - 4.4. Common conjunctions, ‘and’ and ‘but’ (an alternate translation of ‘and’), can have nuanced meanings in different contexts.
 - Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within

²² This consideration anticipates the next section on interpreting a text within its context.

and on the back, sealed with seven seals. (Rev 5.1).

The ‘then’ at the beginning of the sentence is ‘and’ (καὶ) in the Greek.

- Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals (Rev 6.1).
The ‘now’ at the beginning of the sentence is ‘and’ in the Greek.
- but you are dead (Rev 3.1).
The ‘but’ is ‘and’ in the Greek.
- When he opened (Rev 6.5).
The ‘and’ in the Greek has been dropped.

4.5. The articles (‘the’, ‘a’, ‘an’), and the negation (‘not’) need to be considered in their context. A classic example is the mistranslation of John 1.1 in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ translation. They add the article ‘a’ before the second occurrence of the word ‘God’. They contend that the lack of an article in the Greek means that the indefinite article (‘a’) must be added in English. However, they are selective and inconsistent—there are over 250 other instances in the NT where the Greek word for ‘God’ (θεός) does not have an article, and the JW’s translation does not insert the article ‘a’ in vast majority of these instances, including in John 1.6, 12, and 13, which conclusively demonstrates that the absence of an article does not require the insertion of ‘a’.

4.6. Prepositions (e.g., ‘of’, ‘in’, ‘into’, ‘on’, ‘by’, ‘with’, ‘from’, ‘for’ [also a conjunction]) can also be translated with a spectrum of nuanced meanings.²³ For example:

4.6.1. The translation of Hosea 11.12 is a clear example of how the translation of a preposition can present interpretive challenges.

4.6.1.1. “and is faithful to the Holy One” (ESV)

4.6.1.2. “even against the faithful Holy One (NIV)”

4.6.1.3. “Even against the Holy One who is faithful” (NASB)

4.6.1.4. “Even with the Holy One who is faithful. (NKJV)”

4.6.1.5. “and is faithful with the saints” (KJV)

4.6.1.6. עַם-קְדוֹשִׁים נֶאֱמָר

The preposition is translated as ‘to’, ‘with’ and ‘against’. In addition, the word referring to the object of the preposition is translated as ‘holy one’ and ‘saints’. The noun, in the Hebrew is a plural. Thus, the KJV understood it to be a reference to ‘holy ones’—i.e., ‘saints’, whereas the modern translations have understood it to be reference to God, using the ‘im’ ending as a plural of majesty, as in ‘Elohim’. We would have to consider the immediate context of the verse in Hosea to determine which translation of the preposition makes the most sense.

4.6.2. The translations (ESV, NIV, NASB, NKJV, KJV) consistently translate the Greek ‘in’ (ἐν) as ‘with’ in Matthew 3.11—“He will baptize you *with* the Holy Spirit and fire”.

4.6.3. All of the translations (ESV, NIV, NASB, NKJV, KJV) translate the preposition ‘in’ (ἐν) as ‘by’ in “For by him all things were created” (Col 1.16). The ESV adds a footnote. This translation is consistent with other passages in the Bible (Jn 1.3 ‘through’; Heb 1.2 ‘through’).

4.6.4. “the peace of God” (Phil 4.7) could be understood as ‘peace with God’ or ‘peace from God’, or possibly both.

4.6.5. The Greek ‘from’, in Ephesians 2.9, has been translated as ‘a result of’ (ESV/NASB), ‘by’ (NIV), and ‘of’ (NKJV/KJV).

4.6.6. Romans 16.7 has various interpretations of the ‘in’ (ἐν). It is translated as “‘to’ the apostles” (ESV), “‘among’ the apostles” (NIV/NASB/NKJV/KJV)

4.6.7. In Hebrews 13.20, the ESV translates the “‘in’ (ἐν) the blood” as ‘by’. The rest translate it as ‘through’. In Romans 5.12, the ‘through’ is also translated as ‘by’ (KJV).

4.6.8. In Luke 12.10, the ‘into’ (εἰς) is translated as ‘against’ in all the translations.

²³ [The exegesis and translation of prepositional phrases in the Greek New Testament: a semantic role analysis \(sil.org\)](http://www.sil.org)

- 4.7. The précis for a book on NT prepositions, states, “Prepositions are important in the exegesis of the Greek New Testament, but they are at the same time very slippery words because they can have so many nuances.”²⁴ Thus, the examples we have considered illustrate why it is important that we not make an interpretation rest on the translation of a single word or on a single translation version, when that word can have nuanced shades of meaning.
5. What are examples which show why it is important to take into account the contents of the entire Bible when we consider any topic addressed by the Bible?
- 5.1. The OT provides hints about the trinitarian nature of God and about the resurrection of mankind at the end of time. The NT is required to fill out our understanding.
- 5.2. Isaiah’s condemnation of Judah’s seeking Egypt’s help (Isa 31.1) was given in the context of God’s explicit command that his people were not to seek help from Egypt (Dt 17.16).
- 5.3. The fulfilment of some of the prophecies about the Messiah only make sense when we see how Jesus or the Apostles interpreted them—for example, Matthew 11.14; Matthew 17.10-13; and Luke 1.17 speak of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of the ‘Elijah’ of prophecy (Mal 4.5); and Matthew 2.15 indicates that the return of Jesus with his parents from Egypt is a fulfillment of Hosea 11.1.
- 5.4. Many interpreters support universalism, which posits that the death of Jesus paid the debt of sin for all people, whether or not they believe in Jesus and repent of their sins.
- 5.4.1. They point to verses which make statements such as:
- For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (Jn 3.17).
 - For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor 15.22).
 - who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim 2.6).
 - He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 Jn 2.2).
- 5.4.2. They choose to ignore, or they dismiss, other passages which indicate that salvation is dependent upon repentance of sin and belief in Jesus (Jn 3.16), and that not all people are saved (Mt 25.46; 2 Thess 2.10; Rev 16.9-10; Rev 22.15). We must explain this apparent discrepancy by observing that the writers of the NT are indicating that Jesus died not only for Jews but for people from every nation—i.e., the whole world and all the ethnic groups of mankind.
- 5.5. Jesus provides most of the information about Hell found in the Bible. What he teaches indicates that Hell is an everlasting place of physical torment—not as some claim, a pagan mythological interpolation into the Bible. If we do not take into account his teaching, we can come to faulty views about the destiny of the unrepentant wicked after death, such as:
- 5.5.1. A period in purgatory followed, eventually, by universal redemption of all mankind.
- 5.5.2. Outright universalism.
- 5.5.3. Annihilationism, which posits that God could not be so cruel as to punish forever the wicked.
- 5.5.4. Hell is living in this life, and the ministry of Jesus was to rescue people from the hell of this life.

²⁴ Harris, Murray J., [Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis](#)

- 5.6. Paul deals with the gifts of the Spirit in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians. To take a single verse from 1 Corinthians (e.g., 1 Cor 14.39, “do not forbid speaking in tongues”) to defend a practice, without taking into account other passages can lead to a faulty interpretation and application.
- 5.7. To gain a full understanding of Paul’s instruction about women remaining silent in the churches (1 Cor 14.33b-35) we should also consider his statements in 1 Timothy 2.11-15.
- 5.8. We need to understand Revelation in the context of what Daniel (Dan 2; Dan 7-8; Dan 9.20-27; Dan 10-12), Jesus (Mt 24-25), and Paul (1 Thess 4.13-5.3; 2 Thess 2.1–12) tell us elsewhere.
6. What may be the result when we do not compare Scripture with Scripture?
 - 6.1. Cults and heresies are often founded upon erroneous interpretations of the Bible—the proponents of the erroneous interpretation often use the statement in a single verse to create a new doctrine and ignore the rest of the Bible’s teaching on the topic.
 - 6.2. A single verse does not make a theology.
 - 6.3. Examples of one-verse theology:
 - 6.3.1. The Mormon’s practice of “baptism for the dead” is based on 1 Corinthians 15.29.
 - 6.3.2. Snake handling churches (cults) justify their practices from Mark 16.18.
7. What can we do to help us avoid the danger of misunderstanding a verse or passage and introducing or accepting a false doctrine?
 - 7.1. Read and study the whole Bible. A good practice is to read through the Bible once a year, to use different translations, and to periodically use a version that presents the text in a chronological format.
 - 7.2. Study systematic Biblical theology. There are good surveys available that do not require a person to be studying for a diploma in theology to understand them.
 - 7.3. Read good (the best) commentaries on the passage being considered.
5. Interpret a text within its context
 1. It has been said that a “text without a context is a pretext.”²⁵ What does this mean?
 - 1.1. That a text can be interpreted to mean something different from the author’s original intention or can be interpreted to mean what we want it to mean. Both approaches are wrong.
 - 1.2. To properly interpret a verse or pericope it must be understood within the context of its surrounding text—paragraph, chapter, book, and the whole Bible. Each book of the Bible has a primary purpose and key theme(s). Likewise, chapters and sections of chapters generally focus on a particular topic or small range of topics.
 - 1.3. We must remember that the overriding context of the Bible is God’s plan for redeeming the elect from mankind. Therefore, the primary purpose of the Bible is to reveal man’s lostness in sin and his need for a redeemer—the Anointed One, the Messiah/Christ. This begins explicitly in Genesis 3.15 with the announcement, in the midst of the curse on Eve’s sin, that a descendent of Eve would conquer Satan.
 2. What are examples of what to look for to ensure that we are properly interpreting a verse (etc.) within its context?
 - 2.1. *Repeated words or phrases.* For example, “And there was evening and there was morning” and “it was good” in Genesis 1.

²⁵ This [statement](#) is found as early as 1912.

2.2. *Parallelism*. Parallelism is used to create memorable sayings; for example, ‘stupid is as stupid does’ [anaphora], ‘today a reader, tomorrow a leader’ [antithetical], ‘where there is smoke, there is fire’, and ‘Where now? Who now? When now?’ [epistrophe]. What are examples of Biblical parallelism?

- He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps 1.3-4). [Antithetical parallelism.]
- for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1.6). [Antithetical parallelism.]
- As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. (Ps 42.1). [Simile in parallelism.]
- In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. (Prov 12.28). [Synonymous parallelism.]
- Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Mt 5.17). [Antithetical Step parallelism.]
- Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Mt 7.7-8). [Synonymous parallelism.]
- So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (Mt 7.17-18). [Antithetical parallelism (in each verse) and synonymous parallelism (across the verses).]
- Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. (Mt 10.40). [Step parallelism.]
- But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Lk 6.27-28). [Synonymous parallelism.]
- One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. (Lk 16.10). [Antithetical parallelism.]

2.3. *An immediate explanation*. For example,

2.3.1. A translation such as where ‘Immanuel’ is explained to mean “God with us.” (Mt 1.23); ‘Talitha cumi’ means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” (Mk 5.41); or ‘Messiah’ means ‘Christ’. (Jn 1.41).

2.3.2. Jesus explained the meaning of some of his parables (e.g., Mt 13.36-43; Mt 15.15-20).

3. What are examples of how to interpret a text within its context?

3.1. The meaning of the word ‘day’ in Genesis 1 is defined by the use of the ordinal ‘2nd, 3rd, etc. (compare, Numbers 7.12-83; Numbers 29.12-38) and the repetition of the phrase “And there was evening and there was morning”. Then, in Exodus 20, we have a further definition of the word ‘day’ in Genesis 1:

- For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. (Ex 20.11).

Thus, within the immediate context, and broader context, we must understand the word ‘day’ to mean a natural day—what we refer to as a ‘24-hour day’.

3.2. Ecclesiastes is written from an earthly or worldly perspective on human endeavours as indicated by the phrase “under the sun”, repeated 28 times, beginning in Ecclesiastes 1.3. This establishes an interpretive context for the 31 uses of the word ‘vanity’, and three uses of ‘vain’ in the text and

as exhibited in worldly affairs.

- 3.3. In Romans 11, Paul uses the word 'Israel' in two senses—the natural seed of Jacob and the spiritual seed of Abraham. Elsewhere in Romans he states, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” (Rom 9.6). In Galatians 6.16 he refers to the Church as Israel. Thus, when we interpret Romans 11.26, “in this way all Israel will be saved”, we need to establish which ‘Israel’ he is speaking of—ethnic Jews or the elect saved-ones. Based on the broader context of the rest of Scripture (e.g., Mt 21.19, 43; Mt 23.38; Lk 13.9; Acts 18.6; 1 Thess 2.14-16), we understand that God does not now deal with ethnic Jews in a collective way, as he did in the OT, but deals with each one as an unsaved person who can repent and believe. Thus, Paul is referring to elect Israel in Romans 11.26 which now includes ethnic Jews and Gentiles grafted in, and not to a tiny portion of ethnic Jews (from over the past 2,000-year period) which will be alive in the last generation of mankind before Christ returns.
4. What are examples of taking a verse out of its context and misinterpreting it?
 - 4.1. “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt 7.1) is not speaking of applying discernment but of being hypocritically critical about others.
 - 4.2. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Mt 18.20) is often used to encourage a small group assembled for a prayer meeting on an evening Sabbath service. However, the context is speaking of the exercise of Church discipline based on the presence of two or three witnesses (Dt 17.6; Dt 19.15; Mt 18.16).
 - 4.3. Mormons use 1 Corinthians 8.5b, ‘as indeed there are many “gods”’, to support their doctrine of polytheism.
 - 4.4. Philippians 4.13, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” can be found pasted on sports lockers and printed on inspirational posters as a promise of temporal power given to Christians, instead of being understood as faith enduring trials associated with the advancement of the Gospel.

6. Avoid allegorical interpretations

1. What is allegory?
 - 1.1. It is the representation of an abstract idea (e.g., kindness, love, mercy, grace) with instances of persons, figures, or events. Allegory is used to teach a moral lesson or express a polemic against a popular idea, concept, or doctrine.
 - 1.2. What are classic examples of allegorical literary works?
 - 1.2.1. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a figurative account of the Christian life.
 - 1.2.2. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a satirical social and political critique of 18th century British life—e.g., of George I and the Whigs and conflicts between High church and Low Church.
 - 1.2.3. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a critique of mankind's obsessive search for meaning.
 - 1.2.4. Mary Mapes Dodge's *The Little Red Hen*, intended to teach children the importance of hard work and personal initiative. Revisions have been used to illustrate different political viewpoints.
 - 1.2.5. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a satirical critique of socialism.
 - 1.3. Political cartoons often encapsulate critiques similar to those expressed in literary allegory.
2. The use of allegorical interpretations of the Bible appeared early in the Church.
 - 2.1. It appears to have been introduced by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century.
 - 2.2. This technique is illustrated by Clement's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10.30-37). Clement applied meaning to details in the parable—for example, he saw Adam's sin in

the man who fell among the thieves and Jesus as the Samaritan who saved the fallen man.²⁶

2.3. Origen is reputed to have suggested that there are three levels of interpretation of Biblical texts—a plain-sense meaning, a moral meaning, and a spiritual meaning—analogueous to the Greek concept of body, mind, and spirit.²⁷ He added more detail to the interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable, suggesting that Jerusalem was paradise; Jericho was the world; the inn the Church; and the promise made by the Samaritan to return, the promise of Jesus' second coming.

2.4. Augustine applied this interpretive method at times.

2.5. A contemporary of Augustine, John Cassian (360 - c. 435) added a fourth level of meaning—a heavenly meaning. His interpretive model became standard for scholars, including Thomas Aquinas, during the Middle Ages, which applied the following doggerel:

The letter teaches events
Allegory what you should believe
Tropology what you should do
Anagogy where you should aim.

2.6. Luther continued to apply the medieval approach to the parables.

2.7. John Calvin is the first known theologian to say that the parable of the Good Samaritan is not a story about Jesus. He states:

- The allegory which is here contrived by the advocates of free will is too absurd to deserve refutation. According to them, under the figure of a wounded man is described the condition of Adam after the fall; from which they infer that the power of acting well was not wholly extinguished in him; because he is said to be only *half-dead*. As if it had been the design of Christ, in this passage, to speak of the corruption of human nature, and to inquire whether the wound which Satan inflicted on Adam were deadly or curable; nay, as if he had not plainly, and without a figure, declared ... As little plausibility belongs to another allegory, which, however, has been so highly satisfactory, that it has been admitted by almost universal consent, as if it had been a revelation from heaven. This *Samaritan* they imagine to be Christ, because he is our guardian; and they tell us that *wine was poured*, along with *oil*, into the wound, because Christ cures us by repentance and by a promise of grace. They have contrived a third subtlety, that Christ does not immediately restore health, but sends us to the Church, as *an innkeeper*, to be gradually cured. I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ.²⁸

3. What is the primary problem with interpretating texts—Biblical or extrabiblical—in an allegorical manner?

3.1. If the author of the text has not provided an explanation of the allegory, interpretations can be subjective, based on the interpreter's worldview, presuppositions, or biases.

3.2. One writer illustrates the subjective and fanciful nature of allegorical interpretation with examples:²⁹

- Jacob's wife Leah represents the Jews, while his other wife, Rachel, represents the church,

²⁶ Roukema, Riemer. "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity", *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Feb., 2004), pp. 56-74; www.jstor.org/stable/1584537

²⁷ Gilmore, A. (2006). Allegory. In *A Concise Dictionary of Bible Origins and Interpretation* (p. 7). London; New York: T&T Clark.

²⁸ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 3, pp. 62–63). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

²⁹ Campbell, Charlie H. *Hermeneutics 101 - Some Rules and Guidelines for Interpreting the Bible*; alwaysbeready.com/hermeneutics-rules-and-guidelines

- and Jacob represents Jesus who serves both (Genesis 29)
 - As Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands, it was an Old Testament picture of Christ on the cross
 - The twelve stones taken from the Jordan River represent the 12 apostles
 - The field in the book of Ruth is really a reference to the Bible. Ruth represents students. The reapers in the field represent teachers
 - The Red Sea symbolizes the atoning blood of Christ
 - The five kings who attacked Gibeon in Joshua chapter 10 represent the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.
- 3.3. Interpretations which 'spiritualize' a text and, for example, deny the historicity of an account or miracle cause havoc with a proper understanding of the Bible.
4. Where does Paul apply allegory to the interpretation of the OT?
- 4.1. 1 Corinthians 10.1-5 could be considered to be allegorical:
- ¹For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Cor 10.1-5)
- 4.2. In Galatians 4.22-26, Paul interprets the historical figures Hagar and Sarah allegorically and applies Hagar to the old covenant, Mt. Sinai and the Law, and the earthly Jerusalem; but Sarah to the new covenant and the heavenly Jerusalem (the Church).
- 4.2.1. The Greek word used in verse 24 (ἀλληγορούμενα) is the word from which we get the English word allegory. It is translated as 'allegorically' in the ESV, NASB, and KJV ('allegory'); 'figuratively' in the NIV; and 'symbolic' in the NKJV.
- 4.2.2. This form of allegorical interpretation is rare in the NT.
5. How should we respond if someone claims that since Paul used an allegorical interpretation it is proper for us to do the same thing.
- 5.1. Paul wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.20), so his interpretation was based on revelation. Modern interpreters are not Apostles and are not given direct revelation on the level of an Apostle.
6. Some people claim that parables are allegories.
- 6.1. However, what makes Paul's use of an allegorical interpretation different than the parables of Jesus?
- 6.1.1. Paul uses historical persons to represent theological concepts. In contrast, parables appear generally³⁰ to use fictional characters and events to express theological and spiritual concepts.
- 6.2. We are likely not required to understand most of or all of the parables to be speaking of actual personages who performed real actions. For example, some parables appear to be illustrations and not a report of actual events, such as:
- 6.2.1. The property owner who planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants and went into another country (Mt 21.33-46).
- 6.2.2. The return of the prodigal son (Lk 15.11-32).
- 6.2.3. The seed being sown in different types of soil (Mt 13.3b-9, 18-23).
7. At times, commentators, preachers, and group-study leaders can drift into applying texts for their modern audience in ways that are close to being allegorical. It is important therefore that they focus on

³⁰ There is debate about whether some of the parables speak of real people and recount actual events. We will consider this in more detail later.

the main message and purpose of a text and consider how to apply that message to their audience with contemporary relevance.

7. Interpret figures of speech correctly

1. What is a figure of speech?

1.1. Rather than start with a technical definition, we can illustrate figures of speech with examples. What are examples of figures of speech, used within North American English colloquialism or in our English Bible translations?

1.1.1. “I have a million things to do today!” is an example of hyperbole.

1.1.2. “His heart is hard as a stone,” (Job 41.24) is a metaphor.

1.1.3. “Easier said than done” is a common idiom in English.

1.1.4. “Go the extra mile” is an idiom drawn from the Bible (Mt 5.41).

1.1.5. “She’s between jobs” is a euphemism meaning “she’s unemployed”.

1.1.6. “Pro-choice” is a euphemism meaning, “pro abortion” or “pro murder”.

1.1.7. “The more you try to impress people, the less impressed they’ll be.” is an example of paradox that is true.

1.1.8. “The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know.” is another example of a true paradox.

1.1.9. Puns:

1.1.9.1. “I gave away dead batteries... free of charge!”

1.1.9.2. “I read a book on levitation... I couldn’t put it down.”

1.1.9.3. “What is a shotgun wedding? A case of wife or death.”

1.1.9.4. “A hangover is the wrath of grapes.”

1.1.10. “Parting is such sweet sorrow” is an oxymoron from Shakespeare’s classic, *Romeo and Juliet*.

1.1.11. Jesus said, when speaking of the elements he distributed during the meal in the upper room before his crucifixion, “this is my body” and “this is my blood”—which we understand to be a metaphor and to mean that the bread and fruit of the vine are symbols of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood on the cross.

2. There are a number of types of figures of speech used in the Bible which are picturesque and memorable, but they use language in a plain sense. We won’t consider these in detail in this study. Some of these figures of speech are:

2.1. Alliteration – Each sentence or stanza starts with the same letter of the alphabet; Psalm 119 and Lamentations are examples in Hebrew.

2.2. Anaphora – Repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several successive verses, or clauses; ‘blessed’ in Matthew 5.3-11

2.3. Antithesis – Contrasting ideas are presented in a verse or stanza (Mt 5.21-22; Rom 6.23).

2.4. Chiasmus – A means of structuring ideas in a X format like ABB’A’ (Gen 9.6; Mt 23.12; Mk 8.35; Jn 4.23-24; 1 Pt 1.23-25).

2.5. Hendiadys – Two words are connected with a conjunction rather than with an adjectival form (Lk 1.17; 1 Tim 1.17).

2.6. Irony – A surprising and apparent coincidence. For example, in Esther 5.12 Haman thought his invitation to Esther’s banquet was his crowning distinction, but instead it would be his consummate destruction; Haman thought he would be honored, instead he had to honour his enemy (Est 6.6-11); Haman built a gallows on which to hang Mordechai, instead he met his own death on it (Est 5.14; Est 7.9-10).

2.7. Onomatopoeia – Words that imitate the sound they are expressing (Prov 1.7; Heb: זָזַז, ‘buzz’ swift movement like vibration of the wings of an insect).

- 2.8. Oxymorons – A combination of two terms in a way which appears to be contradictory. They are rare in the Bible if they appear at all. Possible examples are ‘gloom as noonday’ (Isa 58.10), and ‘weakness is stronger’ (1 Cor 1.25). However, these examples may be more like paradoxes than true oxymorons since there are intervening words and the two opposing terms are not adjacent as in, ‘original copy’, ‘virtual reality’, ‘old news’, and ‘jumbo shrimp’.
 - 2.9. Paradiastole – The repetition of disjunctive words in a list (Rom 8.38-39).
 - 2.10. Polysyndeton – The repetition of words (often conjunctions) in close succession (Isa 6.3; Isa 40.1; Jn 1.51; Acts 1.8; 1 Thess 5.23).
3. Every language uses figures of speech. At times it is difficult to transfer them via word-for-word translation from one language to another. The same applies in Bible translation.
 4. In general, good Bible translations deal with the challenges associated with understanding figures of speech, for example translating idioms into reasonable equivalents in English. However, some of the figures of speech are more challenging to interpret and care must be taken to derive the meaning as intended by the Holy Spirit and the human author. In some instances, it may be necessary to consult commentaries or systematic theologies to gain a fuller insight into what is being communicated. Let’s consider types of figures of speech which at times cause translation or interpretive difficulties.

Idioms and puns

1. Idioms and puns (word plays on sounds or an idea) are sometimes not easy to carry through the translation process from Greek or Hebrew into English (or another target language). Generally, we are dependent on translations to derive the meaning of the idioms.
2. What are examples of Biblical idioms or puns?
 - 2.1. Which we understand with no translation of the idea (some because they have been absorbed into our linguistic culture):
 - 2.1.1. Genesis 4.1: ‘knew’ → ‘had sexual relations’ [this is also a euphemism]; see also ‘I know not a man’ (Lk 1.34; NKJV/KJV) → ‘I am a virgin’ (ESV/NIV/NASB)
 - 2.1.2. Genesis 2.17: ‘seed’ → ‘descendants’.
 - 2.1.3. Genesis 31.35: ‘way of women’ → ‘menstrual cycle’ [this is also a euphemism].
 - 2.1.4. Joshua 8.17; Judges 4.16: ‘not a man was left’ → ‘no one was left.’.
 - 2.1.5. Jonah 3.2: ‘great city’ → ‘large city’,
 - 2.1.6. Job 19.20: ‘skin of teeth’ → ‘barely’.
 - 2.1.7. Ecclesiastes 1.9: ‘nothing new under the sun’.
 - 2.1.8. Matthew 20.9: ‘eleventh hour’.
 - 2.2. Which we understand with minimal translation of the idea:
 - 2.2.1. Job 9.18: ‘return my breath’ → ‘get/catch my breath’.
 - 2.2.2. Proverbs 16.18: ‘before breaking, exaltation’ → ‘Pride goes before destruction’.
 - 2.2.3. Matthew 10.27: ‘hear in the ear’ → ‘hear whispered’.
 - 2.2.4. Luke 16.22: ‘Abraham’s bosom’ → ‘Abraham’s side’.
 - 2.3. Which are not obvious in our English translations and have undergone an idea translation in the ESV:
 - 2.3.1. Deuteronomy 1.17: ‘regard face’ → ‘show partiality’ or ‘be partial’.
 - 2.3.2. Deuteronomy 10.17, a similar but less obvious example, ‘he lifts faces’ → ‘he is partial’.
 - 2.3.3. Deuteronomy 11.10: ‘caused to drink water by/with feet’ → ‘irrigated’.
 - 2.3.4. Deuteronomy 20.8: ‘melting heart’ → ‘fainthearted’.
 - 2.3.5. Judges 3.24: ‘covering his feet’ → ‘relieving himself’ [this is also a euphemism, see below].
 - 2.3.6. 1 Samuel 25.22: ‘one urinating on a wall’ → ‘one male’.
 - 2.3.7. Isaiah 13.10: the Hebrew word for ‘constellations’ is also the Hebrew word for ‘foolish’.

2.3.8. Micah 1.10: 'Beth-le-aphrah' is 'house of dust' and is contrasted with 'roll in dust'.

2.3.9. Matthew 1.18: 'having in belly' → 'to be with child'

2.3.10. 2 Thess 3.12: 'eat their own bread' → 'earn their own living'.

3. Since we are dependent on translators to address idioms during the translation process, we should compare translations, and if we are doing a detailed study consult reliable commentaries for guidance as to the meaning of idioms.

Euphemisms

1. A euphemism is an indirect way of referring to something that otherwise could be considered blunt or even harsh or offensive. Some of the euphemisms used in the Bible are obvious and do not need to be explained. Others might require that we consult multiple translations or obtain additional information (e.g., from historical or linguistics studies) to fully understand the nuances of the euphemisms. Euphemisms used in the Bible (and Bible translations) include the following:
 - 1.1. "Put your hand under my thigh"; 'grasp my testicles' (Gen 24.2). We obtain English words such as 'testator', 'testify', and 'testament' from the Latin root '*testis*' ('testicle').
 - 1.2. "cover his feet"; 'relieve himself' or 'use the toilet' (1 Sam 24.3).
 - 1.3. "I am about to go the way of all the earth" (1 Ki 2.2); 'die'.
 - 1.4. "hair of the feet" (Isa 7.20, ESV/KJV) "hair of your legs" (NIV/NASB/NKJV); 'hair of the genitals'
 - 1.5. "open wide your legs" (Ezk 16.25, Heb) "spread your legs/feet" (NASB/KJV); "offering yourself" (ESV/NKJV) "offering your body" (NIV)
 - 1.6. "members" and "issue" (Ezk 23.20); "flesh" and "issue" (Heb/NASB/NKJV/KJV); "genitals" and "emission" (NIV).
 - 1.7. "breathed his last" (Mk 15.37); 'died'.
 - 1.8. "unclean things" (Isa 30.22, ESV/NKJV); "impure thing" (NASB); "menstrual cloths" (NIV/KJV); from נִיָּז; "menstruous impurity" (Lev 15.33; Lev 20.18).
2. Since we are dependent on translators to address euphemisms during the translation process, we should compare translations, and if we are doing a detailed study consult reliable commentaries for guidance as to the meaning of the euphemistic phrases.

Metaphors

1. Metaphors are used frequently in the Bible, particularly in the poetic books such as the Psalms. A metaphor is a word or phrase where one thing is used to refer to a different thing.
 - 1.1. A *simile* is a type of metaphor which uses 'like' or 'as'. Similes are less likely to be misunderstood because of the use of the comparatives. For example, "It is as hot as an oven in here!"
 - 1.2. A *synecdoche* is a form of metaphor in which a part is used to represent the whole. The expression, "'I need a headcount by morning," uses "head" to represent a person.
 - 1.3. A *metonymy* is also a form of metaphor in which a word is used as a substitute for something else. A common example is when the media refers to the 'White house'—they mean the US President and his administration.
2. What are examples of Biblical metaphors?
 - 2.1. "and the sword shall not go through your land" (Lev 26.6) contains a metonymy in which 'sword' stands in the place of 'war'.
 - 2.2. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news" (Isa 52.7) uses 'feet' as a synecdoche for 'person'.

- 2.3. “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa 53.6) is a simile.
- 2.4. Mountains and hills singing and trees clapping hands (Isa 55.12) is a metaphor.
- 2.5. God’s word is “like a fire” (Jer 23.29) is a simile.
- 2.6. ‘Bread’ is often used as a synecdoche for food (Ezk 16.19; Mt 4.4; Mt 6.11).
- 2.7. “You are the salt of the earth” (Mt 5.13) is a metaphor.
- 2.8. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 16.19) contains two metonymies—‘keys’ is a substitute for authority, and ‘Kingdom of heaven’ is a metonymy for ‘kingdom of God’ or ‘kingdom of Christ’.
- 2.9. “They have Moses and the Prophets” (Lk 16.29) is a metonymy which means they had the *writings* of Moses and the Prophets not the men physically present with them.
- 2.10. “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3.17) uses ‘heart’ as a form of a synecdoche meaning in your whole person/being.

3. How can metaphors present interpretation challenges?

- 3.1. Likely, the most common challenge for making a proper interpretation is applying the metaphor to actual spatial-temporal entities. For example, when Jesus said that we should be lights or salt in the world he was speaking figuratively and not telling us that we are to become lightbulbs or candles, or sodium-chloride.
- 3.2. A classic historic example of a misinterpretation of a figure of speech is when Martin Luther challenged Ulrich Zwingli in the ‘Great Controversy’ at the Marburg Colloquy, held at Marburg Castle in Hesse, Germany (October 1-4, 1529). A key issue under consideration was whether Jesus is *physically* present in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Luther is reported to have said,
 - I do not ask how Christ can be God and man, and how his natures could be united. For God is able to act far beyond our imagination. To the Word of God one must yield. It is up to you to prove that the body of Christ is not there when Christ himself says, ‘This is my body.’ I do not want to hear what reason says. I completely reject carnal or geometrical arguments, as for example, that a large body could not fill a small space. God is above and beyond all mathematics, and his words are to be adored and observed with awe. God, however, commands: ‘Take, eat; this is my body’. I request, therefore, a valid proof from Holy Writ that these words do not mean what they say.³¹

Luther is reported to have then written the words “This is my body” (*hoc est corpus meum*) on a table using chalk. He insisted that he would not budge from the *plain words* of Scripture. We, in the Reformed churches and other Evangelical Protestants who are not Lutherans, understand the words of Jesus to be figurative and that the elements of the Lord’s Supper represent his sacrificed body. It has been suggested that if John Calvin had been present at the Colloquy (a valid counterfactual), he could have brought the two parties together since he insisted on the *spiritual* presence of Jesus with those who partake of the elements.
- 3.3. Much of the imagery in the visions in Revelation is to be understood figuratively. However, many people today attempt to impose physical elements into the account. For example, some suggest that when the second trumpet was blown and John says he saw, “hail and fire mixed with blood: (Rev 8.7), “something like a great mountain, burning with fire” (Rev 8.8), and “living creatures in the sea died” (Rev 8.9) we are to understand that there will be physical events in the future, in which actual hail and fire mixed with blood will fall upon the earth, a large stone (e.g., a meteorite) will land in the ocean, and many springs will be polluted (e.g., with radiation). People who hold to this form of interpretation of the visions in Revelation say that if we don’t understand them as

³¹ Sasse, Herman. *This is My Body* (Adelaide, South Australia: Openbook Publishers, 1977), 186-287.

describing actual physical events, we are using an allegorical approach which leads to nothing but arbitrary guesswork. However, their interpretive approach is filled with arbitrary guesswork. We will consider an alternate (symbolic-typical) approach when we deal with how to interpret the Apocalyptic Biblical genre.

4. How can we address the possibility of our misinterpreting a metaphor?
 - 4.1. Consult reliable commentaries for guidance about the meaning of the metaphor.
 - 4.2. Also, having a better understanding of the full spectrum of Biblical doctrine, will help us to interpret and apply metaphors properly. To obtain a better understanding of biblical doctrine, we need to be consistent in our reading of the entire Bible and my want to read good systematic theology texts.

Paradoxes (and apparent contradictions)

1. There are no contradictions in the Bible.
 - 1.1. Thus, even though the Bible was transmitted through human authors over a 4,000-year period, its message and content are entirely consistent. The Holy Spirit does not contradict himself.
 - 1.2. So, when we find 'contradictions' or 'inconsistencies' we need to preface them with 'apparent'. There are always reasonable, logical, and valid means of explaining the variation.
2. How are we to understand the following sample statements which appear to be self-contradictory, or which appear to contradict another statement in the Bible, but nonetheless are true?
 - Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Prov 26.4-5).
 - We are told not to answer a fool but also to answer a fool. The immediate juxtaposition of what appears to be contradictory statements encourages us to find a proper interpretation. In the first instance, we are not to assume or agree that the fool's position is correct and thus encourage his folly. In the second instance, we are to show the fool the logical consequences of his folly (e.g., through a *reductio ad absurdum* argument) lest he be puffed up in pride.
 - For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12.10).
 - How can Paul say that when he is weak, then he is strong? When we are weak by worldly standards but depending on Christ, we are strong in ways which the world knows nothing about, because we have:
 - Endurance – We are able to endure great hardships for the sake of Christ.
 - Confidence – We have a sincere belief that God does all things well and will make everything right in the end.
 - Perseverance – Jesus is going to bring us through the hardships of this life and through the valley of the shadow of death.
 - Hope – We will be with the Lord forever.
 - Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4.10).
 - True humility comes from knowing our place before God as creatures and acknowledging that we cannot save ourselves and must depend on the work Jesus did on our behalf. When we have this true humility, then we are part of the royal family in the Kingdom of God (Mt 25.34; 1 Pt 2.9) who will be given great rewards (1 Cor 3.14; 2 Tim 4.8).
 - Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Mt 10.39).
 - Jesus is contrasting two forms of finding and losing. On the one side is finding 'life' by the

world's means (e.g., power, prosperity, pleasures) which results in a loss of everlasting life in the glory of heaven. On the other side is finding true life, which is everlasting, by renouncing the pleasures of sin and this world (Heb 11.25) for the sake of Christ and obedience to his commandments (Jn 14.15).

- Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Mt 11.29-30). with, For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5.1).
 - Jesus tells us to take his yoke upon ourselves, but Paul says that we are not to submit to a yoke of slavery. The 'yoke' Jesus speaks of is his law—the Ten Commandments—which we *desire* to obey once we have been saved. The 'yoke' Paul speaks of is twofold: 1) an attempt to earn salvation through obedience to the law of God and the traditions of men, and 2) the guilt associated with our inability to keep the law. Jesus tells us twice that what men think is bad is in fact good. The yoke of the law is a *much* lighter burden than attempts to save ourselves and the associated guilt of sin. Think of a very large beach ball placed on your back. It has some weight; but it is mostly air, and you can easily carry it. But while it is on your back no one can place a packsack containing rocks on your shoulders. This is how the weight of the law works. As long as we are carrying it faithfully, through obedience and the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we cannot be weighed down by doubts, guilt, and the consequences of sin.
- For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Rom 3.28).
- You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2.24).
 - The role of faith and works in salvation has been debated for centuries and we must be careful not to fall into the traps such as:
 - antinomianism and Gnosticism ('it doesn't matter what you do, as long as you believe'),
 - faith-plus-works is how we are saved,
 - we can earn our salvation by works, or
 - that salvation was different in the OT than it is in the NT.
 Luther had difficulty with this apparent contradiction and questioned the canonicity of the book of James. But we do not need to throw out James. We can reconcile Paul and James. Theologians have provided good explanations for the different emphases in Paul and James and the subordinate order of justification (e.g., Calvin in the *Institutes*; 3.12, and in his commentary on Psalm 106). We will *not* address this apparent contradiction in this study.
- Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ... But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. (Mt 2.13-15, 19-23).
- And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by

the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” ... And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. (Lk 2.21-24, 39-40)

- It is claimed that the difference between Matthew and Luke presents a contradiction.
- What is the issue?
 - Matthew tells us that shortly after his birth, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt and lived there until the death of Herod and then went to live in Nazareth.
 - Since Mary and Joseph fulfilled the ceremonial law in detail, they presented themselves with Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem on the 40th day after his birth. Then they went to live in Nazareth.
- How can we resolve this apparent contradiction?
 - Do not assume the timelines presented in popular recounting of the birth narratives are correct.
 - Do not assume that a silence—each Gospel writer includes events that the other did not—means that there is a contradiction. The ‘silences’ of Scripture are not to be read as declarative statements (see below, *Do not ‘read between the lines’*).
 - Understand what a synthesis of the two accounts can tell us. A possible outline of rapidly unfolding events surrounding the death of Herod, the birth of Jesus, and the early infancy of Jesus, could be as follows:
 - The Magi visited Herod prior to his death to determine where the Christ was to be born (Mt 2.1, 2) and then they went to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus (Mt 2.11) a few days after his birth. Then they went back to their homeland by a different route (Mt 2.12).
 - Jesus was probably circumcised in Bethlehem on the 8th day after his birth (Lk 2.21).
 - After his circumcision, Jesus was taken to Egypt by Joseph and Mary (Mt 2.13-14). It probably took them about 10³² days to reach Egypt. They would have travelled slowly given Mary’s postpartum condition, and because she was nursing baby Jesus. They may have been in Egypt a day or two before the angel announced to them that Herod had died. Thus, 12 days could have elapsed from the time they had left Bethlehem.
 - As Joseph and Mary were travelling to Egypt Herod was waiting for the Magi to return. It is possible that it was a week or two after the birth of Jesus that Herod realized that the Magi were not going to return (Mt 2.16), and he issued the command to have the infants in Bethlehem slaughtered. Herod had infants up to two years old slaughtered to include the time from when the Magi had first seen the star (Mt 2.7, 16). The star first appeared some time before Jesus was to be born, not on the night of his birth, so that the Magi had time to travel to Judea and arrive in Jerusalem before his birth, and in Bethlehem around the time of his birth. Herod probably also allowed additional time to ensure that the massacre of the infants would be certain to include the baby Jesus.

³² We do not know how far into Egypt they went. Donkeys move at a walking pace of a little over 7 kms/hr. So they could have travelled 45kms in six hours; taking time to rest, they could have comfortably covered 45kms in 8-10 hours. If they travelled 45 kms/day, they would have covered 450kms in 10 days, which would have put them past Suez and well into the Nile delta. However, they probably rested on the Sabbath. Also they may have travelled only 300kms. Regardless, it would have been very feasible to walk from Bethlehem to parts of Egypt in 10 days.

- After Herod died (Mt 2.15), a few days after the slaughter of the infants, Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth (Mt 2.19-23). Then, on the 40th day after his birth, Jesus was presented in Jerusalem at the temple (Lk 2.22-38), where Mary completed her time of purification, according to the Law of Moses (Lev 12.2-4). After Jesus was presented at the temple, his parents returned to Nazareth (Lk 2.39).
 - In the genealogy of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, the name Cainan is included (Lk 3.36; note that it also appears in Lk 3.37). However, that name does not appear in the genealogies in Genesis 11 (Gen 11.12-13) or in 1 Chronicles (1 Chron 1.17-18, 24). This apparent inconsistency has encouraged some critics of the belief that we can use the Genesis genealogies, along with key date markers elsewhere in the Bible, to calculate an approximate date for the creation of the universe. They argue that this extra name in Luke 3.36-37 indicates that the Genesis genealogies are not intended to be understood as giving an actual father-son' list of ancestors from Adam to Abraham. We will consider this example of an apparent inconsistency as one of our interpretive case studies at the end of this study.
3. How can we address the possibility of our misunderstanding a paradox or an apparent contradictions?
 - 3.1. We likely need consult reliable commentaries for guidance as to the meaning of the two statements which appear to be contradictory.
 - 3.2. Also, having a better understanding of the full spectrum of Biblical doctrine and narrative will help us to address paradoxes and apparent contradictions.

Proverbial statements

1. What are examples of Biblical proverbs, that if understood as presenting absolute guidance, present us with challenges?
 - Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. (Prov 3.9-10).
 - If you tithe regularly, you will become rich. *However*, some regular tithers are not rich and even poor—such as the widow (Lk 21.1-4).
 - A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. (Prov 10.4).
 - If you are lazy, you will be poor but if you work diligently, you will become rich. *However*, not every diligent person is rich.
 - The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. (Prov 10.3).
 - If you are a good person, you will never go hungry but if you are a bad person, you will never have your desires met. *However*, there are true believers who go to bed hungry and even die of malnutrition and starvation.
 - Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good. (Prov 13.21).
 - A person who is a sinner will fall into disaster, but a good person receives good things. *However*, there are many evil people who never face disasters during their lives.
 - Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Prov 22.6).
 - If you train a child properly, he will never go bad. *However*, some children, no matter how

careful their parents were in training them, end up committing grievous sins and crimes.

- Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth, or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. (Prov 22.16).
 - Evil people who rob from the poor will themselves become poor. *However*, there are many evil people who have defrauded others, who end their lives loaded with wealth.
 - Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (Mt 26.52).
 - Anyone who uses weapons against his neighbour will perish by his own weapon. *However*, if this were absolute, then every person who ever fought in a war or used weapons in a police tactical team would have died from similar weapons.
 - For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Mt 6.21).
 - A rich person will covet more or be a miser. *However*, there are some rich people who are true believers and are generous toward others.
2. How are we to understand these proverbs since each one can be challenged with an ‘however’ which seems to invalidate them?
- 2.1. They each state a *general* truth, but a truth that cannot be applied in every instance.
- 2.2. These proverbial statements can often also be ‘contradicted’ by other statements in the Bible. For example, some proverbs indicate that the righteous will prosper, but other statements in the Bible indicate that the righteous will suffer, and the way of the wicked will prosper (Job 12.6; Job 21.7, 13; Ps 73.3; Jer 12.1). We need to apply the teachings of Biblical proverbs with care.
3. Are there Biblical proverbs which could be true in every instance?
- One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. (Lk 16.10).
 - This seems to be universally applicable. If you can trust a person in small things, you can likely trust him in big things. *However*, a person may be dissembling to gain your confidence so that he can pull off a big ‘score’.
 - For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Lk 14.11).
 - This one falls into an ambiguous category since many people who exalt themselves in this life are never brought low, and vice versa. *However*, in an ultimate and final sense, God will humble all the haughty and exalt the spiritually humble.
 - Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” (1 Cor 15.33).
 - This seems to be a truism. It is hard to ‘run’ with a bad crowd and not be sucked into their schemes. *However*, some truly godly people have backbones of steel and can be a witness even in the most evil circumstances.
4. Understanding the nature of proverbs—i.e., giving general truths, but ones which cannot necessarily be applied in every situation and to every person—can help us interpret the book of Job. Job’s friends often quoted proverbs to him and attempted to apply them to Job’s situation, for example:
- Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. (Job 4.7-9).
 - But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth and from the hand of the mighty. (Job 5.15).

- If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation. And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great. (Job 8.5-7).
 - In Job's case, the advice of his friends was sound since it was generally true, but the application to Job's situation was mostly invalid since he was not suffering as a result of specific sins—as someone has said with respect to the words of Job's friends, “Good medicine, but given to the wrong patient.”
5. What is an example where Jesus provides guidance for how to interpret proverbs which deal with blessings for the righteous and curses for the wicked?
 - As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (Jn 9.1-3).
 - Job's example and Jesus' words about the man born blind teach us not to apply general truths to every particular and personal situation. God has greater purposes behind the dispositions of his providences than we can observe on the surface of events.
 6. How can we address the possibility of our misinterpreting a proverb?
 - 6.1. Remember that proverbs provide general truths about life, not absolute applications to every situation.
 - 6.2. Having a better understanding of the full spectrum of Biblical doctrine will help us to interpret and apply proverbs properly. To obtain a better understanding of biblical doctrine, we need to be consistent in our reading of the entire Bible and my want to read good systematic theology texts.
 - 6.3. Consult reliable commentaries for guidance about the meaning of a proverb.
 - 6.4. Apply the general of a proverb truth where the particulars fit.

Hyperbole

1. Hyperbole is an exaggerated overstatement of a truth or of a command. The purpose of the overstatement is to emphasize a point. It is a legitimate form of communication as long as the person communicating and the person receiving the communication both understand that hyperbole is being used.
2. How can we justify the idea that the use of hyperbole is legitimate?
 - 2.1. Jesus appears to have used hyperbole a number of times (e.g., in the *Sermon on the Mount*) and since he never did anything wrong, the use of hyperbole cannot be wrong if the hearers understand that a statement is hyperbolic.
3. This type of figure of speech, when used in the Bible, is sometimes the most difficult for us to interpret. Why is this?
 - 3.1. When Jesus uses hyperbole, we don't want to think that we are contradicting something which he appears to state plainly with what appears to be an absolute sense.
 - 3.2. We often have to provide an additional explanation to a Biblical teaching so that we can understand it. This can present challenges for people who do not know much of the contexts of the Bible or have only a limited understanding of theology.
 - 3.3. We often need to discern the use of comparative terminology to understand the meaning.
 - 3.4. It requires work to apply logic, such as using a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, to determine how to understand and apply the teaching.
 - 3.5. It is often simpler to take a statement a face-value than to compare Scripture with Scripture to determine its meaning.

4. What are examples of hyperbolic statements used in the Bible, which can cause interpretive challenges?

- You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Mt 23.24).
 - Let's start with a simple one. We know that this is hyperbolic exaggeration since no one can swallow a camel. Jesus' point is that the hypocritical Pharisees were focusing on a strict adherence to rituals (e.g., tithing on the herbs grown in their kitchen gardens) but were ignoring the administration of justice and mercy.
- Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Prov 13.24)
 - Again, this is not a difficult statement of understand. It does not necessarily mean that a father is to beat his child with a rod, but it certainly means that a father is to punish his son when necessary, and at times it may be necessary to use corporal punishment such as a spanking.
- For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thess 3.10).
 - This one is a bit more challenging. However, it probably does not mean that if a person refuses to work, we are to let him starve to death. In some cases, we might only give an incorrigible person a bowl of oatmeal to eat and water to drink until he smartens up. Paul's point is that we are to expect people to take responsibility for their own welfare and not to be lazy and depend on others.
- And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' (Mk 9.43-48).
 - With this kind of hyperbole, we can apply a *reductio ad absurdum* analysis to determine how to apply the lesson. Sin is pervasive and constant, even in the lives of believers. Therefore, if we were to apply Jesus' instruction about cutting off hands and tearing out our eyes consistently then we would also have to cut out our tongues since they speak lies and cut off our feet since they lead us in the way of temptation. So, everyone who took seriously this instruction from Jesus would be completely maimed and unable to conduct any work and would be put in a position where he was unable to follow other of God's explicit commands—e.g., to work six days per week (Ex 20.9) and undertake family responsibilities (1 Tim 3.5). So, it is clear that Jesus uses an exaggerated overstatement to drive home the point that we should root out sin—through confession, prayer, and diligent efforts to avoid being led into temptation.
 - There is another component of this instruction which we also need to deal with. Since Jesus is clearly using hyperbole with regard to his instruction about dealing with sin, does this mean that we are also to interpret his statements about Hell—"worm does not die and the fire is not quenched"—as hyperbole?
 - Many interpreters of the Bible do not believe that the Bible, or Jesus specifically, teaches that Hell is an actual place of everlasting physical torture. They could argue that if we interpret one part of this section of Jesus' teaching hyperbolically, then we should do the same with the teaching about Hell.
 - The statements about body mutilation are not supported elsewhere in the Bible and would

clearly, if applied physically, result in our being disobedient to the full spectrum of God's instructions about caring for our bodies, which are a temple of the Holy Spirit.

- But Jesus' statement about the nature of Hell is probably not overstated since statements elsewhere in the Bible indicate that Hell is a real place of enduring torment (Mt 10.28; Mt 13.45, 50; Mt 25.41, 46; Jn 5.28; 2 Pt 2.4; Rev 20.14-15). Thus, Jesus' statement can be understood as not being purely metaphorical.
- "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated." (Mal 1.2-3; see also, Rom 9.13).
 - Taking the words as plainly stated, we can legitimately conclude that God is declaring emphatically that he hated Esau and those whom he represents—the reprobate (Johah 2.8; Ps 31.6; Ps 119.113)—and not just their sin (Ps 26.5). There are possibly other ways to understand this, for example:
 - If God does not love a person (i.e., with a steadfast [תָּוֶךְ], special, electing, and saving love [Rom 5.8; 1 Jn 4.9-10], rather than as the general love of a creator for his creation [Mt 5.45]), then there is a vacuum of special feeling/concern toward that person. We could call that vacuum a 'not-love' or 'loveless' condition. Thus, the verse could theoretically be translated as 'Esau I have not loved'. A synonym for this condition is 'hated', as it is correctly translated.
 - This could be a comparative—i.e., loved more/less. As we will see, in the next example, the application of a comparative may make sense. However, in this instance this could be a 'stretch' interpretation.
- If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14.26).
 - In this instance, we probably have to understand Jesus to be using a *comparative*—love more and love less—rather than absolutely.
 - Jesus would not have taught that a person is to hate in an absolute sense any of his family members. In fact, he declares that we are to love even our enemies and not to hate them (Mt 5.43-44).
 - John makes it clear that we are not to hate anyone (1 Jn 2.9, 11). He says that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 Jn 3.15) and a liar if he says he loves God (1 Jn 4.20). John would not have contradicted Jesus, and Jesus would not have taught something different from what he would later include in Scripture.
- Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. (Ps 139.21-22)
 - When we read and sing in worship verses such as these, we need to put them into the interpretive context of comparing Scripture with Scripture and how we are to understand God's hatred toward the wicked.
 - It is not sufficient to say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." These verses are explicit in calling for hatred of wicked persons, not just their actions, based on God's hatred toward them.
 - However, our interpretive framework must take into consideration Jesus' and John's teaching.
 - A possible way of dealing with this apparent conundrum is to cast the issue into a forensic judicial context. A person who is a murderer deserves to die. From this perspective we must display hatred toward the murderer by having him executed. So, anyone who openly rebels against God is to be hated. But at the same time, we should be displaying love for the murderer by caring for his temporal needs until he is executed and by communicating the

Gospel to him (i.e., even murders can be forgiven if they repent and believe in the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross) and praying that he will be converted and receive eternal life.

- Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Mt 5.42). Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. (Lk 6.30).
 - We can apply a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to these statements. Clearly, if we were to give anything to anyone who asked it of us, we would quickly become destitute and become beggars ourselves.
 - We should notice that this instruction appears to be given in the context of non-retaliation and a love for enemies (Mt 5.38-42; Lk 6.27-31). Christians are to have a generous attitude that shows concern for others (Dt 15.7-10). We are not to demand our rights but to defer to others in humility. We are to display the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5.22-23) and live with the objective of making the fact that Jesus is our Lord real to our associates, neighbours, friends, and family. We must overcome our innate tendency to selfishness, revenge, and personal retaliation.
- Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Mt 7.7-8)
 - It is obvious that Jesus is not teaching that we can ask for absolutely anything and we will receive it. We cannot ask to have our sinful desires satisfied and expect God to hear us. What we ask for, in prayer, must be according to the will of the Father (1 Jn 5.14), sought in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8.26), and requested in the name of Jesus (Jn 16.23).
 - Since this passage does not teach that we can ask for everything, there must be limits. Therefore, we need to determine what is included.
 - From the immediately preceding context, it appears that we are to ask for two things:
 - *Wisdom in judging* – Immediately prior to this teaching about how to ask God for what we need, Jesus has told his hearers how to judge others properly and has warned of the consequences of judging unfairly. It is therefore likely that Jesus is telling us to ask God for wisdom when we make judgments. We need to be like Solomon who understood his need and pleased God when he asked for wisdom (1 Ki 3.9, 10).
 - *Grace to live as Christians* – In the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus teaches his disciples how to live the Christian life. Thus, within the larger context of the *Sermon*, we are to ask God for all the grace that he can provide to us so that we can:
 - Live as those who are poor in spirit, mourn over sin, be meek, and hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc. (Mt 5.3-9).
 - Live as salt and light in the world (Mt 5.13-16).
 - Keep the Law with a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees (Mt 5.17-48).
 - Worship him properly (Matthew chapter 6).
 - This passage is often directed by preachers to those who do not know Jesus as their Saviour. They encourage their hearers to ask, seek, and knock in order to obtain salvation. Although it is absolutely true that sinners are to seek salvation from God (Isa 55.1-7), this passage is not really addressed to unbelievers. It is addressed to those who are already children of God.
- For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." (Mt 17.20) and "If ... I have all faith, so as to remove mountains" (1 Cor 13.2)

- Could a person with an unwavering trust in God and his power command a physical mountain to move, or ask God to move it, and expect that it would happen? Theoretically this is possible, since moving a mountain is a trivial exercise for God.
- At the time Jesus and Paul spoke, sign miracles were used to validate the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. Even if we believe that miracles (e.g., raising the dead, restoring withered limbs, giving sight instantly to someone born blind) continue today, could a person with enough faith move a mountain? Again, theoretically this is possible.
- However, are Jesus and Paul suggesting that we are to *expect* this kind of miracle to happen? We would have to determine what the purpose of such a miracle would be. If it is not a sign miracle (i.e., to validate the divinity of Jesus and the ministry of NT prophets), then what would be the purpose of the miracle? We can dismiss purely selfish reasons such as bringing renown to the person performing the miracle or restoring the health of someone we care for. Probably the only valid reason that could be suggested is to convince a sceptic. Suppose a neighbour has a house that is covered with red brick. He says to you, “I will believe in God, if the bricks turn blue overnight.” Overnight the bricks turn blue. Would he believe in God? It is unlikely, although the Holy Spirit could use this miracle as a means of opening his mind and heart. Rather he will likely say something like, “Isn’t it amazing! There must be an unknown or unexplained astronomical phenomena (e.g., a burst of cosmic rays) that can change the pigment in bricks.” Jesus states that miracles will not convince sceptics (Lk 16.31).
- It is better to understand the words of Jesus and Paul purely as a picturesque way of describing ‘great faith’. It is equivalent to someone saying to a friend, “I will be there in a second.” We know he cannot travel as fast as light and that he means ‘quickly’ or ‘as soon as possible’.
- And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. (James 5.15)
 - The consideration of the previous hyperbolic statements helps to provide an interpretive framework for interpreting James’ statement. Even though it is not hyperbolic, it is likely still not to be understood as an absolute statement.
 - Miraculous healings may still occur. But it is not for elders or a band of prayer-warriors to expect that every sick person will be healed. God has his own purposes for why, when, and how he provides inexplicable healings. Every sick person over whom true prayer is offered is not restored to full health.
 - By applying a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, we know that it is not according to God’s providential governance that every sick person could be healed by praying Christians. If that were in his will, then no one would ever die since we could always pray away his or her illness.
 - Rather, we need to qualify James’ statement with the words, “If the Lord wills.”, as James says earlier (James 4.15). If we don’t qualify James’ statement, we can deceive and disappoint people. They would blame God for not providing the healing that they claim was promised.
- Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. (Mt 5.33-37; see also, James 5.12).
 - This passage has been used by some pietist segments of the Church (e.g., Religious Society

of Friends [Quakers]³³, and strict Amish³⁴ and Mennonites³⁵) as a basis for disavowing oath taking in some situations (e.g., in a courtroom).

- An oath (or vow) is a solemn statement (verbal or written) that a person makes to fulfill a promise that he has given or to abide by the conditions of a covenant or contractual obligation that he has made—for example, marriage vows, a vow to uphold a constitution, or a promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth before a judge. There are various reasons, recounted in the Bible, why persons took oaths, including to:
 - Devote one's self to God (Num 6.2).
 - Dedicate a child to God (1 Sam 1.11).
 - Devote property to God (Gen 28.22).
 - Offer sacrifices (Lev 7.16).
 - Keep a covenant promise (Gen 21.31-32; Gen 26.3; Dt 4.31; Dt 29.12, 14).
 - Confirm allegiance to a king (2 Ki 11.4).
- That it is permissible for Christians (and any person) to take oaths and swear vows is demonstrated by a number of Biblical examples, including:
 - God himself took an oath in his name (Heb 6.16-17) and the writer of Hebrews justifies this action of oath taking.
 - God swore a vow to Abraham (Gen 24.7).
 - Abraham, when sending Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac, had him make a vow (Gen 24.2-4).
 - Ezra and Nehemiah required the Jews to swear oaths in different legal settings (Ezra 10.5; Neh 5.12; Neh 13.25).
 - Jesus did not denounce using God's name in a serious oath. In fact, during his trial, when God's name was invoked and he was essentially placed under an oath, he answered his accusers (Mt 26.63-64).
 - Paul used oaths (Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 1.23; Gal 1.20; 1 Thess 2.5; 1 Thess 5.27).
 - An angel swore an oath (Rev 10.4-7).

Thus, people who argue that it is sinful for Christians to take oaths are accusing God, Jesus, the Prophets, the Apostles, and holy angels of sinning.

- The problem Jesus was addressing is that people had (and have) trivialised oath taking and he was pointing out the need for oath taking to be performed only in a serious context. When people trivialise swearing oaths by drawing a distinction between the types of oaths they make, they take the name of God in vain. The examples Jesus uses indicate that they were also committing perjury by rationalizing which oaths they felt that they were obligated to keep and which they could ignore. Jesus teaches that:
 - To use the name(s) of God in casual language is blasphemy and is anathema to God since it breaks the third commandment.
 - To use anything in creation as a substitute for swearing an oath other than God's name, is idolatry, and a breach of the second commandment.
 - To use oaths or vows in casual conversation is sinful. For example, if someone says, "I swear I love chocolate ice cream the most."
 - Other than when we are required to take a vow, our word should be our bond, and we should perform what we have said we would do.

³³ [bryanhodge.net/2021/08/24/denominations-the-religious-society-of-friends/y of Friends | Bryan Hodge](http://bryanhodge.net/2021/08/24/denominations-the-religious-society-of-friends/y%20of%20Friends%20|%20Bryan%20Hodge)

³⁴ www.gotquestions.org/Amish-beliefs.html

³⁵ conversationswithafriend.blogspot.com/2008/01/mennonites-and-oath-swearing.html

- Guiding principles for oath taking, include the following:
 1. We are to use only God's name when taking oaths (Dt 6.13; Dt 10.20; Isa 65.16; 2 Cor 1.23). Therefore, oath taking is an act of religious worship.
 2. We are forbidden from taking an oath in the name of idols (Josh 23.7; Jer 5.7; Jer 44.25-26) or any created thing (Mt 5.34-36). For example, we should not say: "I give you my word as an Englishman ..." or "I swear as a knight of the realm ..." or "I swear on my mother's grave ...". Each of these instances of oath taking is a form of idolatry as each makes a created thing equivalent to God.
 3. We are not to take a false oath (Lev 19.12; Zech 8.17) or swear one rashly (Lev 5.4).
 4. Anything that we swear to must be true—for example, if we are recounting events of a traffic accident before a judge, our statements must be factual (Ps 24.4; Jer 4.2).
 5. No one should make a vow to perform something that is sinful—either directly forbidden by God's word or detrimental to our fulfilling our moral obligations (Num 30.5, 8, 12, 13; Mk 6.26; Acts 23.12-14).
 6. For oaths to be valid, they must be voluntary, uncoerced, and out of a good conscience (Gen 28.20-22; Dt 23.21-23; 1 Sam 1.11; Ps 132.2-5); but once made, they are binding (Num 30.2; Ps 76.11).
 7. It is a sin to refuse to take a lawful oath, imposed by lawful authority (Dt 6.13; Mt 26.63-64).
 8. Oath taking is to be reserved for use in serious matters at serious times (e.g., business contracts, courts of law, vows of office).
 9. An oath is to be understood in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, mental reservations, or rationalizations (Mt 5.37).
 10. The fulfillment of a vow is obligatory. When we make a commitment, to any person (believer or unbeliever), to do something, we are obligated to fulfill our promise (Dt 23.21; Ps 50.14; Ps 66.13-14; Ps 76.11) and not to break it (Ezk 17.16-19), even if the fulfillment of the oath results in negative or adverse consequences to ourselves (Josh 9.18-19; Ps 15.4).
- A person who agrees to tell the truth in a court setting or to uphold the obligations of his office, but will not swear by God, puts himself (through the supposed veracity of his own words) or a created thing in the place of God and is an idolater.
- Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Mt 10.34-36).
 - When the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they declared that "on earth peace among those with whom he [God] is pleased!" (Lk 2.14). Yet Jesus says that he doesn't bring peace, but conflict.
 - Jesus is not suggesting that in families where there are Christians present there will necessarily be physical battles—i.e., one killing another with a sword. However, this may (and does) happen. For example, in some cases when a person in an Islamic or Hindu family becomes a Christian, the other family members exercise a vendetta and execute the person.
 - Rather, Jesus is stating that in some situations when a person receives Christ as saviour he will be treated as if he never existed. A Christian, regardless of how gentle and loving, will also be viewed as suspect when he speaks against homosexual practices or an adulterous affair in his family. Marriages have been torn apart when one spouse says that a son's or daughter's 'lifestyle' is un-Biblical and the other spouse sides with the child. Christians

who ‘blow the whistle’ against tax fraud or insider trading are blacklisted and become pariahs in their professions. We are to expect this tension, turmoil, and tearing-apart, since truth divides.

5. How can we address the possibility of our misinterpreting hyperbole?
 - 5.1. Avoid the tendency to make hyperbolic statements absolute.
 - 5.2. Consult reliable commentaries for guidance about the meaning of hyperbolic statements.
 - 5.3. Also, having a better understanding of the full spectrum of Biblical doctrine, will help us to interpret and apply hyperbolic statements properly.

Purpose of figures of speech

1. Why are figures of speech employed in the Bible?
 - 1.1. This is a similar question to one which we considered earlier—why did God include different literary genres in the Bible and not just use propositional statements?
 - 1.2. Figures of speech were used by Jesus when he was teaching and are used by the authors of some of the books of the Bible to:
 - 1.2.1. *Engage our minds*. God engages our minds with interesting communication. He is the author of beauty and variety and did not create a dull, bland universe. Likewise, his communication to mankind is stimulating with its variety of genres and forms of communication.
 - 1.2.2. *Emphasize a message*. Figures of speech are used to emphasize a particular point. For example, since Jesus began each of the beatitudes with the word ‘blessed’ no one can misunderstand his desire to provide the meaning of true blessedness.
 - 1.2.3. *Enable memorization*. Figures of speech make instruction more memorable. This was particularly important in a society in which many of the individuals were unable to read and had limited access to manuscripts because they were expensive. We are spoiled today with our access to the global *econosis* (house of knowledge) available in the world-wide-web and we rarely memorize anything since we figure we can look up anything we want to know.
 - 1.2.4. *Encourage method*. God encourages us to approach the study of his word methodically as a systematic whole. The use of (complex) figures of speech reminds us that we should not focus on a single word, verse, or passage without putting everything into the context of the entire Bible.

Round numbers

1. Round numbers are not a figure of speech *per se* but are often used in common speech.
2. What are examples of round numbers used in our cultural context?
 - 2.1. We are told that the circumference of the earth is 40,000kms, whereas at the equator it is 40,075.017kms.
 - 2.2. The estimates of crowds attending political rallies or driving in truck convoys is often reported in round numbers.
 - 2.3. The number of Jews killed during the WW II holocaust is reported in round numbers as an estimated 6,000,000 persons.
3. There are instances of round numbers being used in the Bible. What are examples?
 - 3.1. Isaac reaped a hundredfold from the seeds he had planted (Gen 26.12). This indicates a large increase, not that he counted and found that there was 100 times as many seeds as he had planted. A similar usage is found in other places in the Bible (2 Sam 24.3; Eccl 8.12; Mt 19.29)
 - 3.2. Leviticus 26.8 uses ‘hundred’ and ‘thousand’ as general terms, not as precise counts.

- 3.3. The Levites killed *about* 3,000 sinners (Ex 32.28).
 - 3.4. Joshua assigned *about* 5,000 men to the ambush (Josh 8.12).
 - 3.5. Joab reported the number of men who could fight in Israel to be 800,000 and in Judah, 500,000 (2 Sam 24.9).
 - 3.6. Matthew reports that Jesus fed *about* 5,000 men (Mt 14.21).
 - 3.7. Luke tells us that Jairus' daughter was *about* twelve years old (Lk 8.42).
4. There appears to be only one instance in the Bible where rounding has occurred, and the addition of the specific numbers gives a different total. This is in Numbers 3 (Num 3.22, 28, 34) where the sum of the details ($7,500 + 8,600 + 6,200 = 22,300$) differs from a reported rounded number of 22,000 (Num 3.39).
 - 4.1. This does not provide an interpretive issue since the details are provided.
 - 4.2. In addition, there appears to be a reason for the rounding to the closest 1,000, implied by the following context (Num 3.46-49) where the 22,000 are taken as substitutes for the firstborn of Israel.
 5. In other cases, when detailed counts are provided, they add precisely to the reported total—as in Genesis 5; Numbers 1; Numbers 26; Ezra 2; and Nehemiah 7.
 6. In general, we should interpret numbers as providing precise counts (e.g., Gen 20.16) and not rounded, unless the context indicates otherwise.

8. Be aware that grammar rules may differ

1. We should be aware that grammar rules in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) differ from those applied in English. For example, word order in sentences can be used to emphasize a key idea, and words modifying other words (as with an adverb or adjective) can appear in a different order in different languages. For example:
 - waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, (Titus 2.13).
 - The ESV, NIV, NASB and NKJV translate this expression in the same way. The KJV translation, “the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) can be misunderstood as having Paul identify separate persons. The modifier ‘great’ does not apply only to ‘God’ and the ‘and’ does not separate ‘God’ from ‘Jesus Christ’. Rather the ‘great’ modifies ‘God and saviour or us’, who is Jesus Christ. Paul is clearly stating the Jesus is God. By putting the ‘our’ before ‘great God and Savior’ instead of before ‘Saviour Jesus Christ’, the newer translations more accurately reflect what Paul stated in the Greek.
 - Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Pt 5.6-7).
 - Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. [NIV]
 - Ταπεινώθητε οὖν ὑπὸ τὴν κραταιὰν χεῖρα τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα ὑμᾶς ὑψώσῃ ἐν καιρῷ, πᾶσαν τὴν μέριμναν ὑμῶν ἐπιρίψαντες ἐπ’ αὐτόν, ὅτι αὐτῷ μέλει περὶ ὑμῶν.
 - In this example, the participle ‘casting’ appears later in the sentence in Greek ‘all anxieties of you casting’. The ESV has moved the active participle to the beginning of the subordinate clause. The NIV has gone further and changed the participle into an imperative and started a new sentence with the imperative. This has changed the meaning, since in the

Greek (and ESV) the subordinate clause explains how we are to humble ourselves—by casting our anxieties onto God.

- addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, (Eph 5.19).
- ... λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς
 - In the Greek, the word ‘spiritual’ appears at the end of the clause (in both Eph 5.19 and Col 3.16), after the word ‘odes’. Translations (since the time of Vulgate) have moved it before the word ‘songs’. However, in Greek, when an adjective immediately follows two or more nouns, it can apply to all the preceding nouns. Thus, the word ‘spiritual’ can be understood as a modifier for all three terms. Consider these examples:
 - In Colossians 1.9, in the Greek, the word ‘spiritual’ follows the nouns ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’ but precedes the two words in the English translation.
 - In 2 Thessalonians 2.17, in the Greek, ‘good’ follows the nouns ‘work’ and ‘word’ but precedes the two words in the English translation.
 - The adjective ‘spiritual’ agrees in gender with the noun ‘songs’ only, but when an adjective occurs with more than one noun, it may agree in gender with only the nearest noun.
 - It would best if the English translations moved the adjective ‘spiritual’ before all three words, since:
 - This would be more consistent with the preceding verses which refer to being ‘filled with the spirit’ (Eph 5.18) and ‘word of Christ’ dwelling in us with which we are to teach and admonish one another (Col 3.16). Non-Biblical hymns or songs cannot fill us with the Spirit, and they are not the words of Christ, since they are not the God-breathed word of God (2 Tim 3.16).
 - As a modifier, the word ‘spiritual’ means at least that the ‘songs’ are to be *from* the Holy Spirit. However, Paul is differentiating the ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’ he is commanding the Church to sing from mere human compositions that can also be called ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ or ‘songs’. Paul is insisting that all the ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’ used by the Church are to be the breath of God.

2. These examples reinforce one of our opening assumptions—no translation is perfect. They also illustrate the challenge we have since the majority of readers of the Bible do not know how to read the original languages of the Bible and we are dependent on translations. Thus, it is important that if we wish to interpret the Bible correctly, it is wise to compare reliable translations with one another.

9. Do not read an interpretation into the text

1. What are ways that interpreters ‘read between the lines’ or read an interpretation into (eisegesis) a text rather than reading out of (exegesis) the text?
 - 1.1. They ask, “What does the verse mean to me?” rather than, “What does the verse mean?”
 - 1.1.1. What the text means to any reader or interpreter is irrelevant. A verse’s meaning is that which was intended for it by its author under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
 - 1.1.2. The meaning of the text is not changed by the presence of a reader of the text or by his interpretation of the text. We do not apply the ‘observer effect’ to the interpretation of the Bible as it theoretically can be applied in quantum physics or human psychology.
 - 1.1.3. If the meaning is determined by the presence of the reader, then the meaning is not absolute and therefore it is not true.
 - 1.2. They ask, “What does the verse mean today?” rather than, “What has the verse always meant since

it was written?”

1.2.1. A verse or text cannot mean something today which it did not mean when it was written.

1.2.2. Determining the correct meaning of a text does not preclude the possibility of it having different *applications* in different cultural settings.

1.3. Since they have not previously studied the verse or text, they bring to it interpretations which:

1.3.1. They have heard and are parroting.

1.3.2. Make ‘sense’ in their situational circumstances. This is Satan’s classic temptation technique—”God couldn’t really mean what he says, could he?” (Gen 3.1-4).

1.3.3. Make ‘sense’ in their cultural context, we find with some current beliefs of ‘scientists’—such as that the universe is ~13.8 billion years old and world is ~4.5 billion years old, or that mankind evolved from an ape-like creature.

1.4. They try to find novel or esoteric interpretations.

1.4.1. This could be done for various reason, including wishing to be considered creative or brilliant; or needing to ‘get published’.

1.4.2. Most often a novel interpretation is offered because the reader or interpreter does not like the clear message in the text, or it does not support their theological presuppositions.

1.5. They take the ‘silences’ of Scripture as a declarative. For example, if the Bible doesn’t say or repeat something, then it can be interpreted as prohibiting or permitting something, depending on what view the interpreter wishes to expound [see below for examples].

1.6. They believe that there are hidden, or deeper truths (mysteries) embedded in the Biblical text. The Bible becomes a puzzle or riddle which needs to be ‘solved’. They quote verses such as Proverbs 25.2, “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.” And ignore verses such as, Psalms 119.130, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.” The approach of Bede (673-735 AD), a British monk illustrates the issue:

Bede’s fascination with numbers was such that he always sees in them some symbolism, which is regularly transcribed into the *glossa ordinaria*. Thus in his commentary on John, the six water-jars at the marriage feast of Cana are the six ages of the world. The water-jars hold two or three measures: two because the prophets speak only of Father and Son, three in order to mention the Trinity. The transformation of the water into wine signifies the completion of the law in Christ.³⁶

1.7. They believe that since we find ‘deeper meaning’ in some OT prophetic passages, this implies that every passage must have a deeper meaning. For example, a typical Jew reading “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (Ps 22.18) would not have understood that to be a prophecy of what would happen near the place of a cross, on a Friday in the spring of 33 AD (John 19.23-24). There is a profound difference between a NT writer, under the guidance of the HS, who gives the ‘deeper meaning’ of an OT prophecy than a modern interpreter claiming to have insight into the ‘deeper meaning’ of a passage.

2. What are examples of ‘reading between the lines’ in Bible interpretation?

2.1. It is claimed that since the Bible speaks of four beings around God’s throne (Ezk 1.10-11; Rev 4.6-8), that these represents the four Gospels—with Matthew presenting Jesus as the Lion of the

³⁶ Wansbrough, H. *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation* (p. 69). T&T Clark International; 2010.

tribe of Judah, Mark presenting Jesus as an Ox, Luke as a Man, and John as an Eagle.

2.1.1. The word 'lion' does not appear in any of the Gospels—Jesus is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah in Revelation 5.5. The word 'ox' appears twice in Luke but not in Mark. The word 'vultures' (a better translation than 'eagles') appears in Matthew and Luke, but not in John. Jesus' self designation "Son of Man" appears in all the Gospel accounts.

2.2. A belief held among many today is called the 'Bible Code', which is the idea that there are hidden messages (e.g., by abstracting every n^{th} letter in the text and constructing sentences from the abstract) contained in the Hebrew text which either confirms the authorship of the Bible (e.g., by God or aliens) or provides a prognostication tool.

2.3. Revelation 13.18, states "This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666." Thus, some ask why John would ask us to *calculate* the beast's number if there isn't a hidden message there. Most of those who hold to the idea that John refers to a single individual, conclude that they are to associate the numbers to letters of an alphabet to derive the person's name. Then they attempt to discover the name by mapping letters to numbers to obtain a total of 666. However, mapping 'Nero Caesar' to Greek letters does not sum to 666. So, it has been proposed that the Greek name 'Nero Caesar' should be transliterated into Hebrew, and the letters mapped to numerals, sums to 666 and provides the necessary meaning. However, this makes little sense, since:

2.3.1. The '666' refers to the number of the beast not to a man.

2.3.2. John would not have expected his readers, which would have spoken Greek as their primary or secondary language, to have known the Hebrew or Latin alphabets and how to use the letters of one of these alphabets to conduct the letter-number mapping.

2.3.3. If John had intended his readers to use the Hebrew or Latin system of numeric mapping to letters, he would have guided his readers with words such as, "and his number in Hebrew is 666." (Rev 9.11; Rev 16.16).

2.3.4. Nowhere else in Revelation is a letter-number scheme used.

2.3.5. Choosing the name 'Nero Caesar' happens to sum to 666, when it is spelled a particular way in Hebrew. However, there can be latitude in including vowels and a final 'n' sound (e.g., 'nro' vs 'nron'). And, there is no valid reason to assume that the title 'caesar' must be included.

It seems best to apply a symbolic interpretation, so that the number 666 refers to the beast by a human calculation or measurement (Rev 21.17). John likely uses the numeral 6 to mean incompleteness or falling short of seven, the number of perfection. Thus, the numeral 6 is typical of what is earthly and is associated with the beast, in contrast to the heavenly and divine. The three-fold repetition of the numeral 6 represents the absolute falling short of divine perfection (777).

2.4. The 'silences' of Scripture are applied as if declarative. For example, some people claim that:

2.4.1. The NT doesn't repeat the Sabbath command, therefore it must no longer apply. This claim is a false meme that is often repeated, since in fact the Sabbath command is explicitly reiterated with implied support in the NT (Lk 23.56)³⁷ and the arguments in favour of the standing obligation of the fourth commandment are significant.

2.4.2. The Bible doesn't say 'don't write hymns' for use in worship, therefore it must be okay to do

³⁷ Luke wrote to a Roman Gentile (Theophilus) and he states that the women rested "on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment." Luke uses 'commandment', referring to the Ten Commandments, in only two other places (Lk 1.6; Lk 18.20). If the Sabbath-keeping principle had ended with the death of Jesus, it is unlikely that Luke, writing over 20 years after the events, would have mentioned their 'obedience to the *commandment*'. Instead, he would likely have used the word 'custom', referring to Mosaic ceremonial law practices, as he does elsewhere (Lk 1.9; Lk 2.27; Lk 2.42; Acts 6.14; Acts 15.1; Acts 21.21; Acts 28.17; see also Jn 2.6; Jn 19.40). He would have said something like, 'in conformity with Jewish custom'. Since he used 'commandment', it seems reasonable to conclude that he wished to indicate that the Sabbath continues to apply in the NT era.

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2.4.3. The NT doesn't state that musical instruments are not to be used in NT worship, therefore their use must be okay. This is the 'what is not forbidden, is permitted' argument.

2.4.4. The NT does not mention the presence of infants in family baptisms therefore it must not be right to baptize infants.

Arguments from silence are a logic error which usually hide assumptions and that are used when a person is attempting to defend a viewpoint that requires other approaches, which would require a robust logic to defend.

2.5. Various attempts have been made to introduce different interpretations of Genesis chapter 1, other than that it recounts what happened over a period of six natural days. Examples of these alternate views include [we won't expose the problems with these interpretations at this time]:

2.5.1. *Day-Age*: Each day covered a long time (many thousands, millions, or billions of years) to allow natural evolutionary processes to develop.

2.5.2. *Gaps*: The days themselves were the days of creation, in which God created with bursts of activity. Long gaps exist between the days.

2.5.3. *Expanding/Slowing Time*: Time moved faster/slower in the past. In the first few days many events occurred in a day, giving the appearance of age.

2.5.4. *Literary Framework*: The creation week is a metaphor with the various acts of creation grouped topically.

2.5.5. *Poetry*: The Genesis account is poetry not history.

2.5.6. *Analogical Days*: The days of creation are God's workdays which are only analogous to our workdays. God created everything but we don't know anything about the sequence or duration of the creation events.

2.5.7. *Days of Revelation or Divine Fiat*: God isn't communicating what happened. Rather the account of creation is an account of the sequence in which God *revealed* what he had done.

2.5.8. *Eden-Only*: The creation account deals only with the formation of the Garden of Eden.

2.5.9. *Focus on Palestine/Temple*: The days are speaking figuratively of the formation of Palestine or the temple, from a Hebrew viewpoint, and do not speak of the creation of the world.

Each of these views has been proposed or has gained support in the Church only since naturalistic theories of cosmology, geology, and evolution arose after about 1800 AD. They are all feeble attempts to undermine God's word and conform to the ever-shifting teachings of men. They are all attempts to cling to Biblical authority while denying the plain sense of the Bible's teaching. They all undermine our view of the rest of Scripture. If God's straightforward word about how he created, in six 24-hour days.

2.6. Many in the Church believe in a rapture of believers. They use the following passage (among others) to support their view:

- ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Mt 24.36-44).

- 2.6.1. Jesus says that on the last day there will be a sudden separation of mankind (verses 40 and 41).
 - 2.6.2. There are many who believe that this will happen at a rapture at the *beginning* of a millennium when Christians will be taken from the earth and unbelievers will be left on the earth. Some who believe this have stickers on the bumpers of their cars stating, “In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.” or “After the rapture, give this car to my mother-in-law.”
 - 2.6.3. These people are mistaken. Jesus is not speaking of the beginning of a millennial reign on earth. He is speaking of the end of time. He is speaking of the *end* of his invisible reign over the kingdoms of mankind.
 - 2.6.4. Jesus is speaking of the day on which mankind will be separated into two classes—those who will be taken away for consignment to Hell (Mt 13.40) like those swept away in the Flood (Mt 24.39), and those who will be left behind to be with the Lord (Isa 4.3). He then interjects a warning to his people to keep watch and to be alert. With this injunction he reinforces the fact that the day or the hour when this will happen has been revealed to no one, so that his people will be constantly on guard, waiting expectantly for his return—which could be in the next few seconds, tonight, or at any time in the future. This should engender keen anticipation, keep us from becoming complacent and indifferent, and prevent us from living like the pagans around us.
3. How can we avoid ‘reading between the lines’? We must:
 - 3.1. Trust the authority of the word of God.
 - 3.2. Remember that the Bible was not written for those who are ‘learned’ but for sinners who need to know what to believe about God and what requirements he has for us (Rom 15.4).
 - 3.3. Read what is written, in its plain sense, within its genre while considering obvious uses of figures of speech.
 - 3.4. Follow the example of Jesus, who used what was written to guide his thinking and actions (Mt 4.4, 7, 10).
 - 3.5. Refuse to allow presuppositions to influence the interpretation of Scripture or to silence its voice. Instead, listen to what it says, even if it is contrary to our presuppositions.
 - 3.6. Be humble before God’s word by accepting what it says and letting it correct our false notions.

10. Consider the historical context

1. How should we interpret a verse (passage) in its historical context?
 - 1.1. we must start with information which the Bible provides elsewhere that relates to what we are considering. For example, God tells Noah to take seven pairs of clean animals into the ark (Genesis 7:2). To this point in the narrative, we are not informed what is meant by ‘clean’. Presumably, the pre-Flood patriarchs had been informed of the meaning. We need to turn to Leviticus 11 to gain insight into the meaning of ‘clean’.
 - 1.2. Once we have considered the biblical context, we can expand our context to include ancient cultural information which are not documented in the Bible. We can use Bible dictionaries to help us understand the historical context. It is wise to compare what multiple dictionaries say, as each can have its own theological bias. I keep a number open on my desktop when working on sermons, Sunday School lessons, or articles.³⁸

³⁸ Sample Bible dictionaries:

- Easton, M. G. Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature. Harper & Brothers, 1893.
- Myers, A. C. The Eerdmans Bible dictionary. Eerdmans, 1987.
- Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. Samaritans. In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible. Baker Book House, 1988.
- D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), New Bible dictionary (3rd ed.). InterVarsity Press, 1996.

2. What are examples which demonstrate that knowing the cultural context can help us understand a text?
 - 2.1. In Matthew 1.18 it is stated that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Later, in verse 24, Mary is referred to as Joseph's wife. A betrothal in Bible times was a legally binding contract and was not considered as loose an arrangement as many consider marriage engagements to be today. These contracts required a divorce proceeding to break (Mt 1.19).
 - 2.2. In Mark (Mk 15.25, 33, 34) mention is made of the third, sixth, and ninth hour. If we don't know how time was reckoned in the days of the crucifixion, our faith will not be hindered. However, knowing gives more detail, and we realize that Jesus was hung on the cross at 9:00am. At noon, darkness came over the land, and at 3:00pm Jesus gave up his spirit.
 - 2.3. Mark 8.31 (see, Mt 12.39-40; Mt 27.63; Mk 10.34; Lk 11.29-30; Jn 2.19) says that Jesus taught the disciples that he would be killed and that after three days he would rise again. If we took that verse in a stand-alone manner and accepted that the resurrection occurred on a Sunday (Mk 16.1-2), then we might conclude that Jesus was crucified on a Wednesday. However, Mark tells us later that Jesus was crucified on a Friday (Mk 15.42). So, it is helpful to understand the historical context of the reckoning of days. A portion of a day was counted as a day. The same thing applied to regnal years which counted part of a year as a year.³⁹
 - 2.4. Slavery is a topic that is fraught with complexities because of the treatment of kidnapped Africans (and others) during the colonial period. However, slavery in the Bible can have a different 'complexion'—for example, those who are sold into indentured servitude until they have paid off a debt or those who were taken as spoil during the execution of a just war. Modern translations generally translate the word 'slave' (δοῦλη) in the NT as 'servant' (Lk 1.38) to avoid a misunderstanding which could be created by the use of the term 'slave'.
3. Some modern interpreters start with this guideline, rather than applying it later in their interpretive process. They attempt to use the historical situation of an author as a means of dismissing the relevance of a passage for today or for reinterpreting the passage to say something different from what it has traditionally been understood to say. For example,
 - 3.1. It is claimed by some that the word (רָקִיעַ) translated as 'expanse' (ESV/NIV/NASB) or 'firmament' (NKJV/KJV) means a solid dome. Therefore, the author of Genesis 1 was applying an ancient pagan concept which shows an ignorance of modern celestial mechanics.⁴⁰ However, in Genesis 1.8, God provides a parallel definition of the word, calling it 'heavens', which can refer to the sky, the celestial realm, or heaven.
 - 3.1.1. What are examples of words we use today, which can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context?
 - 3.1.1.1. 'Fortunate' – If we use this word (the ESV uses it in Acts 26.2) we do not mean that we believe in luck ruling our destinies through the goddess Fortuna.
 - 3.1.1.2. 'Evolved' – If we use this word, we may do so as a synonym for 'changed' but this does not mean that we accept the idea that humankind is descended from an ape-like kind.
 - 3.1.1.3. We use the terms 'sunrise' (Num 2.3; Mt 5.45; Lk 1.78) and 'sunset' (Dt 16.6; 1 Ki 22.36) without implying that we accept the Ptolemaic model of the solar system rather than the Copernican model.

• C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.

³⁹ Curtis, E. L., The Old Testament Reckoning of Regnal Years, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 1/2 (1895), pp. 125-130; https://www.jstor.org/stable/3268894?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁴⁰ Holding James Patrick, Is the Raqia' ('Firmament') a Solid Dome? Equivocal Language in the Cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a Response to Paul H. Seely; *Journal of Creation* 13, no 2 (November 1999): 44-51; [/answersingenesis.org/astronomy/cosmology/is-the-raqiya-firmament-a-solid-dome/#12](https://answersingenesis.org/astronomy/cosmology/is-the-raqiya-firmament-a-solid-dome/#12)

- 3.2. Supporters of homosexual practices who claim to be Christians attempt to temper Paul's statement against homosexual practices (1 Cor 6.9) by stating that Paul was condemning male-on-male prostitution (as he would any form of prostitution) and homosexual acts performed as part of an idolatrous religious practice. They then attempt to suggest that Paul is not ruling out 'loving consensual same-sex acts'. However, Paul is echoing OT laws which condemned homosexual acts (Lev 18.22; Lev 20.13; Dt 23.18) whether or not a payment or religious ceremony was involved.
4. What are potential problems if we place too much emphasis on interpreting a text in its historical context?
 - 4.1. We can forget that the Bible is clear, understandable, comprehensible, and perspicuous. We don't need to have an extensive knowledge of ancient history to understand its teachings. Understanding the historical context of verse is not required to provide the information we need to believe in God, the birth, death by crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and how we can glorify God through obedience to his revealed will, summarized in the Ten Commandments.
 - 4.2. We can assume that the historical context is so different from our own that the text no longer applies to us.
 - 4.3. We can focus on understanding the historical context and lose sight of today's relevant application of a text.
5. Conversely, if we ignore a consideration of the historical context, we can impose our current context on a passage and make it read something radically different from what the author intended. For example, many people (especially in the US) are attempting to use the Jubilee release principle (Leviticus chapters 25 and 27) to call for major economic and societal structural changes.
 - 5.1. The jubilee release principle was applied (incorrectly) during the American Civil War era, based on, "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25.10). Due consideration was not given to the full context of the instructions in the law, since the Israelites did not have to release slaves acquired from outside the nation of Israel (Lev 25.44-46). Notwithstanding that misapplication, the colonial slave trade was wicked and rightly abolished.
 - 5.2. More recently, the jubilee release principle has been touted as a solution for a number of the economic challenges faced by society today. For example, some Christians (e.g., [Richard Lowery](#) and [Ronald Sider](#)) have proposed that the command to return to one's own property (Lev 25.10) provides a justification for wealth redistribution. Sider, for example, has said that, "at the heart of God's call for Jubilee is a divine demand for socioeconomic structures that provide all people with the means to produce wealth and thus earn their own way." Others use the jubilee release concept as a call for rich countries to forgive [foreign debt](#). An article in [Forbes](#), suggested that a jubilee release could be a means of kick-starting the economy, by forgiving consumer debt. And, it has been used by advocates of [cancelling student loan debts](#) in the US. However, the application of the jubilee release to debt forgiveness is mistaken since Leviticus 25 says nothing about cancelling debts on borrowed money.

11. Apply the wisdom of the ages

1. For the past 2,000 years Christians have been interpreting the Bible. There have been many dangerous misinterpretations of Scripture, for example:
 - 1.1. *Adoptionism* – Jesus was only a non-divine virtuous man who was adopted as the Son of God by the Spirit descending upon him.
 - 1.2. *Marcionism* – The benevolent God of the Gospel is the true Supreme Being, different and opposed to the malevolent Demiurge or creator god, identified with the Hebrew God of the Old Testament. Marcionism accepted only Paul as the true apostle of Jesus Christ.
 - 1.3. *Gnosticism* – People are divine souls trapped in a material world created by an evil god; the material body/world should be destroyed.

- 1.4. *Docetism* – Jesus’ body was a mere appearance without any true reality.
 - 1.5. *Nestorianism* – Jesus, the man, is not identical with the Son of God but is united with him. The two persons live together vs the orthodox hypostatic union of one person with two natures.
 - 1.6. *Sabellianism* – Also, Modalism and Unitarianism, denies the trinitarian nature of God—i.e., three distinct persons in the one God.
 - 1.7. *Tritheism* – Opposite of Sabellianism—three distinct gods in the godhead.
 - 1.8. *Arianism* – Rejected the divinity of Jesus; Jesus was created by the Father; Jesus is a created god.
 - 1.9. *Pelagianism* – Original sin did not taint human nature; humans have the free will to achieve perfection without divine grace.
 - 1.10. *Antinomianism* – Christians are freed from all obligations of the moral law through grace.
 - 1.11. *Dispensationalism* – Biblical history is divided into dispensations (periods/ages) in which God deals with people through different covenants; opposed to Reformed covenant theology.
 - 1.12. *Kenosis* – Jesus voluntarily gave up his divine attributes (e.g., omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence) while in his incarnate state; he was no longer fully divine as he completed the work of redemption
 - 1.13. *Prosperity Gospel* – Faithfulness to God necessarily results in material prosperity; also called “health-and-wealth gospel”.
 - 1.14. *Federal Vision* – Also called Auburn Avenue Theology. The Old Testament implies corporate election of all Israel, this applies also in the New Testament era. Thus, there is a distinction in election—those whom God intends to save and who will persevere in their faith, and the covenantally elect who are predestined to be followers of Jesus for a time but are predestined to fall away.
 - 1.15. *Open Theism* – If God knew the future absolutely, humans could not have truly free will. Therefore, God does not know everything about the future; the future is not knowable. God knows everything that can be known about what he has made but does not know the future.
2. Early councils, the development of creedal statements, and the writings of theologians (e.g., Athanasius, Augustine, Anslem, Calvin, and Owen) have helped to steer Christian theology and Bible interpretation in an orthodox direction—consider for example the development of theories of the atonement⁴¹ or the development of covenantal theology as a framework for interpreting the Bible. Heresies and false interpretations continue to arise. However, they are often not truly new, but reworkings of old heresies which have been dealt with in the past.
 3. When we encounter difficulties understanding or interpreting a verse or passage, we can utilize commentaries and systematic theology texts, which are consistent with the Bible, the early councils, the creeds, and the long-held views of the best theologians throughout the centuries. For example, we as Reformed Protestants should not be turning to the Scofield Reference Bible to interpret passages in Daniel 9 and 10 or Revelation. Nor should we consult the commentaries of liberals who question the historicity of the Bible. Likewise, we should avoid using writings which have been influenced by (post-) modernism [see the next guideline].
 4. We are to respect the wisdom of those of the past who have given considerable thought to the interpretation of the Bible. But we are not to appeal to the Church Fathers for a *final* interpretation of the Bible. Scripture alone is its own interpreter. When the fathers contradict Scripture, we are to follow the teachings of the Bible. This is a principle that was re-established during the Protestant Reformation. It continues to be a feature distinguishing Protestantism from Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. These traditions accept the interpretation of the fathers even when it contradicts Scripture. Jesus teaches that we must not accept the opinions of the elders over the written word of God (Mt 5.21, 27, 33, 38, 43; Mk 7.8).

⁴¹ Jesus's death was a ransom to the devil, an example, a conqueror's victory, a substitution, a penal substitution.

5. What caveats must we apply when considering how others have interpreted a verse or passage?
 - 5.1. We must avoid the celebrity mentality.
 - 5.1.1. “John Calvin taught ...”, “John MacArthur says ...”. Why?
 - 5.1.1.1. Even the most godly and intelligent commentator or preacher can be mistaken.
 - 5.1.1.2. The believers in Berea were credited with being noble because they examined the Scriptures daily to see if the things being taught by Paul were correct (Acts 17.11).
 - 5.2. We must not take the positions of even the godliest and theologically astute men, as absolute.
 - 5.2.1. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the product of a council, acknowledges this:

All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice; but to be used as a help in both. (WCoF, 31.4)
 - 5.2.2. We have only one *final* authority, the Bible, as the *Confession* states,

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined; and in whose sentence we are to rest; can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (WCoF, 1.10).
 - 5.3. Likewise, we must avoid falling into the consensus trap. How is this displayed at times?
 - 5.3.1. An appeal to the masses: “Most Christians believe ...”.
 - 5.3.2. An appeal to experts: “Most scholars say ...”.
 - 5.3.3. What are possible problems associated with consensus thinking?
 - 5.3.3.1. *Consensus can be wrong*. There are numerous examples, in science and in other domains of knowledge, which demonstrate that majority opinion can be wrong, for example:
 - 5.3.3.1.1. The belief that the sun revolved around the earth.
 - 5.3.3.1.2. The consensus that most ulcers were caused by stress, rather than by the *H. pylori* bacteria.
 - 5.3.3.1.3. A majority of Evangelicals today believe in a premillennial rapture, that it is not right to baptize infants, that it is permissible for Christians to go shopping at the Walmart on a Sunday afternoon, or that it is proper to use musical instruments during worship. Majority opinion does not mean that their beliefs are Biblical.
 - 5.3.3.2. *An argument based on consensus applies faulty logic*. Logicians include the form of argument, based on majority opinion, among the false forms of logic. An appeal to the majority only speaks to what people believe to be true, not what is in fact true.
 - 5.3.3.3. *Consensus can cause harm*. For example:
 - 5.3.3.3.1. Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician working in Vienna in the 1840s, demonstrated that the incidence of puerperal fever (caused by a bacterial infection) in new mothers could be drastically reduced if doctors in obstetrical clinics disinfected their hands with a chlorinated lime solution. His peers refused to believe that their practices had been responsible for many deaths. Joseph Lister, in the late 1860's, finally convinced the medical practice that unsanitary surgical conditions contributed to premature deaths. He instructed surgeons working under his authority to wear clean gloves and wash their hands before and after operations with a carbolic acid solution.
 - 5.3.3.3.2. Faulty theology from the misinterpretations of Scripture that we identified above (e.g., *Antinomianism*, *Dispensationalism*, and *Prosperity Gospel*, *Open Theism*) and others such as salvation based on works can lead people into doubts, guilt, despair, and even to Hell!

12. Watch out for (post-)modernistic interpretations and interpretation methods

The past has no monopoly on the creation of heresies and aberrant interpretations of Scripture. They are like ‘wack-a-mole’—knock down one, and another pops up.

Deep-time, evolution, false science, and myths

1. We are all familiar with the standard translation of Genesis 1.1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”
 - 1.1. However, there are some today who claim that this translation is mistaken, since:
 - 1.1.1. It includes the definite article before ‘beginning’ in English. The claim is that instead, it should read ‘a beginning’ since there is no definite article in the Hebrew.
 - 1.1.2. ‘he created’ should be translated as ‘had made’.
 - 1.2. Then, it is claimed that the Bible is not speaking about *the* beginning but about a second beginning in a universe that had existed for a long time. This argument is advanced with the claim that Genesis 1.2 should be translated as ‘had become formless and empty’ rather than ‘it was formless and empty’.
 - 1.3. This is followed by the claim that we can insert considerable time (millions or billions of years) between Genesis 1.1 and Genesis 1.2 and that there was a pre-cursor to this created realm that was spoiled by Satan’s rebellion and that God had to restore the creation by reforming it, beginning in Genesis 1.3.
2. Other re-interpretations of Genesis 1-11, include:
 - 2.1. The Adam identified in Genesis chapter 1, is not an historical person who was created uniquely on the sixth day of the creation week just as God describes it. Rather, Adam was the first hominoid creature (in a long chain) which was endowed with rationality or is a type for mankind in general. For example, *In Quest of the Historical Adam*, William Lane Craig, a theologian and apologist who teaches at Houston Baptist University and is a research professor at Talbot School of Theology, advocates for a mytho-historical interpretation (recounting real events but in a figurative way) of Adam and Eve, which supports the incorporation of evolutionary theory.⁴² We should be concerned when an atheist and evolutionary biologist, Nathan Lents, writes enthusiastically about Craig’s book.⁴³
 - 2.2. Death was not introduced into the world by Adam’s sin. Animals (including pre-hominoid creatures) were dying for millions of years before Adam arrived on the scene of history.
 - 2.3. There was not a global Flood. The account is either a myth or refers to a local flood in the eastern Mediterranean region.
 - 2.4. The account of the Tower of Babel is a myth.
3. What are common elements underlying these attempts to reinterpret Genesis 1-11?
 - 3.1. They are attempts to synthesize cosmological and biological evolutionary myths with the Biblical account.
 - 3.2. They discount the word of God and accept the beliefs of men as a higher standard than the Bible.
 - 3.3. They are a form of neo-Deism in which God plants the initial seeds of cosmic dust or biological molecules and then steps aside to let things unfold through natural processes. They cannot accept the introduction of miraculous events into the accounts, except at ‘key’ points (e.g., initiating the ‘Big Bang’ or providing the ‘spark of life’).
 - 3.4. They are attempts by the advocates of these positions to appear credible with the sceptical, unbelieving, academic world.

⁴² Reviewed on CMI’s website: [Review of ‘In Quest of the Historical Adam’ by William Lane Craig - creation.com](#)

⁴³ [Skeptic » Reading Room » Mytho-history: The “Evolution” of Adam and Eve](#)

4. These of these interpretations of Genesis 1-11 undermine the Bible and Christianity. They are heresies and should be expunged from the Church. It may seem harsh to call a person like William Lane Craig a heretic, but we need to call it as it is.
 - 4.1. The irony is that heresies are normally considered to be dissenting opinions or doctrines which are at variance with established standard beliefs.
 - 4.2. However, the Church is in such chaos today that aberrant views about Genesis 1-11 are now accepted as main-stream concepts in most Christian academic settings and in many denominations. In contrast, organizations like Creation Ministries and Answers in Genesis are considered to be fringe movements which are out of touch with the latest ‘facts’ of science.⁴⁴

Dispensationalism

1. We cannot enter into a lengthy critique of Dispensationalism at this time. We already considered one false notion propagated by Dispensationalists which has become widely accepted in the Evangelical Church, even among those who are not avowed Dispensationalists—that is the belief that there will be a rapture of believers, and unbelievers will be left behind, before Christ sets up a 1,000-year earthly reign.
2. Let’s consider a few additional widely accepted misinterpretations of Bible passages that illustrate the dangers of this heresy.
 - So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, (Gal 3.24-25).
 - 2.1. The *Scofield Reference Bible* commenting on Galatians 3.24 says, “Before the law the whole world is guilty, and the law is therefore of necessity a ministry of condemnation, death, and the divine curse (Rom. 3:19; 2 Cor. 3:7–9; Gal. 3:10).”⁴⁵
 - 2.1.1. What is a consequence of the Dispensationalist’s view of the law? The law is “of necessity a ministry of condemnation”.
 - 2.1.2. Is this true? To the contrary, if it had been possible for anyone to have kept the law perfectly, he would not have been condemned, he would have lived forever (Neh 9.29).
 - 2.1.3. The law isn’t a “ministry of condemnation”; sin is. Note, however, the SRB includes 2 Corinthians 3.7-9 as a reference, which is likely from where the “ministry of condemnation” was derived. What does Paul mean by ‘ministry of death’?
 - 2.1.3.1. Without God’s law, there can be no sin and we cannot know what sin is. But when we learn God’s law, then we realize that we are sinners (Rom 7.7; 1 Tim 1.9-10) and that we are dead in our sins (Rom 7.9; Col 2.13). God’s law exposes our sin, which leads to condemnation, which leads to death.
 - 2.1.3.2. Further, when we properly understand the requirements of the law, we realize that no mere human can obey the law completely (all laws) or perfectly (even a single law). Thus, we come to understand that we cannot earn our salvation by keeping the law, but only earn our deamination by failing to keep the law (Rom 3.19-20; Gal 3.10).
 - 2.1.3.3. The law demands perfect obedience but gives mankind no strength for obedience nor a means of paying the penalty for disobedience.
 - 2.1.4. The quotation from the SRB goes on state that the believer is no longer under law (misapplying what Paul states elsewhere) and that, “The commandments are used in the distinctively Christian Scriptures as an instruction in righteousness.”

⁴⁴ [The Origins of Young Earth Creationism - YouTube](#) on the *Inspiring Philosophy* (Apologetics, Philosophy, Science) channel.

⁴⁵ Scofield, C. I., ed. (1917). [The Scofield Reference Bible: The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments](#) (p. 1245). Oxford University Press.

- 2.2. Jesus refers to the “abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel” (Mt 24:15; Dan 9:27; Dan 11:31; Dan 12:11). The typical Dispensationalist interpretation of this passage is:
- 2.2.1. ‘We take the futurist view, which sees the abomination of desolation prophecy as still future. In our view, Jesus was referring to the Antichrist who, in the end times, will establish a covenant with Israel for seven years and then break it by doing something similar to what Antiochus Epiphanies did in the temple. The sacrilegious object Jesus called “the abomination of desolation” could be the “image of the beast” that the Antichrist’s right-hand man, the false prophet, will order to be set up and worshiped (Revelation 13:14). Of course, for Matthew 24:15 to be yet future, the temple in Jerusalem will have to be rebuilt before the tribulation begins. Those who are alive during the tribulation should be watchful and recognize that the breaking of the covenant with Israel and the abomination of desolation will herald the beginning of the worst 3½ years in history (see Matthew 24:21). “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36).’⁴⁶ This is an example of extreme eisegesis.
- 2.2.2. In contrast what is a proper understanding of the ‘abomination of desolation’ of which Daniel spoke?
- 2.2.2.1. The sign was given to the disciples so that they could escape the city (Jerusalem) before it was too late. By the time the pagan armies had reached the Temple, the city was destroyed, and its inhabitants slaughtered.
- 2.2.2.2. The historic prophetic context informs us that the abomination referred to by Jesus was predicted by Daniel to cause *desolation* (Dan 9:27; Dan 12:11). A Roman ensign or a pig sacrifice in the Temple may desecrate the Temple’s most holy place but would not cause desolation.
- 2.2.2.3. When we compare Luke’s account (Lk 21:20) with that of Matthew and Mark, we see that the meaning of the term ‘abomination of desolation’ is explained, by Jesus, to be armies surrounding Jerusalem.
- 2.2.2.4. Jesus provided his disciples with an explicit sign of the pending destruction of Jerusalem—a local event that occurred about 2,000 years ago—so that they would know when to leave the city. When the Roman armies began to surround Jerusalem in 70 AD, apparently most Christians heeded the warning sign Jesus had given and fled from the city before the Roman siege-works were set up.
- 2.2.2.5. We are not to interpret this passage, as many do, as a warning for some future generation. When Christ returns, there won’t be any use in believers fleeing to the mountains around Jerusalem. Believers (alive or dead) will immediately be taken up to meet the returning Lord (1 Thess 4:17) to face the final judgement.
- 2.3. Dispensationalists claim that after the rapture, Jesus is going to set up a new Jewish kingdom, based in Jerusalem. The temple will be rebuilt, and animal sacrifices restored. This is nonsense:
- 2.3.1. The destruction of the temple in 70 AD ended the old ceremonial system. There is no longer a need for a physical temple because there are no longer any physical sacrifices, Jesus is the true temple (Jn 2:18-22) as are his people (2 Cor 6:16).
- 2.3.2. Jesus isn’t going to set up his kingdom after a hiatus of 2,000 years. His kingdom is already established—the Church, and the everlasting rule of Jesus.
- 2.3.3. The idea that animal sacrifices will be restored is blasphemous. The once for all sacrifice of Jesus ended forever the need for animal sacrifices (Heb 7:27; Heb 9:12, 26; Heb 10:10).
- 2.3.4. This misinterpretation of Scripture influences the Church’s political views. For example, there is a prevailing attitude in many parts of the Church that modern Jews have a special God-derived right to possess the land between the Gaza strip and the Jordan.

⁴⁶ [What is the abomination of desolation? | GotQuestions.org](http://www.GotQuestions.org)

Theological Liberalism

1. Theological liberalism is an approach to interpreting the Bible that developed out of the 18th century Enlightenment. It became a 19th century phenomenon, primarily in mainline Protestant denominations. However, its legacy has taken hold in many ways in much of the modern Church. For example:
 - 1.1. *Reason over revelation* – The findings of ‘science’ supersede the statements of Scripture. So, if ‘science’ claims that the universe is 13.8B years old, this means that we are to reinterpret the Bible to fit within the ‘scientific’ paradigm. Likewise, miracles should be explained as much as possible with natural phenomena to avoid ‘god of the gaps’ arguments. We don’t need to accept the persons and events described in the Bible as being historical. Rather, we need to discover the underlying truth about God and Jesus.
 - 1.2. *Experience over doctrine* – True religion is not based on Biblical authority but on our cultural experiences. Christianity should be a movement for remaking society in order to remake individuals. Thus, it emphasizes political and economic liberation⁴⁷, social reconstruction, and a social gospel. Jesus set a moral example for us to follow.
 - 1.3. *Personal ethics over Biblical Law* – I decide what is right and wrong and live by the motto: ‘do unto others as you would have them do to you’. It is wrong to declare that someone else’s personal life choices are sinful. Christianity is not a one-size-fits-all standard for human societies. Rather we should focus on the fatherhood of God (or these days, the motherhood of god) and the brotherhood of all mankind. God^{48, 49} needs to be redefined from the historic Christian understanding. Other religions are equally valid attempts to find God.
 - 1.4. *Bible criticism*. – The Bible is just a book with a collection myths and moral platitudes. For example, the Gospels contain only a few nuggets of objective reality;^{50, 51, 52} but much of the account about Jesus was added by zealous disciples to make Jesus appear super-human. We are to reinterpret it within our socio-economic context. Truth is relative and is known only through culturally changing symbols and forms. Thus, theological controversy is a debate about language and not about objective truth.
2. Proponents of liberalism believe that they are making Christianity relevant and credible to the world—but they are emptying churches and destroying souls. They also believe that their approach to Christianity is beneficial for all mankind. Instead, they further Satan’s mission of destroying mankind.

Feminism and cultural sexual ‘norms’

1. One of the children of theological liberalism is theological feminism. The more radical version, “Liberal-Christian feminists” claim that Scripture is not infallible or inerrant, and its authority is limited. The less radical version, “Evangelical feminism”, claims to accept the authority of Scripture, but that it has been interpreted incorrectly for two thousand years. Both forms argue for egalitarianism (gender equality) and specifically for women to have teaching/preaching and leadership (Elders) roles within the Church. Specific claims made by the feminists include:
 - 1.1. The patriarchal framework of the Old and New Testaments is obsolete and wrong.
 - 1.2. Paul’s views about the role of women are steeped in cultural prejudices.
 - 1.3. Bible translations should reflect the modern egalitarian position, by:

⁴⁷ [Liberation theology | Theopedia](#)

⁴⁸ [Process theology | Theopedia](#)

⁴⁹ [Open theism | Theopedia](#)

⁵⁰ [The Quest of the Historical Jesus \(gutenberg.org\)](#)

⁵¹ [Jesus Seminar | Theopedia](#)

⁵² [Liberal Myth of Christian Origins | Theopedia](#)

- 1.3.1. Avoiding referring to God as ‘he’.
- 1.3.2. Using gender-inclusive pronouns.
- 1.3.3. Replacing male terms (‘sons of Israel’, ‘men’, or ‘brothers’) with non-specific terms (‘children of Israel’, ‘people’, or ‘brothers and sisters’).
- 1.4. The attempt to introduce gender-neutral pronouns, and the increasingly common misuse of the plural forms (‘their’, ‘they’, ‘then’), to apply to singular persons should concern us—not because language conventions should not change but because they are a direct attack against the created order.
 - 1.4.1. God declares in Genesis 1.26-27 that he created man (male and female) in his own image. He used the pronoun ‘him’ (Gen 1.27) and the gender reference ‘man’ as collective terms for the male and the female. Similarly, in Genesis 5.1-2 Noah records that God “blessed them [Adam and Eve] and named them Man when they were created.”
 - 1.4.2. Mankind was created first as a man, from which was derived a woman (1 Tim 2.13), thus establishing the unity of mankind. Use of the collectives ‘man’ and ‘him’ reinforces this unity.
 - 1.4.3. God works through covenantal means and the male is God’s designated representative for both the male and female. Use of the collectives ‘man’ and ‘him’ reinforces the representative nature of the covenant.
 - 1.4.4. Moral accountability rested with Adam, not Eve, even though she sinned first. Use of the collectives, ‘man’ and ‘him’ reminds mankind that we are all guilty in Adam.
- 1.5. We should continue to speak and write as God does. He uses gender-inclusive pronouns, which he introduced at the opening of history. We should not do this to poke a stick in the eye of our neighbours and co-workers who may think that they are being inclusive and generous by using gender-neutral pronouns. Our motive must not be to offend. Rather, we should use ‘he’, ‘him’, and ‘his’ when referring to a generic person, because to capitulate is to deny that God knows what is best for *man*.

Postmodern interpretations

1. The prevailing idea in postmodern interpretations is to move the focus from the object of study (the Bible) to the subject—that is, the person making the interpretation. Under this paradigm:
 - 1.1. Truth is subjective, and meaning is ‘in the mind of the reader’. It has been observed that, “[M]odern writers who operate with the assumptions of reader-response criticism, especially the notion that readers, not original authors, create meaning, usually also assume that the readers of their own works are not left to create new meanings but can discover rather easily the original intention. This is a significant inconsistency.”⁵³
 - 1.2. The text is interpreted through factors such as ethnicity, gender, and social class—creating new interpretive frameworks such as: “African-American Biblical Hermeneutics,”⁵⁴ “Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics,”⁵⁵ “Ecological Hermeneutics,”^{56, 57} “Latino/a and Latin American Biblical Interpretation,”⁵⁸ and “LGBTI/Queer Hermeneutics.”^{59, 60}
2. It is argued by defenders of these forms of Bible interpretation, that they are not inventing something new, but following in the footsteps of traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters—i.e., letting the

⁵³ Beale, G. K. (1998). *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (S. E. Porter, Ed.; Vol. 166, p. 50). Sheffield Academic Press.

⁵⁴ [What is African Biblical Hermeneutics?: Black Theology: Vol 13, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com)

⁵⁵ [Recent Research on Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Related to the Hebrew Bible - Chloe Sun, 2019 \(sagepub.com\)](https://www.sagepub.com)

⁵⁶ [Ecological Hermeneutics - The Intercultural Bible \(bible-intercultural.org\)](https://bible-intercultural.org)

⁵⁷ [Ecological Hermeneutics: Meaning and Method - Oxford Scholarship \(universitypressscholarship.com\)](https://www.universitypressscholarship.com)

⁵⁸ [Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies on JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org)

⁵⁹ [LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible - David Tabb Stewart, 2017 \(sagepub.com\)](https://www.sagepub.com)

⁶⁰ [What Is Queer Biblical Hermeneutics – Queer Bible Hermeneutics \(smu.edu\)](https://www.smu.edu)

lives, cultures, and ideologies of the reading communities determine the meaning of the Biblical texts. It is claimed further that postmodern interpreters are more honest than those using traditional interpretive methods because they are open about how they interpret the Bible and they expose their interpretive biases.

3. What are key issues with this form of Biblical interpretation?
 - 3.1. It starts at the wrong place. Determining the meaning of a text of the Bible should not begin with the reader but with the author. As much as possible, the reader of the text should go into obscurity and the reader's opinions should be shelved so that the text may be heard to speak on its own merits.
 - 3.2. There is not a primary meaning to a text—what the Holy Spirit intended to communicate through the individual human author. Rather each reader provides his own meaning to the text.
 - 3.3. Truth is malleable. There is not, and cannot be, such a thing as absolute truth. This is antithetical to Christianity—since God is truth (Jn 3.33; 1 Jn 5.20) and the Bible is emphatically true (Ps 119.160).
 - 3.4. Words simply have no inherent meaning if everyone's interpretation could be true.
 - 3.5. The intent, although often denied, is not to *let* the Bible speak, but to *make* the Bible say what the reader wants it to say—this is eisegesis rather than exegesis.
 - 3.6. Postmodern interpretations are invariably inconsistent with the classic long-term interpretations within the larger Christian community
4. There is a way to demonstrate conclusively that postmodern interpretive methods are false—not by arguing against their interpretive conclusions, but to show the logical impossibility of their method. In logic there is a law called the Law of Non-contradiction, which states that a statement cannot be both true and not true at the same time. Or two ideas which are dealing with the same context cannot both be true if they state opposite conclusions. So, when two interpretations are presented and they say contradictory things, at least one of them must be incorrect. Thus, based on pure logic, postmodernism as a methodology fails.

D. Interpretating different (representative) Biblical literary genre

Historical Narrative

1. What are examples of the historical narrative genre in the Bible?
 - 1.1. Accounts of the lives of the patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (Genesis 12-50).
 - 1.2. We must include Genesis 1-11—although many today claim that it is not to be considered as historical narrative.
 - 1.3. Major portions of the books of Exodus and Numbers.
 - 1.4. The record of the time of the Judges and the book of Ruth.
 - 1.5. The book of Esther
 - 1.6. The accounts of the kings of Judah and Israel (1 Samuel; 2 Samuel; 1 Kings; 2 Kings).
 - 1.7. The Gospel accounts of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
2. When we read these passages what question should we *not* ask of the text?
 - 2.1. We should not ask, “Did this really take place?”
 - 2.2. Until the mid-18th century, professing Christians would not have thought to ask such a question. Even those who applied an allegorical interpretation to historical interpretation did not reject the historical nature of the accounts—they merely added a layer of interpretation as does Paul with the account of Hagar and Sarah (Gal 4.21-31), under the direction of the Holy Spirit. However, with the rise of rationalism during the Enlightenment, questioning the accuracy of the Bible's

historical accounts has become fashionable.

3. What are ways that historical narrative texts in the Bible have been questioned?

3.1. *Naturalistic* – It is claimed that miracles cannot (or at least do not) happen and we need to provide explanations for the events described which are possible under natural laws. For example:

3.1.1. The plagues of Egypt were caused by natural events—the Nile wasn't turned to actual blood, but it was during a high-water event which washed red soil into the river, or it was caused by a poisonous red algae; likewise volcanic ash and dust storms can provide natural explanations for some of the plagues.

3.1.2. Jesus didn't actually walk on water, he walked on submerged sandbars, or on a frozen lake (it was suddenly frozen by a rare weather phenomenon).

3.1.3. Jesus didn't multiply loaves of bread, rather he encouraged people to be generous and open their bags containing hidden supplies.

3.1.4. Jesus didn't rise from being dead, rather he was resuscitated from a swoon.

3.2. *Mythical* – It is claimed that some of the supposedly historical accounts are mythical.

3.2.1. For example, the book of Esther is often considered to be historical fiction and to contain historical inaccuracies. It is claimed that a Jewish girl such as Esther could not have become the wife of a Persian monarch. Why might this be the view about Esther held by secular and religious scholars?

3.2.1.1. It is part of the Bible – Men by nature do not want to accept as true anything that God has communicated (Rom 1.18).

3.2.1.2. It is considered to be a Jewish polemic – It is claimed that the account was concocted to explain the origin of Purim for Jews living in the late Hellenistic era. Those making this claim do not appreciate the overriding purpose of the book—to demonstrate that God controls every event and action, including the events occurring in the most powerful pagan kingdoms of this earth.

3.2.1.3. It refers to Ahasuerus – It once was claimed that there was no such Persian king. Although, now even secular sources generally acknowledge that Ahasuerus is a Hebrew name (or title) for a Persian king—in the same way that Daniel had a Hebrew name and a Babylonian name.

3.2.1.4. It contains apparent historical inaccuracies – It is claimed that it contains information which is inconsistent with the information provided by other writers, such as Herodotus or Thucydides.

3.2.1.5. It is claimed that it contradicts other parts of the Bible – For example, that Mordecai could not have been carried away in the captivity (Est 2.6) or he would have been too old at the time of the events recorded in Esther. However, this apparent contradiction is based on the faulty identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes I. If Ahasuerus was Darius I, this 'problem' disappears.

3.2.2. Another supposedly mythical account is that recounted about the worldwide Flood (Gen 6.9-8.19).

3.3. *Accommodationism* – It is claimed that we need to allow for the scientific ignorance of the times. A passage like Genesis 1 was explained using then known concepts about the origin and structure of the universe. However, today it must be re-interpreted to account for the 'facts' of science—such as the universe being 13.8B years old and the world being 4.5B years old; and that there were millions of years of death of living creatures before Adam's sin. Proponents of this view say that six-day creationists force the historical narrative to say what God did not intend. However, it is the modern re-interpreters who are forcing the narrative to say something that it was never intended to communicate.

- 3.4. *Moralism* – It is claimed that we should not focus on the narrative but the moral lessons to be derived from the narrative, whether or not it is historically accurate.
4. What are issues with these forms of questioning the historical accuracy of the Biblical narratives?
 - 4.1. These interpretive approaches place the word of God on the defensive and human opinion over God's truthfulness. During the 19th century, in particular, many objections to the historical accounts were raised⁶¹—for example, Abraham using domesticated camels, the date for the Exodus, the presence of the Hittites at the time of David, the existence of a town called Nazareth, or Luke's accounts of the rulers and governors during the days of Jesus. Since these claims were first posited, they have been systematically destroyed with extra-Biblical evidence which demonstrates that the Bible can be used as an accurate archaeological guide and record of history about ancient Israel and the nations around it.
 - 4.2. If we subject the historical statements of the Bible to a test of their historicity by comparing them with non-Biblical accounts of history, we then have to ask how we could prove that the non-Biblical writings are accurate. Any form of proof brought forward to defend a lower level of proof would have to be subjected to another, higher-level proof; and the argument would proceed into an infinite regress, with no hope of a solution.
 - 4.3. These methods accuse the authors of being intellectually inferior or dishonest. If they didn't know about 'scientific' explanations for supposed miracles, they were ignorant or fooled. However, if they did understand that there were natural explanations for miraculous events, then they were dishonest by presenting them as miracles. Likewise, if they wrote historical fiction, then they were being dishonest by presenting it as an historical account.
 - 4.4. These methods accuse Jesus and the Apostles as being duped or dishonest since they refer to historical events as having occurred in space-time reality. We simply cannot trust a word which they have said—why would we take their moral teachings as normative, if their statements about history are false?
 - 4.5. If the accounts do not present historical reality, then their interpreted meaning can be anything that a person wishes it to be—if the texts can say or teach anything, then they say and teach nothing.
5. How are we to read and understand Biblical historical narrative?
 - 5.1. We are not to attempt a genre-switch on a text. For example, declaring Genesis 1 to be 'poetry' does not make it poetry any more than a male declaring himself to be female makes him a female.
 - 5.2. The historical narrative sections of the Bible present real events and persons, which occurred in real times and places.
 - 5.3. Any applied lessons we may derive from the text are valuable only because the narratives state truth.

Law

1. What are sections of the Bible that we normally associate with law and with God delivering law to mankind?
 - 1.1. The delivery of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).
 - 1.2. The delivery of the ceremonial and holiness laws and case laws (Leviticus).
 - 1.3. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - 1.4. Vice/virtue lists of the NT.
2. What are views commonly held today about how to interpret and apply OT Biblical law?

⁶¹ [The Bible is not a reliable historical source - Religions Wiki](#)

- 2.1. The moral precepts of the Bible tell Christians how they should behave in their relationships with one another and with their unbelieving neighbours. However, the moral precepts of the Bible cannot be imposed on adherents of other religions and on those who claim that they have no religious affiliation. What are issues with this view?
 - 2.1.1. Religious pluralism doesn't work.
 - 2.1.2. Moral systems contradict one another.
 - 2.1.3. There can be only one true moral standard.
 God's law, as given in the Bible, is not one of many possible standards, it is the only standard; it is not just a standard for faith and personal holiness for Christians; it is the only definitive standard for morality for all of mankind.
- 2.2. The commands of the OT no longer apply, and only what Jesus (and the Apostles) taught in the NT can be viewed as normative for Christian behaviour, or more broadly for mankind's behaviour. What are issues with this view?
 - 2.2.1. Jesus teaches in Matthew 5.17-19 that he did not come to abolish the law.
 - 2.2.2. Paul, speaking of the OT (since most of the NT didn't exist at that point), says that it is the standard for life and practice (2 Tim 3.16-17).
 - 2.3.5. No prohibitions can be found in the NT for a number of behaviours which Christians widely view as sins today. Without the OT laws, Christians have no legitimate reason for declaring a number of actions sinful, because they are not identified as such in the NT; including, bestiality (Ex 22.19; Lev 18.23; Lev 20.15-16; Dt 27.21), brother-sister incest (Lev 18.9; Dt 27.22), transvestite cross-dressing (Dt 22.5), bribery (Ex 23.8), astrology and fortune telling (Lev 19.31; Lev 20.6; Dt 18.11), moving property boundary markers (Dt 19.14; Dt 27.17), using dishonest weights and measures (Dt 25.13-16), hiring a paid assassin (Dt 27.25), misleading a blind person (Dt 27.18), and distinguishing between murder and manslaughter (Num 35.20-23).
- 2.3. A view held by some (e.g., Seventh Day Adventists and Messianic Jews) is that some of the OT holiness laws (e.g., abstinence from pork) and aspects of the ceremonial system (e.g., observance of the OT festivals such as Passover and the application of circumcision) continue to apply today. What are issues with this view?
 - 2.3.1. It ignores the typical nature of these regulations which pointed to the Messiah.
 - 2.3.2. It also ignores the plain teaching of Paul in Galatians where he condemns the adherence to these practices, the revelation given to Peter (Acts 10) indicating that food restrictions are no longer to be applied, and the directions sent from the council held at Jerusalem to the churches (Acts 15).
3. What are guidelines for applying OT (and NT) laws today?
 - 3.1. God does not alter his moral law from age to age. God's moral law is an eternal and universal standard, reflecting his character and defining righteousness. It applies to all mankind, at all times, in all places (Rom 2.15; Rom 8.4; 1 Cor 7.19; 1 Tim 1.8-11; 1 Jn 3.4). It is against this standard that men will be judged on the last day. Time or geography do not alter God's standards.
 - 3.2. The Ten Commandments succinctly express the moral law of God. They are the universal and everlasting summary of all of God's laws. All other laws in the Bible are instances, or examples, of how to apply the Ten Commandments in specific circumstances. These case specific laws are applications of one or more of the perpetual principles summarized in the Ten Commandments. Although the principles are always binding (Rom 2.15), specific applications may not be.
 - 3.3. However, observance of specific instances of law is as important as adhering to the intent and general principle of the law (Mt 5.19-20).
 - 3.4. The fulfillment of the law by Jesus (Mt 5.17) did not abolish any of God's laws. However, God does change specific ways in which his law is to be applied and observed as he deals with men

through his unfolding revelation. For example:

- 3.4.1. God places before us the requirement to worship him as he prescribes but has changed the specific forms at various times.
 - 3.4.2. The OT forms for observing the redemptive types in God's law—the sacrificial system (Heb 7.11, 12; Heb 9.9, 10; Heb 13.15), the ceremonies (Acts 20.7; Col 2.16-17), and the OT signs of the covenant (Acts 2.38; Gal 5.11-12)—is not required by NT Christians because of God's completed revelation in Christ. The OT types have been replaced by NT counterparts by which Christians fulfill the requirements of the law.
 - 3.4.3. Specific case laws of holiness and separation (e.g., food laws; clothing, seed and animal mixtures; intermarriage with non-Jews) are not to be observed today (Acts 10.9-16) as they were by the Jews. These were physical symbols of principles that are to be manifested in the spiritual life of believers (Mt 16.11, 12; 2 Cor 6.14-18).
 - 3.4.4. Some specific Mosaic laws related to the administration of the nation of Israel while they possessed ancient Palestine (e.g., cities of refuge; levirate marriage; and the festivals, such as the Feast of Booths, centred in Jerusalem; and whom priests could marry) have expired and apply today only as far as principles of general equity may be derived from them.
 - 3.4.5. A change occurred in the definition of incest. Prior to the Flood and during the patriarchal age, brother-sister marriage was permitted, but with the deliverance of the law by Moses a change occurred, likely because of the increasing danger of genetic defects in progeny produced by consanguineous marriages.
 - 3.5. The NT writers accept the OT law as normative and often carry forward, either by inference or explicitly, specific case laws of the OT in NT contexts (1 Cor 5.1; 1 Cor 9.9, 13-14; 2 Cor 6.14; 2 Cor 13.1; 1 Tim 5.18; James 5.4).
 - 3.6. It is wise for us to operate on the principle that the OT case laws, where the circumstances are the same (e.g., people relating to one another), continue to apply in the same way unless we find a clear reason (either explicit or by logical inference) in the NT showing that this is not the case.
 - 3.7. It is not necessary for the NT to repeat a specific OT law in order for it to apply to us. Where specific case laws deal with human interpersonal and business relations, they still apply in detail today, even as they did to Israel (e.g., laws about sexual relations, weights and measures, employer/employee relationships, kidnapping, theft, etc.).
 - 3.8. The collection of specific case laws in the Bible is not exhaustive (covering every aspect of life). For example, a civil magistrate may create a law requiring us to stop at a red light as an application of the sixth commandment. Therefore, specific Biblical case laws that apply today are not the only specific case laws we are to follow. However, laws created today must be consistent with the principles established in God's law and must follow the examples in the Bible of applying the Ten Commandments to specific situations.
 - 3.9. Keeping the law of God expresses love for God (Mt 22.37-40; 1 Jn 5.2-3).
- If we apply these guidelines when we consider how the OT laws apply today, we should be able to obtain and maintain a proper balance between the continuity and discontinuity found between the OT and the NT.

Prophecy

1. What do we usually mean when we say that a book of the Bible or a passage in the Bible is prophetic?
 - 1.1. We generally mean that it provides a prediction of events which are yet to happen, from the perspective and time of the writer.
2. Which books of the Bible do we usually associate with prophecy?
 - 2.1. Books in the OT which are included in the section called 'Prophets'—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

- 2.1.1. However, a number of these books also include historical narrative (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Jonah). In addition, prophecies occur in other parts of the Bible, for example:
 - 2.1.1.1. In the midst of the curse, God promises the Messiah (Genesis 3.15).
 - 2.1.1.2. Genesis 6 provides prophecies about the pending flood and the destruction of mankind (Gen 6.3, 7, 13).
 - 2.1.1.3. The patriarchs provided prophecies about their descendants when blessing them (Gen 5.29; Gen 27.29, 39-40; Gen 49.1-27).
 - 2.1.1.4. God informed Abraham of the Egyptian slavery and judgement on the Canaanites (Gen 15.13, 16).
 - 2.1.1.5. Moses foretold of the coming of The Prophet (Dt 18.15, 18-19).
 - 2.1.1.6. A pagan seer made predictions about the coming Messiah (Num 24.17-19).
 - 2.1.1.7. Samuel provided a prophetic warning when the people asked for a king (1 Sam 8.10-18).
 - 2.1.1.8. The Psalms include prophecies about events which would occur in the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah (Ps 16.10; Ps 22.1, 16, 18; Ps 24.7-10; Ps 49.15; Ps 69.21).
 - 2.2. In the NT, Revelation is considered to be the only book that is primarily prophetic. However, Jesus makes prophecies in his teaching about his own death and resurrection and about the pending destruction of Jerusalem and his return to this earth (Mt 16.21; Mt 17.22-23; Mt 24-25). Likewise, the epistle writers include prophecies about events in the last days and the second coming of Jesus (1 Cor 15.42-43, 51-55; 1 Thess 4.13-17; 2 Pt 3.1-13).
3. What are characteristics we find associated with the fulfillment of prophecies?
- 3.1. *Conditional vs unconditional application.* Judgement is announced in many prophecies against the nations. However, the execution of that judgment assumes that the people or nations do not repent. If repentance is evident, the prophecy is not fulfilled as announced (Jer 18.7-10).
 - 3.1.1. Examples of conditional application:
 - 3.1.1.1. In Exodus, the prophecies about each pending plague against Egypt includes an implied cancellation offered to Pharaoh and Egypt. If they repented and let the Israelites depart, they would not have been judged.
 - 3.1.1.2. Jonah 3.1-4, 10, Jonah was upset that the Lord did not send the judgment that had been announced (Jonah 4.1) because the people of Nineveh repented (Jonah 3.10).
 - 3.1.1.3. 1 Kings 21.27-29, Ahab repented, and the announced judgement was delayed beyond his own life.
 - 3.1.2. Examples of unconditional application:
 - 3.1.2.1. Satan's head was to be crushed (Gen 3.15).
 - 3.1.2.2. The Amorites would be destroyed (Gen 15.16).
 - 3.1.2.3. Jesus will return and there will be a general resurrection of the dead (Jn 14.18; Acts 1.10-11; 1 Thess 4.16-17; Heb 9.28).
 - 3.1.2.4. This created realm is to be destroyed and replaced (2 Pt 3.9-13).
 - 3.2. *Spiritual vs temporal fulfillment.*
 - 3.2.1. In the enactment of the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17.1-14) God promises Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan as an "everlasting possession" (Ps 105.9-11), and that the covenant would be marked with circumcision forever.
 - 3.2.1.1. Some use a passage such as this to defend a view that God has an ongoing relationship with ethnic Jews and that modern Jews have an inherent right to possess the territory which we call Israel. Ironically, few of these folks would argue that modern believers who are part of the covenant should be circumcised.

- 3.2.1.2. The promises made to Abraham have not been annulled but have been fulfilled in ways that Abraham may not have fully understood. All believers are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Rom 4.16-18; Gal 3.7-9, 29; Gal 6.16; Eph 3.6), the land of Canaan was a type for Christians possessing the entire world (Mt 5.5; Mt 28.19) and eventually a new heavens and earth, and physical circumcision was a sign for spiritual circumcision which has been replaced with baptism (Rom 2.28-29; Rom 4.11-12; Col 2.11-12; Mt 28.19).
- 3.2.2. A similar everlasting covenant was made with David (2 Sam 7.12-13, 16; 2 Sam 23.5; Ps 89.3-4). Jesus is the fulfillment of this covenant as the king who sits on David's throne forever (Isa 9.1-7; Lk 1.31-33; Rev 22.16).
- 3.3. *Partial fulfillment vs complete fulfillment.* Prophecies can be:
 - 3.3.1. Completely fulfilled in the past, relative to our time—as with the arrival of the Messiah (Isa 7.14; Mt 2.6, 23; Mt 3.3; Mt 4.15-16).
 - 3.3.2. Partially fulfilled in the past, with a complete fulfillment at a later date—as with the son of David being Solomon and Jesus (Ps 132.11 with Lk 1.32) and the weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the slaughter of Bethlehem's infants (Jer 31.15 with Mt 2.18).
 - 3.3.3. Pending an entire fulfillment—antichrist is present and yet to come (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 1 Jn 4.3; 2 Jn 7).
 - 3.3.4. Reserved entirely for a future date—the return of Jesus (2 Pt 3.4).

We must be cautious not to dismiss the possibility of a dual-fulfillment of prophecies or to over-emphasize the possibility by seeing dual-fulfillments in many prophecies. In general, we should consider dual-fulfillment instances of prophecy to be rare, and they should be explicitly identified in the Bible as such. We should not read into a passage our belief in a dual-fulfillment.
- 3.4. *Use of figurative language.* Prophetic passages often use figurative language, rather than making explicit propositional statements about the future. For example:
 - 3.4.1. Isaiah 11.1-9 uses personification of a branch and refers to righteousness as a belt. Then an image is presented of dangerous animals dwelling in harmony with their usual prey (see also, Isa 65.25).
 - 3.4.1.1. Since we would understand the first part of the prophecy as figurative, we should be consistent and understand the second part also as figurative. We should not interpret the cohabiting animals that are natural enemies as the introduction of a paradise on earth this side of the end of time—i.e., in a supposed 1,000-year physical reign of Christ on this earth.
 - 3.4.1.2. We should not expect to see children safely sticking their hands into cobra nests before the return of Christ and the renovation of the entire universe. Rather, we should understand this passage to be using figurative language to speak of the Church age, in which antagonistic humans are brought together into a new family.
 - 3.4.2. Isaiah 35 speaks of the desert becoming well watered and breaking into blossoms, the haunts of dangerous animals being made salubrious, and a highway being constructed on which the redeemed travel safely.
 - 3.4.2.1. This prophecy is not speaking about changes in a wilderness area in physical Israel.
 - 3.4.2.2. We are to consider it as a metaphor for the church age, with the desert conditions of humanity being renovated by the abundant waters of God's grace which cause lush spiritual growth.
 - 3.4.2.3. However, it is possible that we could consider a dual-fulfillment in this prophecy—first applied spiritually in the NT Church age, but ultimately speaking of this cursed, decaying realm being replaced with a new heavens and earth in which there will be streets lined with fruit trees, no dangerous wild animals, and pleasant pathways (Rev

22.1-5)—a paradise that is better than the garden of Eden.

3.4.3. Luke's account of John the Baptist illustrates how we are to interpret figurative prophecies like those we find in Isaiah 11; Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 65:

- Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isa 40.1-5).
- And he [John the Baptist] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (Lk 3.3-6).

3.4.4. We should apply the same interpretive approach to much of the figurative language used in the book of Revelation and not expect to see the prophecies fulfilled with physical phenomena. For example:

- The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. (Rev 8.10-11).

There is a wide variation in the interpretations suggested for the judgement associated with the third trumpet blast. Some expect that in the future a large celestial object will enter the earth's orbit and crash onto the land and cause much devastation that will pollute many fresh water sources. Some claim that since 'chernobyl' is a Russian name for a species of plant (*Artemisia vulgaris*) related to wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), the explosion of the nuclear plant at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986 was the primary fulfilment of the judgement resulting from this trumpet blast. This is a clear example of how we should not interpret the visions of Revelation—forcing details from current events onto the text.

We should interpret this prophecy as using figurative language. However, the spectrum of symbolic and allegorical interpretations that have been proposed includes the following:

- The most common view is that the star refers to a prominent political or clerical personage—e.g., Nero, Julian, Romulus Augustus, or Gregory the Great.
- A fallen angel representing the Roman Empire (compare Dan 10.13, 20), or possibly Satan himself (which is the most likely explanation).
- A symbol for the king of Babylon (Isa 14.12), or Imperial Rome as the NT incarnation of Babylon (Rev 14.8; Rev 18.2).
- False heresies and doctrines, including Arianism and particular Roman Catholic teachings, such as on the Mass. Thus, the Gospel, the spring of spiritual life, is polluted by the introduction of error, leading to ruin for a large portion (figuratively, a third) of mankind.
- The decay of morals in monastic communities during the Middle Ages, after the time of Constantine.
- Just laws (the foundation of liberty, equity, property rights, and personal safety) being poisoned by tyranny.

- Men are given over to a spirit of bitterness (from wormwood) because they refuse to thank God for life's blessings and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.

All attempts to associate the imagery of this trumpet blast with a specific human person, historical event, philosophy, doctrine, or natural phenomenon will fail. Each suggested association will be superseded by another in the next generation. This is not how we are to understand the figurative imagery that John observed in his visions. We are to understand the entire vision of the trumpets as figuratively speaking of a cohesive set of judgements (seven, representing a complete number) that are continually being directed toward the unrepentant, between the time of Christ's resurrection and his return to bring mankind to the final judgement.

3.5. *Use of cosmic terminology.* A form of figurative language used in prophecy relates to cosmic objects and events (Isa 13.9-10, 13; Isa 24.23; Jer 4.23, 28; Ezk 32.7-8; Joel 2.10, 31; Joel 3.15; Amos 8.9; Hab 3.11; Rev 8.10, 12; Rev 9.1; Rev 12.4). We are given examples in the NT which illustrate why we should *generally* understand these passages to be figurative and not prophecies of physical events which will occur in space-time:

3.5.1. In Acts 2.14-21, Peter informs the hearers on the Day of Pentecost that the phenomena which they had experienced (i.e., the people heard the preaching in their own language) was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. Peter even applies the cosmic events (wonders in the heavens, the sun being turned dark and the mood to blood) to events being fulfilled in the proclamation of the Gospel and its message being extended to all nations.

3.5.2. In Rev 9.1 John says that he saw a star fall from heaven to the earth. Even commentators who claim that we are to interpret aspects of the other trumpet blasts with physical exactness concede that an actual star did not fall from its place in the galaxy and land on the earth. We know that even the smallest stars are many orders of magnitude larger than the earth, and that if a real star collided with the earth, the earth would be vaporized. In fact, John tells us that the 'star' is a person ('he', in Rev 9.1, 11).

3.5.3. In The word 'generally' is used above, why? At least one prophecy of cosmic events will happen in physical reality:

- But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. ... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Pt 3.10, 12-13).

Poetry

1. What are characteristics of Biblical poetry?

1.1. Imagery (e.g., metaphors, similes, and personifications) are used to express passionate feelings. For example:

1.1.1. Mountains are jealous (Ps 68.16), rivers clap hands and hills sing for joy (Ps 98.8), and hills skip like lambs (Ps 114.6).

1.1.2. Believers are likened to trees planted by water which bear fruit (Ps 1.3). In contrast unbelievers are like dry chaff (Ps 1.4).

1.1.3. Being discouraged or having doubts are likened to an animal panting with thirst (Ps 42.1).

1.1.4. God is likened to a rock and shield (Ps 18.2).

1.2. A primary indicator of poetry is the use of parallelism, in which ideas are compared or contrasted. [We considered examples of parallelism in the section dealing with interpreting a text within its context.] The most common forms of parallelism found in Hebrew poetry are, antithetical, simile, synonymous, and step.

- 1.3. Alphabetic acrostics are also used in Hebrew poetry. Psalm 119 and Lamentations are classic examples, with entire stanzas being structured around the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Other Psalms utilize the acrostic form (e.g., Ps 9; Ps 10; Ps 25; Ps 34; Ps 37; Ps 111 [2 letters per line]; Ps 112; and Ps 145).
 - 1.4. Hebrew poetry is compact. It often missing words, from our perspective, for example, in Psalm 12.3, the Hebrew reads, “tongue boast great”, which is translated as, “the tongue that makes great boasts”; in Psalm 16.4, the Hebrew reads, “they are many hurts, another they acquire”, which is translated as, “The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply”. With so few words, translators often have to supply words. So, it is especially important to compare translations of poetry.
 - 1.5. The use of Hebrew verb forms differs between poetry and historical narrative, with statistical significance. Therefore, the presence or absence (e.g., in Gen 1.1-2.3) can be used as an indicator of whether a passage is to be understood as historical narrative or poetry. In the case of Genesis 1.1-2.3 the verb forms are overwhelmingly the forms used in other historical narratives and not the forms used in poetical passages. Thus, “it is not statistically defensible to read Genesis 1:1-2:3 as poetry”.⁶²
2. Where do we find examples of poetry in the Bible?
 - 2.1. The primary exemplar of poetry in the Bible is the book of Psalms.
 - 2.2. Other poetic books in the OT are the Song of Solomon and Lamentations. Much of Job is also structured with poetic forms. However, Job is often classed as ‘Wisdom Literature’ rather than as ‘poetry’ (of course it can be both).
 - 2.3. There are poetic sections in most of the books which are usually classified as prophecy.
 - 2.4. There are poetic sections also found in the books containing historical narrative—for example, Exodus 15 which contains Moses’ song about the crossing of the Red Sea, and the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 which records the Israelite’s victory over Sisera and his army.
 - 2.5. There are no poetic books in the NT.
 - 2.6. The NT often quotes OT poetry when quoting the Psalms.
 - 2.7. Zechariah’s prophecy (Lk 1.68-79) and Mary’s declaration (Lk 1.46-55) have the form of OT poetry found in the Psalms.
 - 2.8. Some of the teaching of Jesus might be classed as poetry (e.g., the Beatitudes; Mt 5.3-11). Also, Jesus uses forms of synonymous parallelism (Mt 7.6, 7-8), step parallelism (Mt 10.40), and antithetic parallelism (Mt 8.20) in his parables and teaching.
 - 2.9. Paul uses parallelism in his epistles (1 Cor 4.8; 2 Cor 4.8-9), but these statements are not normally considered to be poetry, per se. He also uses near-poetic forms in his elevated language in Romans 8.31-39; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Corinthians 15.51-58; and Philippians 2.5-11.
 - 2.10. Some people argue that there are pre-Pauline hymns (i.e., early Christian hymns) found in the NT which Paul quotes (e.g., Col 1.15-20). We will consider this claim later when we look at interpretive case studies.
 3. There are examples in the Bible where a record of events is provided in historical narrative and in poetic form. These examples help us to understand that cosmic events (e.g., stars fighting) and earth-based natural phenomena (e.g., earthquakes) described in poetry are generally to be understood figuratively:
 - 3.1. Exodus 14 and 15 recount the crossing of the Red Sea. Moses records the events in space-time as they occurred in chapter 14. Then, he records in poetic song-form the events in chapter 15. In the song-form he mentions ‘a blast of God’s nostrils’ (Ex 15.7, 8), ‘earth swallowing the Egyptians’ (Ex 15.12).
 - 3.2. The song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 recounts in poetic form the Israelite’s victory over Sisera and his army recorded in Judges chapter 4. The song refers to the ‘earth trembling’ and

⁶² [The Biblical Hebrew Creation Account: New Numbers Tell the Story | The Institute for Creation Research \(icr.org\)](https://www.icr.org/article/10000/)

- ‘mountains quaking’ (Judges 5.4, 5) and the ‘stars in heaven fighting’ (Judges 5.20).
- 3.3. Psalm 104 records events of creation and the Flood in poetic form, such as: ‘God covers himself with a garment of light’ (Ps 104.2), ‘makes clouds his chariot’ (Ps 104.3), makes angels ‘a flaming fire’ (Ps 104.4), and ‘makes mountains smoke’ (Ps 104.32).

Psalms

1. Psalms fall within the poetry genre. There are various ways of analyzing the book of Psalms, such as considering the:
 - 1.1. Authorship of the individual Psalms (e.g., Moses, David, Asaph).
 - 1.2. Assembly of the Psalms into five sub-sections and smaller groupings such as the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134).
 - 1.3. Use of picturesque and figurative language to express their messages (Ps 18.13-14).
 - 1.4. Primary thematic content.
2. How might we classify the Psalms into types? There are various ways that commentators have classified the Psalms, for example:
 - 2.1.1. *Messianic* Psalms [e.g., Ps 2; Ps 22; Ps 24; Ps 34; Ps 40; Ps 45; Ps 69; Ps 72; Ps 110; Ps 116; Ps 118; Ps 132]. We understand that in some of these Psalms, the writer is speaking of a physical near king, but that the writers of the NT also apply portions of these Psalms to Jesus.
 - 2.1.2. *Historical* [Ps 78; Ps 104; Ps 105; Ps 106; Ps 107; Ps 114; Ps 135; Ps 136] These Psalms speak about God’s works of creation and providence. In the latter category, his dealings with his OT covenant people.
 - 2.1.3. *Wisdom* Psalms [e.g., Ps 1; Ps 14; Ps 37; Ps 49; Ps 73; Ps 112; Ps 127; Ps 128; Ps 133]. We will consider the wisdom genre in the next section.
 - 2.1.4. *Ethical* Psalms [e.g., Ps 1; Ps 19; Ps 78; Ps 112; Ps 119]. These express the fact that obedience to God’s law is beneficial for all mankind.
 - 2.1.5. *Praise* Psalms [e.g., Ps 5; Ps 8; Ps 18; Ps 30; Ps 33; Ps 40; Ps 65; Ps 66; Ps 75; Ps 84; Ps 92; Ps 100; Ps 103; Ps 104; Ps 106; Ps 107; Ps 113; Ps 114; Ps 117; Ps 118; Ps 124; Ps 136; Ps 135; Ps 145; Ps 146; Ps 147; Ps 148; Ps 149; Ps 150]. These indicate that God alone is worthy of praise.
 - 2.1.6. *Penitential* Psalms [e.g., Ps 6; Ps 32; Ps 38; Ps 51; Ps 102; Ps 130]. Confession of sin is not something that mankind by nature is willing to undertake. Through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit believers are enabled to confess their sins to God.
 - 2.1.7. *Lament* Psalms [e.g., Ps 6; Ps 10; Ps 12; Ps 38; Ps 42; Ps 43; Ps 44; Ps 130]. Lamentation can be expressed over individual or corporate sin. However, it can also be an expression of dismay or discouragement.
 - 2.1.8. *Imprecatory* Psalms [e.g., Ps 55; Ps 59; Ps 69; Ps 79; Ps 109; Ps 137]. We are to understand that these Psalms are not expressing a desire for personal vengeance, but that God would avenge his cause and the cause of his people in the face of wicked persecutors.
 - 2.1.9. *Thanksgiving* Psalms [e.g., Ps 9; Ps 30; Ps 69; Ps 75; Ps 92; Ps 105; Ps 106; Ps 118; Ps 136]. Paul tells us that natural man does not give thanks to God (Rom 1.21). One way to ensure that we are truly thankful for all the goodness that God has directed toward us, is to express it through the voice of thanksgiving Psalms.
 - 2.1.10. *Zion / Church* Psalms [e.g., Ps 9; Ps 15; Ps 20; Ps 48; Ps 50; Ps 65; Ps 76; Ps 84; Ps 87; Ps 122]. Generally, we can apply the Psalms which speak of Zion (and Jerusalem) to the Church as both a temporal and a spiritual entity.
3. Why do people often turn to the Psalms when encountering difficulties?
 - 3.1. The Psalms bless and counsel us. They are filled with messages of salvation and comfort, guidance and direction, meaning and purpose, and encouragement and joy. This is why Paul speaks of using the Psalms to encourage one another (Col 3.16), and James tells us to use them for expressing joy

(James 5.13; Gk, NKJV). Paul and Silas used them in prison in Philippi at midnight for comfort (Acts 16.25). The Psalms cover every emotion and yearning of the soul, for example:

- 3.1.1. Confessions of sin (e.g., Ps 19; Ps 32; Ps 51; Ps 130)
- 3.1.2. Prayers to a merciful God (e.g., Ps 32; Ps 51)
- 3.1.3. Our dependence on the Holy Spirit (e.g., Ps 30; Ps 51; Ps 139)
- 3.1.4. Spiritual desires and affections (e.g., Ps 43; Ps 44; Ps 63; Ps 73; Ps 119)
- 3.1.5. The struggles of faith (e.g., Ps 3; Ps 4; Ps 73)
- 3.1.6. Thanksgiving (many)
- 3.1.7. Concern for, and joy in, the Church (e.g., Ps 48; Ps 95; Ps 96; Ps 122).

As Athanasius stated in his letter to the young pastor, Marcellinus:

- [The Psalter] possesses ... this marvel of its own—namely, that it contains even the emotions of each soul ... these words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.”⁶³
- But in the Psalms we are instructed how one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him. And in the case of each person one would find the divine hymns⁶⁴ appointed for us and our emotions of equanimity.⁶⁵
- For I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter. And nothing beyond these is found among men.⁶⁶

- 4. Paul quotes Psalm 18.49 in Romans 15.9: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” The context of this quotation indicates that the Psalms have a universal witness—to Jew and Gentile. This teaches us that the Psalms are to be used by the Church to offer a challenge to the world since they present God’s glory, kingship over the earth, man’s lost state in sin, God’s judicial office, and the salvation God provides. There can be no better form of evangelism or Gospel call than to use the Psalms along with the preached word. Why are the Psalms an appropriate instrument for apologetics (the defence of the Faith)? They:

- *Declare all of God’s holy counsel in the balance by which he desires it to be communicated to the world.* When the entire Psalter is sung regularly by a congregation, they receive a diet of doctrine precisely as God wishes it to be communicated.
- *Speak to a postmodern culture with a pre-modern voice.* “[T]he church must present a gospel that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric.”⁶⁷ The exciting thing about the Psalms ... is that they speak with a premodern voice. They represent a Hebrew world view and not a Newtonian one. Therefore, the Psalms speak against the extremes of modernism ... First, the Psalms are inherently post-individualistic. The Psalms reflect the corporate identity, cry, and passion of the old-covenant church. ... Second, the Psalms are consistent with post-rationalism and post-dualism. The Hebrew world view did not simply focus on cognitive knowledge, and it did not radically separate mind from matter. ... Third, the Psalms fulfill the call to be post-noeticentric. The Psalms do not allow us to be complacent fact-gatherers, but rather call us to apply our knowledge for the benefit of social change. The Psalms are replete with cries for justice, freedom for the oppressed, and protection of the fatherless. ... Clearly, the Psalms are well suited to speak

⁶³ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus* (Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg), Paulist Press, NY, 1980; p. 108.

⁶⁴ Athanasius uses the terms ‘psalms,’ ‘hymns,’ and ‘songs’ or ‘odes’ interchangeably, as Paul does in Col 3.16 and Eph 5.19 to refer to the compositions in the Psalter.

⁶⁵ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, cited above, p. 109.

⁶⁶ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, cited above, p. 126.

⁶⁷ ‘Post-noeticentric’ refers to the need to focus on “the attainment of wisdom” rather than solely on the “accumulation of knowledge.”

to postmodernists. In fact, they are timeless. They will speak to whatever world view supplants postmodernism.”⁶⁸

- *Describe the gospel going to the nations.* The authors of the Psalms often assume that their words will be used in evangelism (Ps 66.1-4; Ps 67.1-7; Ps 72.19; Ps 87.4-7; Ps 96; Ps 98; Ps 100; Ps 148.11-14).
- *Defend God’s word as the normative standard for faith and life.* Singing Psalms exclusively as worship teaches the world that God’s word is our holy standard.
- *Defend the church against the incursion of error.* Because the Psalms are superior to any merely human composition used for singing, we can be assured that when we sing the Psalms as worship, we will avoid the possibility of introducing a theological error.

We must learn the Psalms and sing them, as God’s witness to his glorious Gospel.

Wisdom / Didactic

1. What is Wisdom Literature?

- 1.1. An ancient genre of literature which has an emphasis on teaching its audience how to attain virtue and please God (or, in non-Biblical contexts, how to gain favour with a deity, demon, or force).

2. What books in the Bible are classified as Wisdom Literature?

- 2.1. All scholars and commentators include Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in this class.
- 2.2. Some also include the Psalms, and a few include the Song of Solomon. There are certainly Psalms which display the characteristics of Wisdom Literature. In the previous section, we identified a number of Psalms as examples of providing what we would be called ‘Wisdom’.
- 2.3. Some also include the book of James in the category. Also, the teachings of Jesus (e.g., in the *Sermon on the Mount*) have characteristics associated Wisdom Literature.
- 2.4. The entire Bible is actually Wisdom Literature, because the Bible teaches “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”⁶⁹ Or, as it has been stated in a more colloquial form, ‘B.I.B.L.E’ stands for “basic instructions before leaving earth”.

3. Where and when did Wisdom Literature arise?

- 3.1. Wisdom Literature is found in the writings of a number of the cultures in the ancient Near East around Israel (Sumeria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Phoenicia, Babylonia, and Persia).
- 3.2. The ancient sages in the Middle East believed in a balanced universe in which good practices (e.g., honesty, gentleness, compassion, hard work, marital faithfulness, and meditative contemplation) are rewarded and evil acts are punished. This view is expressed in concepts such as *karma* which pervades the Eastern religions and much of Western thinking today. What are issues with this belief:
 - 3.2.1. The definitions of good and evil are fluid. For example, proponents of Falun Gong (Falun Dafa), a ‘spiritual’ practice in the Buddhist tradition, claim to espouse the core tenets of ‘truthfulness’, ‘compassion’, and ‘tolerance’. But what do these terms really mean? For example, does ‘compassion’ include allowing a woman to abort a child or the euthanization of an elderly person? And does ‘tolerance’ include acceptance of evils such as rape, incest, or homosexual practices? Without God’s standard there can be no standard.
 - 3.2.2. An impersonal ‘universe’ or ‘force’ rather than a personal God is directing the dispensation of rewards and punishments. This is irrational—a non-living, non-rational, non-personal

⁶⁸ Anthony Selvaggio, “From Premodern to Postmodern,” *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, November, 2003, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer to Question 3.

- entity cannot make judgements, anticipate events, or direct events.
- 3.2.3. There can be no guarantee that the ‘universe’, ‘force’, *karma*, or a god is not capricious. And, even when a god’s governance is believed to be flawless, we cannot be sure that we know or understand what he requires of us.
- 3.2.4. Human experience shows that the universe doesn’t appear to be balanced—sometimes the outwardly good suffer much, and the perpetrators of evil prosper.
- 3.3. How does the Wisdom Literature in the Bible address these issues?
- 3.3.1. God’s universal and permanent law defines good and evil and defines true wisdom.
- But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. (Job 11.5-6).
 - And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’” (Job 28.28).
 - All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit. (Prov 16.2).
- 3.3.2. A personal, omnipotent, loving, consistent and faithful God is controlling events, not an impersonal force.
- Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. (Job 38.1-4).
 - The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps. (Prov 16.9).
- 3.3.3. God is not capricious, and his providential governance is flawlessly just.
- Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty, (Job 34.17).
 - He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. (Job 36.6).
 - To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; (Prov 1.2-3).
- 3.3.4. Human experience cannot be the source of true wisdom. True wisdom is revealed truth.
- The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1.7).
 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Prov 9.10).
- Paul explains that true wisdom is revealed by God in 1 Corinthians 2.6-16 and is not the same as the wisdom of the world. So, the wisdom obtained from observation must be assessed within the context of revealed truth.
- 3.4. It is claimed by secular historians and even by some Bible scholars that some of the Wisdom Literature of the ancient Near East is older than any found in the Bible and that the Bible’s Wisdom Literature follows the example of that of Israel’s near or distant neighbours. For example, it is claimed that Ptahhotep was an ancient Egyptian vizier during the late 25th to 24th century BC and that he composed a wisdom piece⁷⁰ around 2450 BC. However, since the worldwide flood occurred about 2345 BC (100 years after the supposed date for Ptahhotep’s composition), the commonly accepted dates for the early Egyptian dynasties are not possible. Christian Egyptologists redate the early dynasties in Egypt after the Flood and put Ptahhotep’s Pharaoh in the 4th Dynasty around 1950-1850 BC, at the time of Abraham. Likewise, the Egyptian text, *The Royal Instruction of Khety to Merikare*,⁷¹ is dated around 2160 BC (or even earlier, at 2200 BC) by secular historians, but more likely should be dated around 1400 BC.

⁷⁰ [The Teachings of Ptahhotep - Full Text English Translated \(webdiretto.it\)](http://webdiretto.it)

⁷¹ [ANCIENT EGYPT : The Wisdom of Amenemope, son of Kanakht \(sofiatopia.org\)](http://sofiatopia.org)

- 3.5. The reality is that the oldest piece of (extant) Wisdom Literature is found in the Bible. It is the book of Job, that was likely written around 2000 BC and possibly as early as 2200 BC. Thus, the Wisdom Literature of the nations around Israel followed the Biblical exemplar.
- 3.6. There are Bible references, often with scorn, to the Wisdom Literature and sages of the nations around Israel:
- So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. (Gen 41.8).
 - And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. (Acts 7.22).
 - ... Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. (1 Ki 4.30-31).
 - The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish; the wisest counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. How can you say to Pharaoh, "I am a son of the wise, a son of ancient kings"? Where then are your wise men? Let them tell you that they might know what the LORD of hosts has purposed against Egypt. (Isa 19.11-12).
 - Concerning Edom. Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished? (Jer 49.7).
 - Will I not on that day, declares the LORD, destroy the wise men out of Edom, and understanding out of Mount Esau? (Ob 8).
 - And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. (Dan 1.19-20).
 - Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. (Dan 2.2).
 - Concerning Edom. Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished? (Jer 49.7).
- 3.7. Some of the Wisdom Literature included in the Bible was not written by Jews.
- 3.7.1. Job was not a Jew or an Israelite, although he may have been a descendant of Eber thus, (a Hebrew) and of Shem, since Job may have been Jobab (Gen 10.25-29). He was from the land of Uz (Job 1.1) in what later became the territory of Edom (Lam 4.21) about 300 years after the time of Job.
- 3.7.2. It has been suggested that Agur (Prov 30.1) and Lemuel (Prov 31.1) were from Massa, a territory of Ishmael (Gen 25.14; 1 Chron 1.30), although nothing in the Bible states this.
4. What are characteristics of Wisdom Literature in the Bible? [With a focus on Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.]
- 4.1. Much of the instruction is based on common human experience and observation and thus is transcultural. There is very little in the Wisdom Literature that is specific to Israel (e.g., about the sacrificial system or the temple, or Jewish history).
- 4.2. There are two basic forms of instruction:
- 4.2.1. *Parables and short statements*. These parables are often drawn from nature (Jesus did the same thing in his teaching) and common human relationships. Also, many of the parables are

- set up using contrasts (e.g., Prov 15.1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7) between acting wisely and acting unwisely.
- 4.2.2. *Longer developed topics.* These monologues and dialogues are prominent in Job, but also occur in Proverbs (e.g., Prov 31.10-31) and Ecclesiastes (e.g., Eccl 1.1-11; Eccl 7.1-13). These topics deal with life's major questions and mysteries such as:
- 4.2.2.1. If God is good, then why do bad things happen to 'good' people and the wicked seem to prosper?
- Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? (Job 21.7).
 - In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. (Eccl 7.15).
- 4.2.2.2. What happens at death? (Eccl 3.19-21)
- 4.3. The instruction deals primarily with behaviour rather than with belief. The emphasis is not on gaining right knowledge but on how to be wise by acting in a right way in accordance with God's will.
- He opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword and die without knowledge. (Job 36.10-12).
 - Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. (Prov 3.27).
 - Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor. (Prov 21.21).
 - I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; (Eccl 3.12).
- 4.4. Wisdom Literature included in the Bible is unique because God is recognized as the source of all true wisdom.
- With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding. (Job 12.13).
 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10).
 - The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl 12.13-14).
5. There is a special class of Didactic literature in the NT.
- 5.1. It doesn't have the characteristics of the OT Wisdom Literature, but it does give extensive guidance for how to live righteously in the world.
- 5.2. This is Paul's communications in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. In these epistles Paul acts as a spiritual father giving instruction to his spiritual sons. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul deals with the following *sins* exhibited by members of the covenant family:
- 5.2.1. *Divisive Schisms* (1 Cor 1.10-4.21) – Factions had developed around spiritual leaders and had led to personal contentions. Paul deals with this matter extensively by drawing their attention to the importance of focusing on Christ and the Gospel proclaimed by the of the apostles.
- 5.2.2. *Deviance that Shocks* (1 Cor 5.1-13) – A man in the congregation was living openly in an incestuous relationship. This was being tolerated by the body, and not being dealt with through church discipline procedures.
- 5.2.3. *Destructive Suits* (1 Cor 6.1-8) – Paul is appalled that Christians were suing one another, and before the Roman courts, to deal with grievances and were not dealing with their issues as Christian brothers, for example, by asking their church leaders or fellow members of the congregation to judge the disputes and provide a resolution.
- 5.2.4. *Disinherited Sanctification* (1 Cor 6.9-11) – Paul reminds the congregation of the pagan practices of their past, which are unacceptable for those professing to be Christians.

5.2.5. *Disallowed Sex* (1 Cor 6.12-20) – He then returns to another sexual sin—consorting with prostitutes.

He then provides solutions to matters about which the Corinthians asked for guidance:

5.2.6. *Regulations for Marriage* (1 Cor 7.1-40) – There were some in the congregation who claimed that Christians should not marry and that those who were married should practice celibacy (1 Cor 7.1-5). They held that marital sexual intercourse was inconsistent with Christian holiness and some even insisted on the dissolution of the marriage relationship (1 Cor 7.17-24). Paul deals with the place of marriage and remarriage after the death of a spouse.

5.2.7. *Regulations for Meat* (1 Cor 8.1-11.1) – Some wanted to know if they could eat meat from animals which had been sacrificed to pagan gods' idols and whether or not they could eat food served at dinners hosted by their pagan neighbours.

5.2.8. *Regulations for Meetings* (1 Cor 11.2-14.40) – Women were violating the practice in the churches and creation-based principle of male headship. Some people were misusing the Lord's Supper, and others were causing chaos during corporate worship by the exercise of their spiritual gifts. Paul clarifies how churches should operate at their worship services.

5.2.9. *Resurrection Mystery* (1 Cor 15.1-58) – Some were denying the possibility of the resurrection of the body and asking questions about how it could be possible. With masterful logic, Paul demonstrates the reality of the resurrection of Christ and of believers.

5.2.10. *Regulations for Money* (1 Cor 16.1-4) – Paul offered guidelines regarding the collection of the congregation's tithes.

6. What are guidelines we should apply for interpreting OT Wisdom Literature?

6.1. Statements (e.g., proverbs) relating to the benefits of good moral behaviour or to potential outcomes may not be absolute. They are to be understood as generally true but not always applicable in every specific instance. For example,

- The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. (Prov 10.3).
- Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel. (Prov 12.10).
- The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish. (Prov 14.11).

6.2. Some statements could appear not to be applicable in our 21st-century context, and we need to derive the principle being communicated. For example,

- Take a man's garment when he has put up security for a stranger, and hold it in pledge when he puts up security for foreigners. (Prov 20.16).
- It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. (Prov 21.9).
- He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend. (Prov 22.11).

6.3. We need to 'translate' and interpret metaphors, similes, and hyperbole. For example,

- when my steps were washed with butter, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil! (Job 29.6).
- Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? (Prov 6.27-28).
- The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land. (Prov 10.30).
- The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out. (Prov 17.14).

We should try to recast statements such as these with a simple declarative sentence which expresses the central truth which is being communicated.

6.4. In Job's case, the advice of his friends was sound, being generally true, but the application to Job's

situation was mostly invalid since he was not suffering as a result of specific sins—as someone has said, “His friends gave good medicine, but they dispensed it to the wrong patient.”

- 6.5. We need to read each of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as a whole and place their individual statements into the context of the whole. For example,
 - 6.5.1. The theme of suffering, apparently for individual sins, in Job is balanced with the fact of God’s sovereignty over all events.
 - 6.5.2. Wealth or riches in Proverbs are treated as both a blessing (Prov 10.4, 15; Prov 12.27. Prov 14.24) and a curse (Prov 10.2; Prov 11.4; Prov 28.11). The balance is that we are to honour the Lord with our material possessions (Prov 3.9) and not trust in them (Prov 11.28; Prov 15.16; Prov 30.8).
 - 6.5.3. The theme of meaninglessness and vanity in life (wisdom, pleasure, hard work, advancement, riches and obedience) because we all die (Eccl 9.2-6) in Ecclesiastes is balanced by enjoying the life we are given (Eccl 9.7-9; Eccl 11.1, 8-9).

Gospels

1. What is the primary literary genre of the Gospels?
 - 1.1. They are primarily a form of historical narrative, but they include other genre (e.g., parables and prophecy) within their contents.
2. What is the primary purpose of the Gospels?
 - 2.1. The Gospel accounts record the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
 - 2.2. They present Jesus as the God-man.
 - 2.3. They present faith in Jesus as the means of salvation.
 - 2.4. The Gospels present different perspectives on Jesus. In general,
 - 2.4.1. Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.
 - 2.4.2. Mark portrays Jesus as the suffering Son of God who offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and act as a substitute for his people.
 - 2.4.3. Luke, a Gentile, presents Jesus as the Saviour for all nations and people groups.
 - 2.4.4. John emphasizes the fact that Jesus is God and the incarnate image of God.
3. How do some people approach the Gospels?
 - 3.1. Some people make an outright denial that Jesus ever existed and claim that the Gospel accounts are nothing more than fiction.
 - 3.2. Sceptics make similar claims as they do about other portions of historical narrative in the Bible. They attempt to define the Gospels as myths, provide naturalistic explanations for the miracles, and claim that Jesus was at best a teacher with generally helpful teachings and a good moral example but not God.
 - 3.3. Some people claim that disciples of Jesus fabricated or at least embellished the account of Jesus or that later believers added to the legend.
 - 3.4. Some scholars say that there may be a core of truth about the existence of Jesus, but that it is necessary to tease out which portions of the record are historical, and which are myth. For example, Albert Schweitzer, wrote a book entitled, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. More recently, scholars have undertaken projects to determine which words and actions, if any, may be attributed to Jesus.⁷²
 - 3.5. However, as F. F. Bruce stated: ‘Some writers may toy with the fancy of a “Christ-myth,” but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians

⁷² [Quest for the historical Jesus - Wikipedia](#)

who propagate the “Christ-myth” theories.’⁷³

4. What evidence exists which indicates that the Gospels present events as they actually happened in our space-time realm?
 - 4.1. Jesus’ own claims, as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus is either telling the truth about who he is, or he is not. If he is telling the truth, then the Gospels support and reflect this truth. If he is not telling the truth, then his person and words should be rejected since he is the propagator of a delusion.
 - 4.2. Internal claims made by the authors. Examples?
 - Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Lk 1.1-4).
 - This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. (Jn 21.24).
 - 4.3. Eyewitness accounts.
 - 4.3.1. The Gospels give clear evidence that they were written by witness or from information gathered from witnesses (Luke). Two works which analyze the reliability of the eyewitness accounts are:
 - 4.3.1.1. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses – The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Richard Bauckham, Eerdmans, 2006.
 - 4.3.1.2. *The Case For Christ – A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*, Lee Strobel, Zondervan, 1998.
 - 4.3.2. All four of the Gospels were written before 70 AD and likely before 64 AD. There would have been numerous witnesses to the life of Jesus still alive, while the Gospels were circulating, who would have brought forward counterevidence if the Gospels presented mere myths. Paul appeals the existence of these witnesses in his defense of the resurrection:
 - Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Cor 15.6).
 - 4.4. Multiple accounts. The existence of four Gospels with different viewpoints, but a consistent message, provides irrefutable evidence about who Jesus was and what he did.
 - 4.5. There is extra-Biblical evidence from (near) contemporaries who refer to Jesus such as Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus. We won’t review these ancient writings here, since they are reported widely in works defending the historicity of Jesus. There is also indirect evidence for the events recorded in the Gospel, such as references to the darkened sky at the time of the crucifixion, which apparently was visible in other parts of the Mediterranean world.⁷⁴
 - 4.6. Manuscript evidence. Contrary to what some suggest, the Gospels were not written down long after the event. Rather, they were complete and circulating among the Christian congregations within 30 years of Jesus’ death. The manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports the fact that the Gospels did not go through a series of phases of embellishment. The Gospels we now have in our printed editions are essentially the same (and near identical to) what the authors wrote.
 - 4.7. The impossibility of the contrary. Doubting the truthfulness of the Gospels leads to questioning the historicity of Jesus. The Christian faith rests on the truthfulness of the Gospels. Paul uses this form of argument when he says:
 - And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We

⁷³ “Jesus Christ,” in *Macropedia*, vol. 10, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. (Chicago: Benton Foundation and Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976), 145.

⁷⁴ For example, Julius Africanus alludes to a work of the historian Thallus who speaks of the darkness and Tertullian refers to Phlegon who mentions the darkness in what would have been 33 AD.

are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1 Cor 15.14-17).

Parables of Jesus

1. What is a parable?
 - 1.1. One dictionary definition states, “A simple story illustrating a moral or religious lesson.”
 - 1.2. Our English word ‘parable’ is derived (transliterated) from the Greek word (παράβολήν), which means to ‘cast/throw beside/before’. Thus, it has the idea of placing one thing beside another, as is illustrated by Jesus’ use of the word ‘like’ (e.g., “the kingdom of heaven is like”).
 - 1.3. What are extra-Biblical examples of parables to which we could apply this definition?
 - 1.3.1. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*
 - 1.3.2. *The Blind Men and the Elephant*
 - 1.3.3. *The Emperor's New Clothes*
 - 1.3.4. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a long parable.
 - 1.4. Jesus delivered over thirty recorded parables throughout his public ministry, and it appears that about one-third of his teaching was delivered in the form of parables (Mt 13.34-35). Calculating percentages of the forms of his recorded words is a challenge because there is not agreement on what the list of parables should include—for example, does Luke 11.33-36 about lighting a lamp present a parable, since the word ‘parable’ does not appear in the text.
2. Why did Jesus use parables?
 - 2.1. His primary purpose was to reveal to those among his hearers, whose hearts had been opened by the Holy Spirit, the mystery of God’s redemptive plan (Mt 18.10-14; Lk 12.13-21); the kingdom of heaven (Mt 13.11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47); and what the subjects of the kingdom should be like, as in *The Good Samaritan* (Lk 10.25-37), *Taking The Lowest Place* (Lk 14.7-11), and *The Persistent Widow* (Lk 18.1-8).
 - 2.2. A secondary goal was to engage the attention of his audience and to present truth that could be easily remembered. The truth Jesus communicates in parables could be stated as a succinct proposition, for example: “Heaven is the most valuable asset you can obtain.” But we remember that truth more clearly when heaven is compared with a pearl or treasure of great value. Jesus wanted the knowledge about the kingdom of heaven to stick with his hearers and to be carried to the ends of the earth.
 - 2.3. Using parables would require his hearers to think and to extract an abstract meaning from the concrete examples. This is different from propositional statements, such as in the Ten Commandments, which clearly state their application.
 - 2.4. Because parables require thought to understand and apply, Jesus indicates that his parables required an additional level of understanding—spiritual insight.
 - Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “ ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.’ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes,

- for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (Mt 13.10-16).
- 2.5. Jesus did not use the parables to withhold truth from anyone but as a means of showing the division between believers and unbelievers. Those who don't believe in Jesus will never understand the true meaning of the parables. They may be able to restate their factual interpretation, but they will not be able to apply them to their heart and soul and will be judged because they have rejected truth (Mt 13.12). However, those who believe in Jesus will seek to understand the true meaning of the parables (Mt 13.36).
 3. What are characteristics of the parables taught by Jesus?
 - 3.1. Parables teach spiritual truth.
 - 3.2. Parables are often drawn from examples in nature (e.g., a mustard seed, a budding fig tree), familiar human activities (e.g., sewing a patch of new cloth on an old garment, sowing seeds, seeking lost sheep, labourers in a vineyard), or common human interactions (e.g., *The Prodigal Son* and *The Good Samaritan*).
 - 3.3. We noted previously that the parables (at least some) appear to use fictional characters and events to illustrate spiritual concepts. Thus, we are likely not required to understand the parables to be speaking of actual personages who performed real actions.
 - 3.3.1. The parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31) presents an interesting challenge. The fact that this account mentions Abraham may make it more than just a representative illustration. It may be that we are to understand it to be presenting a narrative of actual events (similar to what is recorded in Job 1.6-12). However, since the introduction is similar to that found in other parables recorded by Luke (e.g., Lk 10.30; Lk 14.16; Lk 15.11; Lk 16.1), referring to an unnamed man, this may indicate that Jesus is not reporting actual events but creating an illustration. Regardless the central message is not changed by what we decide about the characters mentioned in the parable.
 4. What are guidelines for interpreting Jesus' parables?
 - 4.1. We need to understand the parables as the 1st century audience would have understood them before we can apply them in the 21st century. Likewise, we need to understand the parables within the context of his ministry. For example, when Jesus mentioned the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples were to understand the leaven as their false teachings (Mt 16.5-12).
 - 4.2. Parables generally teach one main point. It can be helpful when interpreting the parables to restate them propositionally to express the central truth. Once we have determined the primary lesson, we can then ask how the lesson can be applied in our current situation.
 - 4.3. The message of a parable is not necessarily in the details but in the whole. Therefore, we should not scratch every point in a parable to find hidden meanings. Trying to press the details of a parable can lead to distorted interpretations. Likewise, we must avoid allegorizing the parable as a whole or the individual details in the parable.
 - 4.4. Jesus provides examples for interpreting the parables when he explained them privately to his disciples (Mt 13.36-45; Mt 15.15-20; Mk 4.34).
 - 4.5. Since parables are not propositional statements, we must be careful not to build doctrine or practice on a parabolic statement alone. For example, because the good Samaritan poured oil and wine on the wounds of the injured man (Lk 10.34), this does not mean that this is how we are to treat wounds today.
 - 4.6. The parables of Jesus do not stand in isolation. Each one does not present all aspects of what he wished his disciples and us to know. His teaching is a unified whole with many dimensions presented throughout his three years of public ministry.
 5. At the end of this study, we will consider some passages which have caused interpretive challenges. However, let us apply the interpretation guidelines we developed to a sample parable—The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt 25.1-13). The various interpretations that people have given to this parable over

the centuries provides a good reminder of why we are to focus on the primary message of any parable and not to attempt to impute meaning to each element of the story.

5.1. What are some interpretations that have been applied to this parable?

- 5.1.1. The trimming of the lamps by the virgins implies that they had been baptized or that they were ready to give account for their works.
- 5.1.2. There is significance in the fact that there were *ten* virgins. A Synagogue could be formed only when there were at least ten males in a locale. Thus, Jesus is speaking symbolically of congregations.
- 5.1.3. The virgins represent true believers—five of whom are foolish but not immoral. However, it then is necessary to explain the fact that five ‘believers’ are rejected.
- 5.1.4. The oil is a symbol for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. However, it then is necessary to explain how the foolish five had *some* oil but ran out of it.
- 5.1.5. Because the foolish virgins have *some* oil, they had made preparations, but they were resting on their past accomplishments.
- 5.1.6. Salvation (faith or works) symbolized by the oil cannot be shared between people. You cannot be saved by association.
- 5.1.7. The oil and the light from it represent the Word of God that the Church is to hold forth to the world.
- 5.1.8. All the virgins were asleep when the bridegroom came. This represents the state of the Church at the end of this age, when there will be little passion or enthusiasm for spiritual matters.
- 5.1.9. The bridegroom was “a long time in coming”. This has been used as a basis for commenting on the apparently faulty eschatology of the early Church.
- 5.1.10. The coming of the bridegroom refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. Or, it refers to the return of Jesus at the end of time.

When we read too much into each element we can be led into wrong directions.

5.2. How should we interpret this parable?

- 5.2.1. Since Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to bridesmaids we can conclude that they represent the Church—the bride of Christ (Rev 21.2, 9)—and that Jesus is the bridegroom (Ps 45). The Church is called to join Jesus at his great wedding feast (Rev 19.7, 9). It is our great hope that Jesus will return (Acts 1.11; 1 Thess 4.16) to this world to claim his bride and take her to be with himself forever.
- 5.2.2. However, the Church is made up of two classes of people, those with true faith and those without it. There has always been this mixture in the Covenant community, and even among those who have the Covenant sign placed upon them—the brothers, Jacob and Esau, being the archetypal example.
- 5.2.3. While five of the virgins in this parable make a pretence of belonging to Christ, they are not truly and personally converted. They claim to be looking for his coming, but at his return their hearts are found to be empty of a living faith—there is no real love of Christ in them and no humble trust in him. At their death, or on the return of Christ, these false professors find that their dependence on association with true believers is not a sufficient warrant for the door of heaven to be opened to them.
- 5.2.4. An aspect of local custom that Jesus uses is that the bridegroom in his day would go to the bride’s home in the evening for the wedding. Jesus likely intends that we understand this to be a reference to his second coming, which we are to expect could happen at any moment, when he will gather together all those who are part of his true Church and present them to the Father as his bride (1 Cor 15.23, 24).
- 5.2.5. Everybody in the Church is to be watchful to ensure that their *hearts* are right before God so that when Jesus returns, they will be welcomed into the wedding feast in heaven (1 Thess 5.1-6; 2 Pt 3.10-12; Rev 3.2-3). If not, Jesus will say to them, “I do not know you.”
- 5.2.6. This parable and the next one (Mt 25.14-30), are the last recorded parables that he spoke and they should be read and considered together. This parable speaks of the necessity of true faith

and the next of the necessity of the works that flow from that faith. Without faith, and the works evidencing that faith, there is no true salvation (James 2.17).

Theological treatises

1. What books in the Bible are primarily theological treatises?
 - 1.1. A theological treatise is a systematic exposition of doctrine. It consists of a methodical presentation of principles, facts, argument, and conclusions.
 - 1.2. None of OT books are theological treatises. Although the OT books are filled with theology, and it is possible to derive most of the essential elements of systematic theology from the OT books.
 - 1.3. The NT books which are primarily theological treatises, or include a major portion which are theological treatises, were all written by Paul—although portions of Peter’s epistles include theological components. Paul is the great systematiser of theology. What are the main *theological* themes that he addresses? They are:
 - 1.3.1. The lordship of Jesus Christ.
 - 1.3.2. The priesthood of Jesus.
 - 1.3.3. The resurrection of Jesus and of the saints.
 - 1.3.4. Justification by faith through grace.
 - 1.3.5. Obedience to the law is an outworking of salvation, displayed by love, not a means of salvation.
 - 1.4. What are Paul’s theological treatises? They are:
 - 1.4.1. Romans – This is by far the most systematically reasoned portion of the Bible. In it Paul traces the process of salvation from rebellion to belief to obedience.
 - 1.4.2. 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians is primarily a handbook for operating a church congregation. However, chapter 15 is the definitive defense of Christ’s resurrection and of the resurrection of believers.
 - 1.4.3. Galatians – Paul wrote this letter as a counter to those who taught that Christians must observe the ceremonial aspects of the Law to be accepted by God. Paul states, “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2.16). He defends true Christian freedom.
 - 1.4.4. Ephesians – The first three chapters of Ephesians expound the mystery of the Gospel which is available to all who believe by grace through faith, not by works (Eph 2.8-9).
 - 1.4.5. Colossians – Paul confronts false teachers who, as in Galatia, were attempting to impose rules about ceremonial practices. This treatise explicitly presents the deity of Jesus, who is, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1.15), and how reconciliation was accomplished through his shed blood.
 - 1.4.6. Hebrews⁷⁵ – It is only in Hebrews that we learn that Jesus, the God-man, is the great high priest. As this priest he offered himself as the final sacrifice for sin and has fulfilled all the demands of the old ceremonial system.

In the books which are primarily theological treatises, Paul first presents his systematic arguments and then he applies the theology to the Christian life.
2. What are challenges we might encounter when interpreting Paul’s theological treatises.
 - 2.1. The theological treatises are mainly in the form of propositional statements and should be relatively easy for anyone to interpret when taken in their plain sense.
 - 2.2. However, most of the challenges we will encounter with interpretations of these texts is when commentators (or we) impose pre-conceived theological biases on what Paul states. For example:
 - 2.2.1. Interpreting Paul’s statements about the law to teach that the OT law is abolished (advocating antinomianism), rather than understanding him to be dealing with attempts to earn salvation

⁷⁵ [Was Paul the Author of Hebrews?](#)

- through law keeping.
- 2.2.2. Claiming that Paul was a misogynist or narrow-minded prude and bigot who was culture-bound within his pre-modern patriarchal structures.
- 2.2.3. Being offended by Paul's exclusivity—no one can be saved without a personal relationship with Jesus (Rom 1.16-17; 1 Cor 1.18, 24; 1 Tim 2.5-6).
- 2.2.4. Claiming that Paul's theology *developed*—e.g., his understanding of the parousia (second coming) of Jesus.
- 2.2.5. Ignoring portions of the NT written by Paul which many modern interpreters question as being of Pauline authorship—such as Hebrews—and getting an incomplete view on Paul's teachings.

Letters

1. Another literary genre included in the Bible is epistolary—i.e., letters. They are often structured to include a:
 - 1.1. Identification of the author
 - 1.2. Greeting or salutation
 - 1.3. Thanksgiving for the recipient(s) or a prayer for the recipient(s)
 - 1.4. Body addressing a key topic or a number of topics
 - 1.5. Conclusion, with greetings and a benediction.
2. Communication via letters is mentioned in the OT (e.g., Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther). For example, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the captives to encourage them (Jer 29.1-23).
3. However, the epistolary form of communication is most evident in the NT. What books in the NT are in the form of letters?

All the books after Acts through Revelation are epistles to:

 - An individual (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon).
 - A congregation (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians).
 - A group of congregations (Revelation).
 - The scattered Church (Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude).

Although, not usually included in the epistolary genre, the Gospel of Luke and Acts were addressed to an individual—Theophilus (Lk 1.3; Acts 1.1).
4. Since the epistles in the NT have content which falls under one of the other literary genre, the interpretive guidelines for those genres should be applied to the interpretation of the epistles' content. However, there are additional guidelines which we should consider when interpreting passages in the epistles.
 - 4.1. It can prove helpful to identify the audience, date, and place of authorship of the epistles. For example, it appears that Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans while he was in Corinth. His observations of the sexual depravity in Corinth likely influenced what Paul wrote in the latter portion of chapter 1. This is an application of the guideline we develop earlier—Consider the historical context.
 - 4.2. No single letter addresses a full spectrum of theology. The letters were written to address particular needs (e.g., issues in Corinth, pending persecution [1 Peter, Revelation], false teachings [Galatians], forgiveness [Philemon], encouragement and guidance for young pastors [Timothy and Titus]). So, it is important to take the full set the epistles when developing a systematic interpretation of any passage. For example, we should not interpret 1 Corinthians 14.33b-35 without also considering what Paul has to say in 1 Timothy 2.13-15. This is an application of the

guideline we developed earlier—Use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Apocalyptic

1. What does ‘apocalyptic’ mean?
 - 1.1. It comes from a Greek word (ἀποκαλύπτω) that means ‘to uncover’ or ‘to reveal’ and is translated as ‘revelation’ (Rev 1.1). Thus, ‘apocalypse’ as John uses it, is not speaking of the *form* of the communication, but the *contents*—that is, truth that is disclosed by God to mankind (Lk 2.32; Rom 16.25; 1 Cor 14.6, 26; Gal 1.12; Eph 1.17). While we often use the term ‘apocalyptic’ to refer to truth that God reveals through visions of strange phenomena, it can also be applied to the unveiling of any truth which we need to know but cannot know unless God makes it known to us. From this perspective, all of the Bible is actually ‘apocalyptic’, not just the book of Revelation.
 - 1.2. The word is also used in a modern colloquial sense to refer to momentous or catastrophic events (e.g., a major infestation of locusts or a possible nuclear holocaust) or events which supposedly portend the end of the world.
 - 1.3. There is considerable overlap between the prophecy genre and the apocalyptic genre in the Bible. The primary distinction is that apocalyptic portions of the Bible appear to be based on visions, often facilitated by angelic beings, of extraordinary creatures and phenomena. These visions often use descriptions of spatial-temporal entities and events to reveal spiritual realities. The visions were descriptions for an era when they did not have access to the special effects used in movie making today.
 - 1.4. The genre of Biblical literature that is called *apocalyptic* includes portions of OT books, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Amos, and Zechariah, which have apocalyptic features (i.e., visions of strange phenomena), and the NT book of Revelation.
2. How are we to interpret Biblical apocalyptic literature—with a focus on the book of Revelation?
 - 2.1. The guidelines which we identified for interpreting prophecy apply when we interpret Revelation, these are:
 - Conditional vs unconditional application
 - Spiritual vs temporal fulfillment
 - Partial fulfillment vs complete fulfillment
 - Use of figurative language
 - Use of cosmic terminology.
 - 2.2. The book of Revelation also has the form of an epistle or letter (Rev 1.4-8), directed to a specific 1st-century audience. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not consider that it was designed to inform this primary audience will be at risk of misunderstanding the meaning and purpose of the book.
 - 2.2.1. Thus, it is a mistake to read Revelation as if it begins, “John to the 300,000 churches that are in the United States of America”.
 - 2.2.2. Likewise, it is a mistake to assume that Revelation is designed to provide earth-ending signs to an audience in the far-distant future from when it was written.
 - 2.2.3. When we read and attempt to interpret Revelation, we are not to look for its primary meaning in current events and headlines in the news, but to what it meant to Christians facing the prospect of persecution in Neronian Rome.
 - 2.3. We must avoid approaching Revelation with assumptions about its audience and purpose—i.e., we must not read into the text what we want it to say. We would not read a Marvel comic book about Thor and claim that it is presenting world history. Likewise, we should not read a novel that presents an alternate history of WW II, in which America is ruled by Germany and Japan with a neutral zone between, as described in Philip Dick’s, *The Man in the High Castle*, and treat it as presenting history. So, when we read and interpret Revelation, we need to read it as it was intended

to be read—as an encouraging message for those facing pending persecution and as a warning to those who ignore God and his word—and not as a history of the end of the world written in advance.

3. What are some of the interpretations that have been applied to Revelation?
 - 3.1. *Extreme future fulfilment*. All of the contents of Revelation, from at least Revelation 4.1 onward, speaks of a time far-distant from the first recipients of John's letter—that is, it speaks of events which are to occur around the time of Christ's second coming.
 - 3.2. *Historic fulfilment*. The bulk of Revelation (Rev 1.10-19.21) describes events which occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) or before the destruction of Rome (e.g., in 410 or 476 AD), and the remainder (chapters 21-22) refers to the time of Christ's second coming.
 - 3.3. *Extreme immediacy*. All of revelation describes events which occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD), and chapters 21-22 refer to the establishment of the Church as the new Jerusalem.
 - 3.4. *Progressive fulfilment*. Revelation 1.10-19.21 refers to events which began to unfold after Christ's ascension and will continue until his second coming. The remainder of Revelation (chapters 21-22) relates to the immediate time of the second of coming of Christ. The seven letters, seals, bowls, trumpets, and visions relate to historic ages. Proponents of this view associate historic events (e.g., the formalization of the Roman Catholic Church's papacy, the Reformation, or the establishment of Israel in the 20th century) with prophecies in Revelation.
 - 3.5. *Symbolic interpretation*. Revelation 1.10-19.21 refers symbolically to events which occur repeatedly in the nations of the world and the Church, in every age.
4. What can we conclude about these approaches to the interpretation of Revelation?
 - 4.1. Jesus tells John that he will show him *events* that must take place. Thus, a purely *symbolic interpretation* does not appear to fit the spirit of the revelation John receives.
 - 4.2. The similarity between the wording in Revelation 4.1 and Daniel 2.28-29, 45 seems to indicate that the fulfilment of the visions would begin immediately 'after this' (as they did for the then reigning king, Nebuchadnezzar), and could continue for some time; which rules out the *extreme future fulfilment* view. The book was written to encourage 1st century believers in fledgling congregations who were facing persecution. Therefore, the meaning of the visions must have been relevant to their immediate situations.
 - 4.3. The *progressive fulfilment* view places too much of the book outside of immediate situation of the initial recipients and is too fraught with interpretive difficulties (e.g., which events prophesied in Revelation can be aligned with the rise of Nazism in Europe).
 - 4.4. Jesus differentiates between events around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24.1-35; Mk 13.1-31; Lk 21.5-33) and his second coming (Mt 24.36-44; Mk 13.32-33; Lk 21.34-38). If he structures the visions of Revelation in the same way, this rules out the *extreme immediacy* view.
 - 4.5. Thus, the *historic fulfilment* view appears best to fit with the immediate challenges faced by the first recipients of the letter, the events which occurred around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, and Jesus' declaration, "I am coming soon" (Rev 3.11; Rev 22.7, 12). However, this view also presents interpretive challenges.
 - 4.6. A possible approach is to combine the *historic fulfilment* and *symbolic interpretation* approaches to an interpretation of Revelation.

E. Biblical interpretation case studies

We have considered how to interpret a number of passages as we have been developing the interpretive guidelines—e.g., how to interpret proverbs, hyperbolic language, or different Biblical genre. The following case studies have been selected to provide a few examples of applying the guidelines. Many more examples could have been selected.

Leviticus 19.19; Deuteronomy 22.9-11.

- You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material. (Lev 19.19).
 - “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest the whole yield be forfeited, the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together. (Dt 22.9-11).
1. Do these passage prohibit the crossbreeding of domestic bulls with bison females (‘beefalo’) or of horses with donkeys (mules or hinnies), prohibit us from wearing socks made with wool and manmade fibres, or prohibit a farmer from planting nitrogen producing legumes between rows of corn seeds?
 2. What are possible ways that might be suggested for dealing with these passages?
 - 2.1. Some might claim that these laws are irrelevant (and even a mistake), and that we can just ignore them. They would appeal to practical considerations, such as:
 - 2.1.1. The belief of many that planting corn, beans, and squash in a home garden will increase the yield of all three crops or that intercropping different plants appears to reduce insect infestations.^{76, 77}
 - 2.1.2. The durability of clothing made with cotton and manmade fibres or with wool and manmade fibres.
 - 2.1.3. The more robust mule (or hinny) vs a standard horse.
 - 2.2. Some claim that these laws no longer apply because we are no longer under the Mosaic covenant, and they can be dismissed along with much (all) of the law in the OT. This approach is invalid, based on the guidelines we developed when considering how to interpret the Law genre.
 - 2.3. It could be that comparing the passages provides interpretive guidance and that the prohibitions are explicitly detailed and should not be generalized.
 - 2.3.1. The Leviticus passage speaks of a field being sown with two kinds of seed, but the Deuteronomy passage appears to limit this to a seed crop being planted within a vineyard. Thus, intercropping field crops would not an issue.
 - 2.3.2. The Leviticus passage refers to a cloth made with two kinds of material, but the Deuteronomy passage specifies that the two fibres are wool and linen. Thus, as long as we don’t mix wool and linen there shouldn’t be an issue.
 - 2.3.3. The Leviticus passage prohibits breeding two different *kinds* of *cattle*.
 - 2.3.3.1. David had Solomon sit on a mule (1 Ki 1.33-34, 38, 44), the product of a male donkey and female horse. So, we might conclude that the Jews at that time did not interpret this command against breeding two kinds of cattle (i.e., bovines) to apply to all classes of domesticated animals (e.g., equines). However, this interpretation is a form of ‘splitting hairs’ since the Hebrew word (בְּהֵמָה) translated as ‘cattle’ may not refer specifically to bovines but to domesticated beasts in general—i.e., those used in farming.
 - 2.3.3.2. It has also been noted that horses and donkeys are species within the original created kind (because they can interbreed, although the produce infertile offspring), so from the perspective of the creation order this command does not prohibit interbreeding of horses and donkeys any more than it would prohibit the interbreeding of two breeds of horses. However, the Hebrew word (כֹּלֵאִים) translated as ‘kind’ here is different

⁷⁶ [Intercropping Empower Reduces Insect Pests and Increases Biodiversity in Agro-Ecosystem \(scirp.org\)](https://scirp.org/Intercropping-Empower-Reduces-Insect-Pests-and-Increases-Biodiversity-in-Agro-Ecosystem)

⁷⁷ [The Effect of Intercropping Cabbage-Cowpea on Insects Population, Diversity and Interactions \(irispublishers.com\)](https://irispublishers.com/The-Effect-of-Intercropping-Cabbage-Cowpea-on-Insects-Population-Diversity-and-Interactions)

from the word (מִינֵה) also translated as ‘kind’, used in Genesis 1.24, so we should not base our argument on our understanding of the English word ‘kind’.

However, observations which focus on the specifics do not necessarily address the overriding purpose for why these prohibitions were given.

- 2.4. It has been suggested that these passages are part of the ceremonial holiness and separation laws which have been abrogated in their specific *forms* with the completed work of Jesus. This is probably the proper way to approach these prohibitions. However, these prohibitions do not appear in isolation or in association with other laws dealing with ritual purity.

- 2.4.1. The Leviticus passage follows laws related to loving a neighbour and is followed by laws related to sexual purity, among other things.

- 2.4.2. The passage from Deuteronomy appears in a collection of laws which deal with caring for a neighbour’s property, a prohibition on cross-dressing, and a requirement to provide a safety barrier.

This makes it difficult to isolate these passages into the category of holiness and separation laws.

3. These prohibitions were likely given to the Jews as concrete instances for them so that they could display ritual separation from Gentiles in order to exhibit an outward sign of holiness (Lev 1.1-2; Lev 20:22-23, 26).
 - 3.1. Instances of ritual holiness regulations (not including male circumcision which was not publicly observable) included prohibitions against intermarriage with Gentiles (Dt 7.3-4), eating meat of animals defined to be unclean (Lev 11.1-47; Dt 14.1-21), eating leaved bread at the Passover (Ex 12.19; Dt 16.4) or offering grain-based products with leaven or honey present (Lev 2.11; Lev 6.17), cutting the edges of their beards (Lev 19.27), and the specific selected instances of mixing two different kinds of things (Lev 19.19; Dt 22.9-11).
 - 3.2. These outward instances of ritual national separation no longer apply since there is now no difference between Jew and Gentile who are in Christ (Gal 3.28-29; Eph 2.11-14; Eph 3.6). Peter was taught this lesson through the vision which he was shown of the unclean animals being let down on a large sheet (Acts 10.9-16).
 - 3.3. These outward instances of ritual national separation were outward physical symbols (a shadow; Heb 8.5) of principles that are to be manifested in the inward spiritual (the reality) life of believers (Mt 16.11, 12; 2 Cor 6.14-18) and no longer need to be observed in their physical form (Heb 9.8–10).
 - 3.4. In contrast to many other religions, Biblical Christianity does not have required instances of visible separation from others around us. Sikhs have turbans and ritual daggers; Orthodox Jews have kippahs, tassels, and long sideburns; Muslims have hijabs and burqas; Buddhist monks and nuns wear saffron robes and shave their heads; Hindus use permanent and temporary (henna) tattoos. Some Christians today attempt to demarcate (separate) themselves from the broader society with distinctive garments (monks and nuns), plain long skirts, collars (priests and pastors), head coverings (scarves or hats), jewellery (crosses), long beards, etc. Christians should demarcate themselves through holy lives, which the ritual separation and holiness laws of the OT symbolized.

[Exodus 23.19; Deuteronomy 14.21](#)

- The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God. “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” (Ex 23.19; Ex 34.26).
- You shall not eat anything that has died naturally. You may give it to the sojourner who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” (Dt 14.21).

1. How might we interpret the statement, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”?

Suggestions have included:

- 1.1. It was a prohibition against a pagan practice (idolatrous part of a fertility cult) of the Canaanites which the Jews were to avoid. This is certainly a possibility, however, the archaeological evidence that this was part of *idolatrous* practices is questionable.⁷⁸
- 1.2. The prohibition was a sign of symbolic cruelty to destroy a baby in the milk that was supposed to sustain it or shows contempt for a parent-child relationship. This appears to be nothing more than a guess.
- 1.3. The prohibition was given as a dietary provision since mixing meat with milk made it difficult to digest. There does not appear to be any research-based scientific evidence to support this. This appears to be a *post hoc* fallacy.
- 1.4. It was prohibited because Jews were supposed to cook with olive oil, not butter. There is not a particle of evidence in the Bible to support this view.

Some Jews keep two sets of utensils and some even have two kitchens based on this prohibition so that they can keep the preparation of food containing dairy products separate from foods containing meat products.

2. An intriguing suggestion is that the expression is a Hebrew idiom which means “do not mix the new with the old”. This fits the context of the references in Exodus. The ones offering their firstfruits (e.g., of grain) were not to fill partway a basket with the remnants of the previous year’s produce and then top it off with new produce. However, the Deuteronomy passage does not refer to offerings of firstfruits. Also, the suggestion that this is an idiom is relatively recent and without any support from Christian commentators during the preceding almost 2,000 years. Since the OT has been translated for over 2,000 years into other languages by experts in both Hebrew and the target language, some of them might have translated the words into an equivalent idiom in the target language or provided an explanatory (‘dynamic equivalent’) translation. Also, ritualistic observant Jews have applied this command to the explicit separation of milk and meat products for over 3,000 years.
3. It may be that this is another instance of a visible ritual separation and holiness (similar to what we considered previously; Lev 19.19; Dt 22.9-11) which would indicate that the Jews were to be distinct from the nations around them—it may have been in response to pagan practices (i.e., the first suggestion above).
 - 3.1. The preceding context in the Deuteronomy passage is not dealing with ceremonial offerings but with indicators or ritual holiness. Also, the words, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God”, which immediately precede the prohibition in the Deuteronomy passage, appear to indicate that this prohibition fell within the class of ceremonial holiness and separation laws.
 - 3.2. The prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk could be similar to the prohibition against the use of leaven in bread during specific seasons or against eating pig or hare meat (Leviticus chapter 11).
 - 3.3. If this is the case, the words are to be taken in their plain sense and not as an idiom.
 - 3.4. However, Christians are not required to keep milk and meat products separate today because the symbolic holiness and separation laws have been set aside with the integration of Jews and Gentiles into the Church.

Luke 3.35-36; Genesis 11.12

- the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech (Lk 3.35-36)
- When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. (Gen 11.12)

⁷⁸ Ratner, R., & Zuckerman, B. (1986). “A Kid in Milk”?: New Photographs of “KTU” 1.23, Line 14*. Hebrew Union College Annual, 57, 15–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23507691>

1. What difference is there between the two genealogies?
 - 1.1. A person named Cainan appears between Shelah and Arphaxad in Luke's genealogy.
2. Why is it important to address this difference?
 - 2.1. The primary reason we need to consider this difference is that the presence of this additional name in Luke is used as the basis for attacks against the accuracy of the Genesis genealogies and the reliability of the Hebrew OT text of the Bible.
 - 2.2. If it is assumed that Luke's list is accurate and that a name was deliberately or mistakenly excluded from the Genesis 11 genealogy. This assumption is then used as an argument for concluding that other names are also missing from the Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 genealogies and that only selected names are presented in the narrative.
 - 2.3. If only selected names are present in Genesis 5 and Genesis 11, this would present a serious problem for anyone who believes that the Genesis genealogies are the only legitimate chronometer of the early history of mankind. We could therefore not conclude that the Genesis account can be used as an indicator of the amount of the time that passed from creation to the flood and from the flood to Abraham. This would open the door to the long-ages view that claims that the world and human history are much older than the approximately 6,000 years calculated from the genealogies and other dated events in Scripture.
3. What are some ways that could be suggested to explain the (apparent) contradiction?
 - 3.1. A common approach, among Bible-believing scholars, for addressing this difference is to suggest that Luke, being a Gentile and writing for a Gentile audience, used the Greek OT translation rather than the Hebrew OT text when writing his Gospel. In Septuagint Greek OT translation,⁷⁹ the name Cainan appears with information about the age of his father (Arphaxad) at the time of his birth. Some argue that the name Cainan was added by mistake to the Greek OT and that Luke mistakenly copied it.
 - 3.2. Others argue that the Greek version of the OT is accurate and that a Jewish scribe mistakenly dropped a name and the associated ages from the Hebrew text of Genesis 11 during the copying process.
 - 3.3. What is a difficulty with either of these interpretations?
 - 3.3.1. They posit a serious error in the text of the Bible.
 - 3.3.2. In the first case, if Luke copied an erroneous Greek text this would mean that the original of the Gospel of Luke contained an error when it came from his hand. This implicates the Holy Spirit who was superintending the production of the NT.
 - 3.3.3. In the second case, there is an error in the OT text, based on a faulty Hebrew manuscript tradition and we must rely on less reliable manuscripts of the Greek translation to fix the problem with the Hebrew. However, there are significant variations in the ages assigned to the patriarchs in different versions of the OT Greek translation, but no variations among Hebrew manuscripts. This suggests that the manuscripts of the Greek OT translation are not as reliable as the Hebrew manuscripts. In this case, we could not be sure that we have an accurate OT.
 - 3.4. Others suggest that an early Christian copyist's eyes shifted to a preceding line, and he mistakenly added the name Cainan to a NT manuscript he was copying. However, there is no indication that this name was added during the copying process—there are no documented variations among early Greek NT manuscripts at this point in the text. Rather the name Cainan appears to have been what Luke included in his original account, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
4. What might be a better way to solve this apparent contradiction?

⁷⁹ Swete, H. B. (1909). *The Old Testament in Greek: According to the Septuagint* (Ge 11:13). Cambridge University Press.

- 4.1. It is to accept that all the genealogies (Genesis 10; Genesis 11; and Luke 3) are correct, and that we must understand them to serve different purposes.
 - 4.1.1. That genealogies may serve different purposes can be seen from the difference between Matthew's and Luke's genealogies.
 - 4.1.2. Matthew indicates that Jesus had the right to the throne of David through Solomon and his descendants to Joseph, by adoption.
 - 4.1.3. Luke traces Jesus's ancestral line through his mother Mary, through Nathan, another son of David.
 - 4.1.4. In a similar way, there may be differences between the accounts in Genesis and Luke. The Genesis 10 and Genesis 11 accounts appear to trace the direct assignment of the blessing of the inheritance rights from one son to the next—not necessarily of the firstborn sons.
- 4.2. Possible scenarios could explain the difference between the genealogies:
 - 4.2.1. Cainan could have been Arphaxad's firstborn but did not receive the blessing; rather it passed to Arphaxad's grandson, Shelah—Biblical examples of blessings skipping a firstborn son include Shem replacing Japheth, Jacob replacing Esau, and Ephraim replacing Manasseh.
 - 4.2.2. Cainan may have been Arphaxad's firstborn, who married at a young age and died shortly after his son Shelah was born. Arphaxad may have then adopted Shelah and declared him to be his heir—for example, Naomi declares Ruth's son Obed to be her own son (Ruth 4.17).
 - 4.2.3. Cainan may have been a son-in-law of Arphaxad, and the blessing skipped him and was passed to the male heir, Shelah.
- 4.3. We should note that the Hebrew term 'begot', translated as 'fathered' (ESV), can also be translated as 'became the father of' (NIV), which can be through adoption or declaration (Ps 2.7) and not necessarily through direct conception. Genesis 11 could be focusing on the inheritance rights of the declared firstborn, whereas Luke could be focusing on the direct genealogical descent of Jesus from Adam to his adoptive father, Joseph (Lk 3.23).

John 13.12-15

- When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."
1. What is the background to the practice of foot washing?
 - 1.1. It was found in the hospitality customs in regions where open sandals were the primary form of footwear. A host would provide water for guests to wash their feet. He might provide a servant to wash and dry the feet of the guests or even serve the guests himself by washing their feet.
 - 1.2. The practice (of at least providing water for foot washing) is referred to in the Bible (Gen 18.4; Gen 19.2; Gen 24.32; Gen 43.24; 1 Sam 25.41; Jn 12.1-7; Lk 7.44)
 - 1.3. An honored person could offer to wash another person's feet as a sign of humility (1 Sam 25.41). Jesus did this as a sign of his voluntary act of humility of going to the cross to save sinners.
 2. There is evidence that foot washing was practiced in many churches and monasteries throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation period. There are some Protestant denominations which include foot washing as a religious ritual today—whether on a weekly basis or in association with events on a liturgical calendar (e.g., at Easter, since the events described in John 13 are associated with the Passover).
 3. Jesus states, "you also ought to wash one another's feet" to follow his example (Jn 13.15). Does this teach that we should introduce foot washing on Sundays before our services? At least, if we did this,

people would stop tracking into the building mud, slush, and salt 😊.

4. There is nothing in the context which indicates that this should be a religious ritual or be associated with worship services. Therefore, it would be wrong to include this as an element of religious ritual worship during a church assembly.
5. How are we to apply what Jesus says?
 - 5.1. If we lived in an environment where feet regularly became dirty, then we would want to offer as a courtesy a means for people to wash their feet when they entered our homes, after they had removed their shoes or sandals. In some excessively dry and dusty situations, this might include providing a foot-washing sink in a foyer or washroom in a church building—the low sink used for washing mops in our utility room is an example, and modern ceramic foot washing sinks are available. This is similar to our providing masks and hand sanitizer in the foyers of the church building during the COVID situation.
 - 5.2. However, this is not explicitly what Jesus is teaching. He is using foot washing as a symbol of:
 - 5.2.1. *Selflessness* – Jesus is the Creator and Lord of the universe. He is the Holy One who is worshiped by angels and men. Yet, he washed the feet of all his disciples, including Peter, who would deny him, and Judas, who would betray him. We must grasp the profound depth of this example. We have trouble being kind and gracious to those who love us or to those we consider equals or superiors, but the humility that Jesus expects from us is to kneel before our enemies and those who hate us. A lack of true humility is the primary cause of every feud and failure in life. As Peter says, recalling this event, “clothe yourselves with humility” (1 Pt 5.5).
 - 5.2.2. *Service* – Jesus tells the disciples (Jn 13.15) that he gave an *example* that they, and we, should follow. Jesus is speaking metaphorically; not necessarily of taking a bowl of water and towel, but of sacrificial service to all our fellow disciples in the Church. Jesus speaks of service not sacrament.
 - 5.2.3. *Submission* – Foot-washing is service, but it is more. It is submission to Jesus as Lord and to one another. Not only are we not greater than our master who sent us (Jn 13.16), we are not greater than others in the Church. His example is a rebuke to our pride, selfish attitudes, and competition, and an appeal for mutual submission.

Romans 5.18-19; 1 Corinthians 15.22

- Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5.18-19).
 - For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor 15.22).
1. How might some interpret these verses?
 - 1.1. As teaching universalism—i.e., that all people will be saved because the death of Jesus paid the debt of sin for all mankind, just as Adam’s sin brought death on all mankind.
 - 1.2. However, these verses do not teach the universal salvation of all people. Paul does not contradict himself or Jesus—all people will not be saved (Mt 25.46; 2 Thess 1.5-9).
 2. How are we to understand Paul’s usage of ‘all’?
 - 2.1. Paul uses ‘all’ in the covenantal context—all who are represented by each mediator and partake of the mediator’s nature (Rom 5.18-19).
 - 2.2. The two uses of ‘all’ are not co-extensive. The first ‘all’ applies to all mankind who share Adam’s sinful nature through original sin. The second ‘all’ applies to all those for who are in Christ through

faith and repentance (1 Cor 15.23), and for whom Christ died. Outside of Adam, no one dies; outside of Christ no one is raised to new life.

3. What is a significant issue raised by the universalist interpretation of ‘all’?
 - 3.1. If all mankind—every last person—will be saved, then there is no reason to make any distinction between religions. In fact, there is no reason to have any religion at all, no reason to preach the Gospel, no reason to obey God, and no reason to repent of sin.
 - 3.2. The logical conclusion of this interpretation is, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (Isa 22.13; 1 Cor 15.32).

Romans 16.16

1. Some writers on Christian ethics point to commands in the NT that they claim are *culturally* specific. They extrapolate from these examples to argue that other commands are therefore culturally relative—such as, Paul’s command for women to remain silent in the church (1 Cor 14.34) or his condemnation of homosexual practices (1 Cor 6.9). Let’s consider one example of these supposed culturally specific commands.
 - Greet one another with a holy kiss. [Rom 16.16; also, 1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.12; 1 Thess 5.26.]
2. Paul instructs his readers to greet one another with a holy kiss. Paul also instructs the Thessalonians immediately prior (1 Thess 5.25) to pray from him. He gives the same instruction at other times (Eph 6.19; Col 4.3; 2 Thess 3.1; Heb 13.18). Clearly, we are not to pray for Paul’s ministry today. So, we can interpret his instructions to greet one another not as *culturally* specific but as *individually* specific.
3. However, his instruction is consistent with the principle that we should be friendly and loving toward one another (Jn 13.34-35; Jn 15.12; 1 Pt 4.8).

Philippians 2.6-11

- who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father
1. It is claimed that the Apostles and first generations of the Church sang non-Psalm compositions in their worship.
 - 1.1. One commonly heard claim used to support this view is that the NT contains samples of early Christian hymns. For example, Ralph P. Martin suggests that the most likely ‘hymnic’ sections of the NT are Ephesians 5.14; Philippians 2.6-11; Colossians 1.15-20; 1 Timothy 3.16; and Hebrews 1.3. He does not give the standards for pronouncing these as hymns, as he says this would require a technical discussion and he refers the reader to an article he wrote entitled *Vox Evangelica*.⁸⁰
 - 1.2. Other suggestions for NT hymnic material include John 1.1-18; Acts 4.25-31; 1 Corinthians 13. Ephesians 1.3-14; and Romans 11.33-36.

⁸⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 47-51.

2. What evidence would be required to support the idea that these portions of the NT are Christian hymns used during worship services?
 - 2.1. There is no Biblical or extra-Biblical evidence that any of these portions of the NT were ever put into the Hebrew or Greek style of hymns or songs at the time of the Apostles or in the immediate post-apostolic period, although some of the passages do have 'hymnic elements' (e.g., use of parallelism, rhythmic structure, or selected vocabulary).
 - 2.2. None of the source material from which Paul, for example, is supposed to have quoted Colossians 1.15-20 has survived. This does not prove that the supposed hymnic portions did not exist before the Biblical text was composed, but it does prove that if they existed, God did not deem them worth preserving in manuscript form.
 - 2.3. Even if portions of the NT can be cast in poetic form, there is no evidence that they were sung by the Apostles or the first century Church. It is pure speculation and conjecture to suggest that the early Church ever considered any part of the Gospels, Acts, or Paul's epistles as songs of worship.
3. What are other reasons for rejecting the claim that portions of the NT are early Christian hymns or hymn fragments?
 - 3.1. There is no evidence from the Biblical context that these suggested portions of the NT are songs or even cast as poetry.
 - 3.2. None of the supposed hymnic portions are identified by the writers as being hymns or portions of hymns.
 - 3.3. Exalted theological writing tends to sound poetic because of the nature of the subject, even if it is not explicitly written as poetry, making it impossible to distinguish which portions of the NT could be supposed early hymns.
 - 3.4. Each person who reconstructs a particular portion of Scripture that he claims is hymnic, proposes versification, metre, etc., differently. This demonstrates that the hymnic form is not obvious within the text itself.
 - 3.5. Often the reconstruction of the supposed hymn requires imposition on the text, rather than derivation from it. For example, words have to be dropped or added to achieve the supposed strophic structure.
 - 3.6. It appears that the first hymns that were composed in the post-Apostolic era for use as (false) worship came from the hands of heretics, such as the Gnostics⁸¹ or Donatists⁸². For example, "It is well known that as early as the latter part of the second century, Bardesanes, a man of talent, who belonged to the Gnostic sect, and so was a zealous opponent of the doctrine of the Divinity of Jesus Christ, composed hymns and used them in the Syrian Church as a means of teaching and propagating his heretical opinions."⁸³

Revelation 9.16-17, 19

- The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the

⁸¹ See for example: Hans Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church, Volume I of History of the Early Church* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1937-1951), pp. 149-150; and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), p 207.

⁸² "[T]he Donatists reproach us with our grave chanting of the divine songs of the prophets in our churches, while they inflame their passions in their revels by the singing of psalms of human composition, which rouse them like the stirring notes of the trumpet on the battle-field. But when brethren are assembled in the church, why should not the time be devoted to singing of sacred songs, excepting of course while reading or preaching is going on ..." Augustine, Epistle 55.18.34, in: *Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume I, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.*

⁸³ William Wishart, "The Psalms in the Apostolic and Early Church," *Psalm Singers' Conference* (Belfast: Fountain Printing Works, 1903), p. 56.

color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ... For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

1. Some commentators have attempted to explain how such a large army (200,000,000) could be assembled.
 - 1.1. In the past, no nation (or Empire) had a sufficient population from which to recruit or conscript an army of this size. For example, the ancient Persian Empire, that fought against the Greeks at its peak, could theoretically have mustered around 1 million troops.
 - 1.2. So, some interpreters in the past have suggested that these mounted troops represent waves of attacks against Rome (east or west) or Europe, over decades or centuries, by Parthians, Asians from the north-east (e.g., the Huns), or Islamic armies sacking Jerusalem (637 or 1187 AD) and Constantinople (1453 AD), and eventually besieging Vienna (1529 AD).
 - 1.3. Since about the 1960s some interpreters have suggested that the communist Chinese could muster an army of 200 million. Today, the People's Liberation Army, the largest army in Asia, has about 1.6 million active-duty troops.
 - 1.4. With the advent of ISIS, some interpreters today make the assertion that an assembled horde of 200 million Muslims (10-15% of the world's population of Muslims) will cross the dried-up Euphrates River (Rev 16.12) and swarm into Europe, shortly before Christ returns to establish a thousand-year earthly reign.
2. Why are these interpretations misguided? They:
 - 2.1. Attempt to force figurative language into historical or current events; and each generation dismisses the previous generations' explanations and purposes new ones.
 - 2.2. Appeal to naive Christians who believe that Revelation was provided so that we can create a timeline for events leading up to Christ's return.
 - 2.3. Are proposed by self-appointed prophets who wish to impress us with their 'ability' to untangle the complexities of Revelation, by proposing even more complex interpretive schemes.
 - 2.4. Misunderstand the purpose of the trumpets of Revelation. The trumpet blasts do not describe pagan attacks directed against 'Christian' Rome or 'Christian' Europe but provide visions of world-wide judgements against unbelievers, throughout history, who engage in idolatry and practice sexual immorality (Rev 9.4, 18, 20-21).
 - 2.5. Ignore the symbolic nature of this vision, which describes in vivid terms the demonic legions that God sends out to harass and punish unbelievers, with the intention of showing them the extent of their depravity so that they might repent and be saved.

Revelation 16.16

- And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.
1. John indicates that the kings of the whole world (Rev 16.14) were assembled—by the three demonic frog-spirits; the dragon, beast, and false prophet (Rev 16.13)—in a place called Armageddon.
 - 1.1. The word 'armageddon' appears only here in Revelation. It does not appear in the OT, elsewhere in the NT, or in writings outside the Bible from the same era as the OT or NT. Thus, the meaning of the word is difficult to determine—other than that it appears to refer to a place.
 - 1.2. Many commentators assume that the place that is being referred to can be identified on a map of the Middle East. However, no such place can be identified. Therefore, most interpreters of this verse, dissect the word 'armageddon' into two parts: 'har' and 'mageddon', and state that the Hebrew prefix 'har' means mountain and that 'mageddon' refers to a town in ancient Israel called Megiddo, that was about 100km north-west of Jerusalem. They claim that Megiddo is an important

place because a decisive OT battle between Deborah and Sisera (Judges 5.19) was fought in the vicinity of the town. However, this appears to be a form of eisegesis—imposing an interpretation onto a text—since there is no clear correlation between what John sees in his vision and the battles of the OT. In addition, Megiddo isn't a mountain, and not even a hill. The mound on which the town is located rises at most 20m above the plain.

2. Those who claim that John's visions are describing physical events which will happen soon, conclude that two vast antichristian armies will assemble on the plain of Megiddo, centered around the ancient city's ruins, to engage in a single, great, and final battle—that may expand into a world war. After the battle, Jesus will supposedly return and establish an earthly kingdom, centred in Jerusalem, from which the saints will rule with him for 1,000 years.
3. Why is this interpretation misguided?
 - 3.1. Armageddon isn't a real place with geographic coordinates. It is a symbolic place—like the Mount Zion (Rev 14.1), Babylon (Rev 14.8), Sodom (Rev 11.8), Egypt (Rev 11.8), and Euphrates (Rev 9.14), referred to in Revelation.
 - 3.2. The battle is not a physical battle in a geographic locale, since John is reporting about a great spiritual battle that has been raging since Satan beguiled Eve in the garden. The battle is spiritual (Eph 6.12), and the conflict between good and evil continues to rage in “the battle of the great day of God the Almighty” (Rev 16.14). Although, Satan is likely now intensifying his persecution of Christians and his attempts to lead astray many from mankind, since he knows that his time is short (Rev 12.12), the battle of Armageddon is not a single battle that will occur only once.
 - 3.3. Armageddon is a symbol for every battle in which the leaders of nations, under Satan's thrall and slave mastery, reject God's Law (e.g., endorse commercial activities on the Lord's Day), enact laws that are subversive to justice (e.g., permitting Muslims to practice sharia) and destructive to human life (e.g., permitting abortion and euthanasia), suppress true worship (e.g., outlawing prayer in the name of Jesus in public forums), introduce false religious practices (e.g., permitting public school students to hold Satanic clubs, but not conduct a Bible study), and persecute Christians (e.g., claiming that teaching children about man created as male and female is child abuse).
 - 3.4. Armageddon might also be a symbol for personal battles in which believers are engaged as they resist Satan's temptations (1 Pt 5.8; James 4.7). However, this suggestion could be pushing toward allegory.

F. Bible References

01 Genesis	ch. 2, v. 17, pg., 27
ch. 1, v. 1, pg., 53, 67	ch. 3, v. 1, 4-5, pg., 7
ch. 1, v. 1-2	ch. 3, v. 1, 4-6, pg., 5
3, pg., 67	ch. 3, v. 1-4, pg., 45
ch. 1, v. 1-2.3, pg., 67	ch. 3, v. 15, pg., 6, 21, 63
ch. 1, v. 2, pg., 3, 53, 57, 85	ch. 4, v. 1, pg., 27
ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 53	ch. 5, v. 1-2, pg., 57
ch. 1, v. 8, pg., 49	ch. 5, v. 29, pg., 63
ch. 1, v. 24, pg., 85	ch. 6, v. 3, 7, 13, pg., 63
ch. 1, v. 26-27, pg., 57	ch. 6, v. 9-8.19, pg., 59
ch. 1, v. 27, pg., 3, 57	ch. 7, v. 2, pg., 48
ch. 1, v. , pg., 3, 21, 22, 49, 53, 57, 67, 85	ch. 7-50, pg., 17
ch. 1-11, pg., 53, 54, 58	ch. 9, v. 6, pg., 26
ch. 1-11?, pg., 53	ch. 10, v. 25-29, pg., 72
ch. 1-2, pg., 12	ch. 11, v. 12, pg., 2, 33, 86
ch. 1-6, pg., 17	ch. 11, v. 12-13, pg., 33

ch. 11, v. 13, pg., 87
 ch. 12-50, pg., 58
 ch. 15, v. 13, 16, pg., 63
 ch. 15, v. 16, pg., 63
 ch. 17, v. 1-14, pg., 63
 ch. 18, v. 4, pg., 88
 ch. 19, v. 2, pg., 88
 ch. 20, v. 16, pg., 43
 ch. 21, v. 31-32, pg., 40
 ch. 24, v. 2, pg., 28
 ch. 24, v. 2-4, pg., 40
 ch. 24, v. 7, pg., 40
 ch. 24, v. 32, pg., 88
 ch. 25, v. 14, pg., 72
 ch. 26, v. 3, pg., 40
 ch. 26, v. 12, pg., 42
 ch. 27, v. 29, 39-40, pg., 63
 ch. 28, v. 20-22, pg., 41
 ch. 28, v. 22, pg., 40
 ch. 31, v. 35, pg., 27
 ch. 41, v. 8, pg., 72
 ch. 43, v. 24, pg., 88
 ch. 49, v. 1-27, pg., 63
 ch. 11,, pg., 87

02 Exodus

ch. 8, v. 15, pg., 12
 ch. 9, v. 12, pg., 12
 ch. 12, v. 19, pg., 85
 ch. 15, v. 7, 8, pg., 67
 ch. 15, v. 12, pg., 67
 ch. 20, v. 9, pg., 36
 ch. 20, v. 11, pg., 22
 ch. 22, v. 19, pg., 61
 ch. 23, v. 8, pg., 61
 ch. 23, v. 19, pg., 2, 85
 ch. 32, v. 28, pg., 43
 ch. 34, v. 26, pg., 85
 ch. 20,, pg., 22

03 Leviticus

ch. 1, v. 1-2, pg., 85
 ch. 2, v. 11, pg., 85
 ch. 5, v. 4, pg., 41
 ch. 6, v. 17, pg., 85
 ch. 7, v. 16, pg., 40
 ch. 11, v. 1-47, pg., 85
 ch. 12, v. 2-4, pg., 33
 ch. 15, v. 33, pg., 28
 ch. 18, v. 9, pg., 61
 ch. 18, v. 22, pg., 50
 ch. 18, v. 23, pg., 61
 ch. 19, v. 12, pg., 41
 ch. 19, v. 19, pg., 2, 84, 85, 86
 ch. 19, v. 27, pg., 85

ch. 19, v. 31, pg., 61
 ch. 20, v. 6, pg., 61
 ch. 20, v. 13, pg., 50
 ch. 20, v. 15-16, pg., 61
 ch. 20, v. 18, pg., 28
 ch. 20, v. 22-23, 26, pg., 85
 ch. 25, v. 8-55, pg., 3
 ch. 25, v. 10, pg., 50
 ch. 25, v. 44-46, pg., 50
 ch. 26, v. 6, pg., 28
 ch. 26, v. 8, pg., 42
 ch. 27, v. 16-25, pg., 3

04 Numbers

ch. 2, v. 3, pg., 49
 ch. 3, v. 22, 28, 34, pg., 43
 ch. 3, v. 39, pg., 43
 ch. 3, v. 46-49, pg., 43
 ch. 6, v. 2, pg., 40
 ch. 7, v. 12-83, pg., 22
 ch. 24, v. 17-19, pg., 63
 ch. 29, v. 12-38, pg., 22
 ch. 30, v. 2, pg., 41
 ch. 30, v. 5, 8, 12, 13, pg., 41
 ch. 35, v. 20-23, pg., 61

05 Deuteronomy

ch. 1, v. 17, pg., 27
 ch. 4, v. 31, pg., 40
 ch. 4, v. 35, 39, pg., 12
 ch. 6, v. 13, pg., 41
 ch. 6, v. 16, pg., 18
 ch. 6, v. 22, pg., 9
 ch. 7, v. 3-4, pg., 85
 ch. 10, v. 17, pg., 27
 ch. 10, v. 20, pg., 41
 ch. 11, v. 10, pg., 27
 ch. 12, v. 8, pg., 3
 ch. 14, v. 1-21, pg., 85
 ch. 14, v. 21, pg., 2, 85
 ch. 15, v. 7-10, pg., 38
 ch. 16, v. 4, pg., 85
 ch. 16, v. 6, pg., 49
 ch. 17, v. 6, pg., 5, 23
 ch. 17, v. 16, pg., 20
 ch. 18, v. 11, pg., 61
 ch. 18, v. 15, 18-19, pg., 63
 ch. 19, v. 14, pg., 61
 ch. 19, v. 15, pg., 23
 ch. 20, v. 8, pg., 9, 27
 ch. 22, v. 5, pg., 61
 ch. 22, v. 8, pg., 17
 ch. 22, v. 9-11, pg., 2, 84, 85, 86
 ch. 22, v. 18, pg., 6
 ch. 23, v. 18, pg., 50

- ch. 23, v. 21, pg., 41
- ch. 23, v. 21-23, pg., 41
- ch. 25, v. 13-16, pg., 61
- ch. 27, v. 17, pg., 61
- ch. 27, v. 18, pg., 61
- ch. 27, v. 21, pg., 61
- ch. 27, v. 22, pg., 61
- ch. 27, v. 25, pg., 61
- ch. 29, v. 12, 14, pg., 40
- ch. 32, v. 39, pg., 12
- 06 Joshua
 - ch. 2, v. 8, pg., 15, 17
 - ch. 2, v. 8-11, pg., 15
 - ch. 8, v. 12, pg., 43
 - ch. 8, v. 17, pg., 27
 - ch. 9, v. 18-19, pg., 41
 - ch. 10, v. 13, pg., 15
 - ch. 23, v. 7, pg., 41
- 07 Judges
 - ch. 3, v. 20, pg., 17
 - ch. 3, v. 24, pg., 27
 - ch. 4, v. 16, pg., 27
 - ch. 5, v. 4, 5, pg., 68
 - ch. 5, v. 19, pg., 93
 - ch. 5, v. 20, pg., 68
- 08 Ruth
 - ch. 4, v. 17, pg., 88
- 09 1 Samuel
 - ch. 1, v. 11, pg., 40, 41
 - ch. 8, v. 10-18, pg., 63
 - ch. 9, v. 25-26, pg., 17
 - ch. 24, v. 3, pg., 9, 28
 - ch. 25, v. 22, pg., 27
 - ch. 25, v. 41, pg., 88
- 10 2 Samuel
 - ch. 7, v. 12-13, 16, pg., 64
 - ch. 23, v. 5, pg., 64
 - ch. 24, v. 3, pg., 42
 - ch. 24, v. 9, pg., 43
- 11 1 Kings
 - ch. 1, v. 33-34, 38, 44, pg., 84
 - ch. 2, v. 2, pg., 28
 - ch. 3, v. 9, 10, pg., 38
 - ch. 4, v. 30-31, pg., 72
 - ch. 8, v. 60, pg., 12
 - ch. 21, v. 27-29, pg., 63
 - ch. 22, v. 36, pg., 49
- 12 2 Kings
 - ch. 11, v. 4, pg., 40
 - ch. 13, v. 21, pg., 15
- 13 1 Chronicles
 - ch. 1, v. 17-18, 24, pg., 33
 - ch. 1, v. 30, pg., 72
- 15 Ezra
 - ch. 10, v. 5, pg., 40
- 16 Nehemiah
 - ch. 5, v. 12, pg., 40
 - ch. 7, v. , pg., 43
 - ch. 9, v. 29, pg., 54
 - ch. 13, v. 25, pg., 40
- 17 Esther
 - ch. 2, v. 6, pg., 59
 - ch. 5, v. 12, pg., 26
 - ch. 5, v. 14, pg., 26
 - ch. 6, v. 6-11, pg., 26
 - ch. 7, v. 9-10, pg., 26
- 18 Job
 - ch. 1, v. 1, pg., 72
 - ch. 1, v. 6-12, pg., 78
 - ch. 4, v. 7-9, pg., 34
 - ch. 5, v. 15, pg., 34
 - ch. 8, v. 5-7, pg., 35
 - ch. 9, v. 18, pg., 27
 - ch. 11, v. 5-6, pg., 71
 - ch. 12, v. 6, pg., 34
 - ch. 12, v. 13, pg., 73
 - ch. 19, v. 20, pg., 27
 - ch. 21, v. 7, 13, pg., 34
 - ch. 21, v. 7, pg., 34, 73
 - ch. 28, v. 28, pg., 71
 - ch. 29, v. 6, pg., 74
 - ch. 34, v. 17, pg., 71
 - ch. 36, v. 6, pg., 71
 - ch. 36, v. 10-12, pg., 73
 - ch. 38, v. 1-4, pg., 71
 - ch. 41, v. 24, pg., 26
- 19 Psalms
 - 120, 68
 - ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 22, 66
 - ch. 1, v. 3-4, pg., 22
 - ch. 1, v. 4, pg., 66
 - ch. 1, v. 6, pg., 22
 - ch. 2, v. 7, pg., 88
 - ch. 12, v. 3, pg., 67
 - ch. 15, v. 4, pg., 41
 - ch. 16, v. 4, pg., 67
 - ch. 16, v. 10, pg., 6, 63
 - ch. 17, v. 8, pg., 9
 - ch. 18, v. 2, pg., 66
 - ch. 18, v. 13-14, pg., 68
 - ch. 18, v. 30, pg., 5
 - ch. 18, v. 49, pg., 69
 - ch. 19, v. 1, pg., 11
 - ch. 22, v. 1, 16, 18, pg., 63
 - ch. 22, v. 1, pg., 6
 - ch. 22, v. 16, pg., 6

- ch. 22, v. 18, pg., 6, 45
 ch. 24, v. 4, pg., 41
 ch. 24, v. 7-10, pg., 6, 63
 ch. 26, v. 5, pg., 37
 ch. 31, v. 6, pg., 37
 ch. 33, v. 3, pg., 18
 ch. 33, v. 4, pg., 5
 ch. 40, v. 3, pg., 18
 ch. 41, v. 9, pg., 6
 ch. 42, v. 1, pg., 22, 66
 ch. 49, v. 15, pg., 6, 63
 ch. 50, v. 14, pg., 41
 ch. 66, v. 1-4, pg., 70
 ch. 66, v. 13-14, pg., 41
 ch. 67, v. 1-7, pg., 70
 ch. 68, v. 16, pg., 66
 ch. 69, v. 21, pg., 6, 63
 ch. 72, v. 19, pg., 70
 ch. 73, v. 3, pg., 34
 ch. 76, v. 11, pg., 41
 ch. 87, v. 4-7, pg., 70
 ch. 89, v. 3-4, pg., 64
 ch. 96, v. 1, pg., 18
 ch. 98, v. 8, pg., 66
 ch. 104, v. 2, pg., 68
 ch. 104, v. 3, pg., 68
 ch. 104, v. 4, pg., 68
 ch. 104, v. 32, pg., 68
 ch. 105, v. 9-11, pg., 63
 ch. 114, v. 4, pg., 15
 ch. 114, v. 6, pg., 66
 ch. 116, v. 11, pg., 18
 ch. 119, v. 113, pg., 37
 ch. 119, v. 130, pg., 45
 ch. 119, v. 160, pg., 5, 7, 58
 ch. 132, v. 2-5, pg., 41
 ch. 132, v. 11, pg., 64
 ch. 139, v. 21-22, pg., 37
 ch. 144, v. 9, pg., 18
 ch. 148, v. 11-14, pg., 70
 ch. 149, v. 1, pg., 18
- 20 Proverbs
- ch. 1, v. 2-3, pg., 71
 ch. 1, v. 7, pg., 26, 71
 ch. 3, v. 9, pg., 33, 75
 ch. 3, v. 9-10, pg., 33
 ch. 3, v. 27, pg., 73
 ch. 6, v. 27-28, pg., 74
 ch. 9, v. 10, pg., 71, 73
 ch. 10, v. 2, pg., 75
 ch. 10, v. 3, pg., 15, 33, 74
 ch. 10, v. 4, 15, pg., 75
 ch. 10, v. 4, pg., 33, 75
- ch. 10, v. 30, pg., 74
 ch. 11, v. 4, pg., 75
 ch. 11, v. 28, pg., 75
 ch. 12, v. 10, pg., 74
 ch. 12, v. 15, pg., 4
 ch. 12, v. 27, pg., 75
 ch. 12, v. 28, pg., 22
 ch. 13, v. 21, pg., 33
 ch. 13, v. 24, pg., 36
 ch. 14, v. 11, pg., 74
 ch. 14, v. 24, pg., 75
 ch. 15, v. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, pg., 73
 ch. 15, v. 16, pg., 75
 ch. 16, v. 2, pg., 71
 ch. 16, v. 9, pg., 71
 ch. 16, v. 18, pg., 27
 ch. 17, v. 14, pg., 74
 ch. 20, v. 16, pg., 74
 ch. 21, v. 2, pg., 3
 ch. 21, v. 9, pg., 74
 ch. 21, v. 21, pg., 73
 ch. 22, v. 6, pg., 33
 ch. 22, v. 9, pg., 9
 ch. 22, v. 11, pg., 74
 ch. 22, v. 16, pg., 34
 ch. 25, v. 2,, pg., 45
 ch. 26, v. 4-5, pg., 30
 ch. 28, v. 11, pg., 75
 ch. 30, v. 1, pg., 72
 ch. 30, v. 5, pg., 5
 ch. 30, v. 8, pg., 75
 ch. 31, v. 1, pg., 72
 ch. 31, v. 10-31, pg., 73
- 21 Ecclesiastes
- ch. 1, v. 1-11, pg., 73
 ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 22
 ch. 1, v. 9, pg., 27
 ch. 3, v. 12, pg., 73
 ch. 3, v. 19-21, pg., 73
 ch. 7, v. 1-13, pg., 73
 ch. 7, v. 15, pg., 73
 ch. 8, v. 12, pg., 42
 ch. 9, v. 2-6, pg., 75
 ch. 9, v. 7-9, pg., 75
 ch. 11, v. 1, 8-9, pg., 75
 ch. 12, v. 13-14, pg., 73
- 23 Isaiah
- ch. 4, v. 3, pg., 48
 ch. 5, v. 21, pg., 4
 ch. 6, v. 3, pg., 27
 ch. 7, v. 14, pg., 6, 64
 ch. 7, v. 20, pg., 28
 ch. 9, v. 1, 2, pg., 6

- ch. 9, v. 1-7, pg., 64
- ch. 9, v. 7, pg., 6
- ch. 11, v. 1, pg., 6
- ch. 11, v. 1-9, pg., 64
- ch. 13, v. 9-10, 13, pg., 66
- ch. 13, v. 10, pg., 27
- ch. 14, v. 4, pg., 8
- ch. 14, v. 12, pg., 65
- ch. 19, v. 11-12, pg., 72
- ch. 19, v. 18, pg., 8
- ch. 21, v. 8, pg., 8
- ch. 22, v. 13, pg., 90
- ch. 24, v. 23, pg., 66
- ch. 30, v. 22, pg., 28
- ch. 31, v. 1, pg., 20
- ch. 33, v. 8, pg., 8
- ch. 40, v. 1, pg., 27
- ch. 40, v. 1-5, pg., 65
- ch. 40, v. 6, pg., 8
- ch. 44, v. 28, pg., 6, 11
- ch. 45, v. 1, pg., 6, 11
- ch. 45, v. 2, pg., 8
- ch. 45, v. 7, pg., 9
- ch. 49, v. 12, 17, pg., 8
- ch. 49, v. 24, pg., 8
- ch. 49, v. 25, pg., 8
- ch. 52, v. 7, pg., 28
- ch. 53, v. 6, pg., 29
- ch. 53, v. 11, pg., 8
- ch. 53, v. 12, pg., 6
- ch. 55, v. 1-7, pg., 38
- ch. 55, v. 11, pg., 9
- ch. 55, v. 12, pg., 29
- ch. 58, v. 10, pg., 27
- ch. 60, v. 19, pg., 8
- ch. 61, v. 8, pg., 8
- ch. 65, v. 1, pg., 8
- ch. 65, v. 16, pg., 41
- ch. 65, v. 25, pg., 64
- ch. 65, v. , pg., 65
- 24 Jeremiah
 - ch. 4, v. 2, pg., 41
 - ch. 4, v. 23, 28, pg., 66
 - ch. 5, v. 7, pg., 41
 - ch. 12, v. 1, pg., 34
 - ch. 18, v. 7-10, pg., 63
 - ch. 23, v. 29, pg., 29
 - ch. 29, v. 1-23, pg., 81
 - ch. 31, v. 15, pg., 64
 - ch. 44, v. 25-26, pg., 41
 - ch. 49, v. 7, pg., 72
- 25 Lamentations
 - ch. 4, v. 21, pg., 72
- 26 Ezekiel
 - ch. 1, v. 10-11, pg., 45
 - ch. 16, v. 19, pg., 29
 - ch. 16, v. 25, pg., 28
 - ch. 17, v. 16-19, pg., 41
 - ch. 23, v. 20, pg., 28
 - ch. 32, v. 7-8, pg., 66
 - ch. 34, v. 25, pg., 9
- 27 Daniel
 - ch. 1, v. 19-20, pg., 72
 - ch. 2, v. 2, pg., 72
 - ch. 2, v. 28-29, 45, pg., 83
 - ch. 4, v. 29, pg., 17
 - ch. 7, v. 13, pg., 12
 - ch. 7-8, pg., 21
 - ch. 9, v. 20-27, pg., 21
 - ch. 9, v. 27, pg., 55
 - ch. 10, v. 13, 20, pg., 65
 - ch. 10-12, pg., 21
 - ch. 11, v. 31, pg., 55
 - ch. 12, v. 11, pg., 55
- 28 Hosea
 - ch. 11, v. 1, pg., 6, 20
 - ch. 11, v. 12, pg., 19
- 29 Joel
 - ch. 2, v. 10, 31, pg., 66
 - ch. 2, v. 30, pg., 16
 - ch. 3, v. 15, pg., 66
- 30 Amos
 - ch. 8, v. 9, pg., 66
- 31 Obadiah
 - v. 8, pg., 72
- 32 Jonah
 - ch. 3, v. 1-4, 10, pg., 63
 - ch. 3, v. 2, pg., 27
 - ch. 3, v. 10, pg., 63
 - ch. 4, v. 1, pg., 63
- 33 Micah
 - ch. 1, v. 10, pg., 28
 - ch. 5, v. 2, pg., 6
- 35 Habakkuk
 - ch. 3, v. 11, pg., 66
- 38 Zechariah
 - ch. 8, v. 17, pg., 41
 - ch. 11, v. 12-13, pg., 6
- 39 Malachi
 - ch. 1, v. 2-3, pg., 37
 - ch. 4, v. 5, pg., 20
- 40 Matthew
 - ch. 1, v. 18, pg., 28, 49
 - ch. 1, v. 19, pg., 49
 - ch. 1, v. 23, pg., 22
 - ch. 1, v. 25, pg., 9

ch. 2, v. 1, 2, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 6, 23, pg., 64
 ch. 2, v. 7, 16, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 11, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 12, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 13-14, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 13-15, 19-23, pg., 31
 ch. 2, v. 15, pg., 20, 33
 ch. 2, v. 16, pg., 32
 ch. 2, v. 18, pg., 64
 ch. 2, v. 19-23, pg., 33
 ch. 3, v. 3, pg., 64
 ch. 3, v. 11, pg., 19
 ch. 4, v. 4, 7, 10, pg., 48
 ch. 4, v. 4, pg., 7, 29, 48
 ch. 4, v. 6, pg., 18
 ch. 4, v. 15-16, pg., 64
 ch. 5, v. 3-11, pg., 26, 67
 ch. 5, v. 3-9, pg., 38
 ch. 5, v. 5, pg., 64
 ch. 5, v. 13, pg., 29, 38
 ch. 5, v. 13-16, pg., 38
 ch. 5, v. 17, pg., 22, 38, 61
 ch. 5, v. 17-19, pg., 61
 ch. 5, v. 17-20, pg., 12
 ch. 5, v. 17-48, pg., 38
 ch. 5, v. 19-20, pg., 61
 ch. 5, v. 21, 27, 33, 38, 43, pg., 51
 ch. 5, v. 21-22, pg., 26
 ch. 5, v. 22, pg., 9
 ch. 5, v. 33-37, pg., 39
 ch. 5, v. 34-36, pg., 41
 ch. 5, v. 37, pg., 41
 ch. 5, v. 38-42, pg., 38
 ch. 5, v. 41, pg., 26
 ch. 5, v. 42, pg., 38
 ch. 5, v. 43-44, pg., 37
 ch. 5, v. 45, pg., 37, 49
 ch. 6, v. 11, pg., 29
 ch. 6, v. 15, pg., 8
 ch. 6, v. 21, pg., 34
 ch. 6, v. 25-34, pg., 15
 ch. 7, v. 1, pg., 23
 ch. 7, v. 6, 7-8, pg., 67
 ch. 7, v. 7-8, pg., 22, 38
 ch. 7, v. 17-18, pg., 22
 ch. 8, v. 20, pg., 67
 ch. 9, v. 17, pg., 18
 ch. 10, v. 15, pg., 16
 ch. 10, v. 27, pg., 27
 ch. 10, v. 28, pg., 37
 ch. 10, v. 34-36, pg., 41
 ch. 10, v. 39, pg., 30

ch. 10, v. 40, pg., 22, 67
 ch. 11, v. 14, pg., 20
 ch. 11, v. 29-30, pg., 31
 ch. 12, v. 39-40, pg., 16, 49
 ch. 13, v. 3b-9, 18-23, pg., 25
 ch. 13, v. 10-16, pg., 78
 ch. 13, v. 11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, pg., 77
 ch. 13, v. 12, pg., 78
 ch. 13, v. 34-35, pg., 77
 ch. 13, v. 36, pg., 22, 78
 ch. 13, v. 36-43, pg., 22
 ch. 13, v. 36-45, pg., 78
 ch. 13, v. 40, pg., 48
 ch. 13, v. 45, 50, pg., 37
 ch. 13, v. 52, pg., 18
 ch. 14, v. 13-21, pg., 15
 ch. 14, v. 21, pg., 43
 ch. 14, v. 22-27, pg., 11
 ch. 15, v. 15-20, pg., 22, 78
 ch. 16, v. 5-12, pg., 78
 ch. 16, v. 11, 12, pg., 62, 85
 ch. 16, v. 19, pg., 29
 ch. 16, v. 21, pg., 63
 ch. 17, v. 10-13, pg., 20
 ch. 17, v. 20, pg., 38
 ch. 17, v. 22-23, pg., 63
 ch. 18, v. 10-14, pg., 77
 ch. 18, v. 16, pg., 23
 ch. 18, v. 20, pg., 23
 ch. 18, v. 35, pg., 8
 ch. 19, v. 29, pg., 42
 ch. 20, v. 9, pg., 27
 ch. 21, v. 19, 43, pg., 23
 ch. 21, v. 33-46, pg., 25
 ch. 22, v. 37-40, pg., 62
 ch. 23, v. 12, pg., 26
 ch. 23, v. 24, pg., 36
 ch. 23, v. 38, pg., 23
 ch. 24, v. 1-35, pg., 83
 ch. 24, v. 15, pg., 55
 ch. 24, v. 21, pg., 55
 ch. 24, v. 36-44, pg., 47, 83
 ch. 24, v. 38-39, pg., 16
 ch. 24, v. 39, pg., 48
 ch. 24-25, pg., 21, 63
 ch. 25, v. 1-13, pg., 78
 ch. 25, v. 14-30, pg., 79
 ch. 25, v. 34, pg., 30
 ch. 25, v. 41, 46, pg., 37
 ch. 25, v. 46, pg., 20, 89
 ch. 26, v. 29, pg., 18
 ch. 26, v. 52, pg., 34
 ch. 26, v. 63-64, pg., 40, 41

- ch. 27, v. 63, pg., 49
- ch. 28, v. 19, pg., 64
- 41 Mark
 - ch. 1, v. 27, pg., 18
 - ch. 4, v. 34, pg., 78
 - ch. 5, v. 41, pg., 22
 - ch. 6, v. 26, pg., 41
 - ch. 7, v. 8, pg., 51
 - ch. 8, v. 31, pg., 49
 - ch. 8, v. 35, pg., 26
 - ch. 9, v. 43-48, pg., 36
 - ch. 10, v. 6-9, pg., 16
 - ch. 10, v. 34, pg., 49
 - ch. 11, v. 26, pg., 8
 - ch. 13, v. 1-31, pg., 83
 - ch. 13, v. 32-33, pg., 83
 - ch. 15, v. 25, 33, 34, pg., 49
 - ch. 15, v. 37, pg., 28
 - ch. 15, v. 42, pg., 49
 - ch. 16, v. 1-2, pg., 49
 - ch. 16, v. 17, pg., 18
 - ch. 16, v. 18, pg., 21
- 42 Luke
 - ch. 1, v. 1-4, pg., 76
 - ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 81
 - ch. 1, v. 6, pg., 46
 - ch. 1, v. 9, pg., 46
 - ch. 1, v. 17, pg., 20, 26
 - ch. 1, v. 31-33, pg., 64
 - ch. 1, v. 32, pg., 64
 - ch. 1, v. 34, pg., 27
 - ch. 1, v. 38, pg., 49
 - ch. 1, v. 46-55, pg., 67
 - ch. 1, v. 68-79, pg., 67
 - ch. 1, v. 69, pg., 10
 - ch. 1, v. 78, pg., 49
 - ch. 2, v. 14, pg., 41
 - ch. 2, v. 21, pg., 32
 - ch. 2, v. 21-24, 39-40, pg., 32
 - ch. 2, v. 22-38, pg., 33
 - ch. 2, v. 27, pg., 46
 - ch. 2, v. 32, pg., 82
 - ch. 2, v. 39, pg., 33
 - ch. 2, v. 42, pg., 46
 - ch. 3, v. 3-6, pg., 65
 - ch. 3, v. 23, pg., 88
 - ch. 3, v. 35-36, pg., 2, 86
 - ch. 3, v. 36, pg., 33
 - ch. 3, v. 36-37, pg., 33
 - ch. 3, v. 37, pg., 33
 - ch. 5, v. 37-39, pg., 18
 - ch. 6, v. 27-28, pg., 22
 - ch. 6, v. 27-31, pg., 38
- ch. 6, v. 30, pg., 38
- ch. 6, v. 31, pg., 3
- ch. 7, v. 44, pg., 88
- ch. 8, v. 42, pg., 43
- ch. 10, v. 25-37, pg., 77
- ch. 10, v. 30, pg., 23, 78
- ch. 10, v. 30-37, pg., 23
- ch. 10, v. 34, pg., 78
- ch. 11, v. 29-30, pg., 49
- ch. 11, v. 33-36, pg., 77
- ch. 12, v. 10, pg., 19
- ch. 12, v. 13-21, pg., 77
- ch. 13, v. 9, pg., 23
- ch. 14, v. 7-11, pg., 77
- ch. 14, v. 11, pg., 34
- ch. 14, v. 16, pg., 78
- ch. 14, v. 26, pg., 37
- ch. 15, v. 11, pg., 25, 78
- ch. 15, v. 11-32, pg., 25
- ch. 16, v. 1, pg., 78
- ch. 16, v. 10, pg., 22, 34
- ch. 16, v. 19-23, pg., 15
- ch. 16, v. 19-31, pg., 78
- ch. 16, v. 22, pg., 27
- ch. 16, v. 29, pg., 29
- ch. 16, v. 31, pg., 12, 39
- ch. 17, v. 28-29, pg., 16
- ch. 18, v. 1-8, pg., 77
- ch. 18, v. 20, pg., 46
- ch. 21, v. 1-4, pg., 33
- ch. 21, v. 5-33, pg., 83
- ch. 21, v. 20, pg., 55
- ch. 21, v. 34-38, pg., 83
- ch. 21, v. 36, pg., 55
- ch. 21, v. 38, pg., 8
- ch. 23, v. 56, pg., 46
- ch. 24, v. 32, pg., 5
- 43 John
 - ch. 1, v. 1, pg., 19, 90
 - ch. 1, v. 1-18, pg., 90
 - ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 19
 - ch. 1, v. 6, 12, pg., 19
 - ch. 1, v. 41, pg., 22
 - ch. 1, v. 51, pg., 27
 - ch. 2, v. 6, pg., 46
 - ch. 2, v. 18-22, pg., 55
 - ch. 2, v. 19, pg., 49
 - ch. 3, v. 16, pg., 20
 - ch. 3, v. 17, pg., 20
 - ch. 3, v. 33, pg., 58
 - ch. 4, v. 23-24, pg., 26
 - ch. 5, v. 28, pg., 37
 - ch. 5, v. 31-47, pg., 5

- ch. 7, v. 53-8.11, pg., 8
- ch. 8, v. 32, pg., 5
- ch. 9, v. 1-3, pg., 35
- ch. 10, v. 30, pg., 12
- ch. 10, v. 35, pg., 7
- ch. 12, v. 1-7, pg., 88
- ch. 13, v. 12-15, pg., 2, 88
- ch. 13, v. 15, pg., 88, 89
- ch. 13, v. 16, pg., 89
- ch. 13, v. 34, pg., 18, 90
- ch. 13, v. 34-35, pg., 90
- ch. 14, v. 15, pg., 31
- ch. 14, v. 18, pg., 63
- ch. 15, v. 12, pg., 90
- ch. 16, v. 23, pg., 38
- ch. 17, v. 3, pg., 12
- ch. 17, v. 17, pg., 12
- ch. 19, v. 23-24, pg., 45
- ch. 19, v. 40, pg., 46
- ch. 19, v. 41, pg., 18
- ch. 20, v. 31, pg., 5, 11
- ch. 21, v. 24, pg., 76
- 44 Acts
 - ch. 1, v. 1, pg., 81
 - ch. 1, v. 8, pg., 27
 - ch. 1, v. 10-11, pg., 63
 - ch. 1, v. 11, pg., 79
 - ch. 2, v. 14-21, pg., 66
 - ch. 2, v. 19, pg., 16
 - ch. 2, v. 38, pg., 62
 - ch. 4, v. 24, pg., 16
 - ch. 4, v. 25-31, pg., 90
 - ch. 6, v. 14, pg., 46
 - ch. 7, v. 22, pg., 72
 - ch. 8, v. 30-31, pg., 3
 - ch. 10, v. 9-16, pg., 62, 85
 - ch. 15, v. 1, pg., 46
 - ch. 16, v. 25, pg., 69
 - ch. 17, v. 10, pg., 5
 - ch. 17, v. 11, pg., 18, 52
 - ch. 17, v. 19, 21, pg., 18
 - ch. 17, v. 24-26, pg., 16
 - ch. 18, v. 6, pg., 23
 - ch. 20, v. 7, pg., 62
 - ch. 21, v. 21, pg., 46
 - ch. 23, v. 12-14, pg., 41
 - ch. 26, v. 2, pg., 49
 - ch. 28, v. 17, pg., 46
- 45 Romans
 - ch. 1, v. 16-17, pg., 81
 - ch. 1, v. 18, pg., 3, 12, 59
 - ch. 1, v. 21, pg., 3, 68
 - ch. 1, v. 21-22, pg., 3
- ch. 2, v. 15, pg., 61
- ch. 2, v. 28-29, pg., 64
- ch. 3, v. 19, pg., 54
- ch. 3, v. 19-20, pg., 54
- ch. 3, v. 28, pg., 31
- ch. 4, v. 11-12, pg., 64
- ch. 4, v. 16-18, pg., 64
- ch. 5, v. 8, pg., 37
- ch. 5, v. 12, pg., 19
- ch. 5, v. 18-19, pg., 2, 89
- ch. 6, v. 23, pg., 26
- ch. 7, v. 6, pg., 18
- ch. 7, v. 7, pg., 54
- ch. 7, v. 9, pg., 54
- ch. 8, v. 4, pg., 61
- ch. 8, v. 26, pg., 38
- ch. 8, v. 31-39, pg., 67
- ch. 8, v. 38-39, pg., 27
- ch. 9, v. 1, pg., 40
- ch. 9, v. 6, pg., 23
- ch. 9, v. 13, pg., 37
- ch. 10, v. 17, pg., 11
- ch. 11, v. 26, pg., 23
- ch. 11, v. 33-36, pg., 90
- ch. 12, v. 11, pg., 10
- ch. 15, v. 4, pg., 48
- ch. 15, v. 9, pg., 69
- ch. 16, v. 7, pg., 19
- ch. 16, v. 16, pg., 2, 90
- ch. 16, v. 25, pg., 82
- ch. 11,, pg., 23
- 46 1 Corinthians
 - ch. 1, v. 10-4.21, pg., 73
 - ch. 1, v. 18, 24, pg., 81
 - ch. 1, v. 25, pg., 27
 - ch. 2, v. 6-16, pg., 71
 - ch. 2, v. 13-14, pg., 5
 - ch. 3, v. 14, pg., 30
 - ch. 4, v. 8, pg., 67
 - ch. 5, v. 1, pg., 62
 - ch. 5, v. 1-13, pg., 73
 - ch. 5, v. 7, pg., 18
 - ch. 6, v. 1-8, pg., 73
 - ch. 6, v. 9, pg., 18, 50, 73, 90
 - ch. 6, v. 9-11, pg., 73
 - ch. 6, v. 12-20, pg., 74
 - ch. 7, v. 1-40, pg., 74
 - ch. 7, v. 1-5, pg., 74
 - ch. 7, v. 17-24, pg., 74
 - ch. 7, v. 19, pg., 61
 - ch. 8, v. 1-11.1, pg., 74
 - ch. 8, v. 6, pg., 12
 - ch. 9, v. 9, 13-14, pg., 62

- ch. 10, v. 1-5, pg., 25
- ch. 11, v. 2-14.40, pg., 74
- ch. 12, v. 4-6, pg., 12
- ch. 12, v. 9, pg., 18
- ch. 13, v. 2, pg., 38
- ch. 13, v. , pg., 90
- ch. 14, v. 6, 26, pg., 82
- ch. 14, v. 26, pg., 10
- ch. 14, v. 33b-35, pg., 21, 81
- ch. 14, v. 34, pg., 90
- ch. 14, v. 39, pg., 21
- ch. 15, v. 1-58, pg., 74
- ch. 15, v. 6, pg., 76
- ch. 15, v. 14-17, pg., 77
- ch. 15, v. 22, pg., 2, 18, 20, 89
- ch. 15, v. 23, 24, pg., 79
- ch. 15, v. 23, pg., 79, 90
- ch. 15, v. 29, pg., 21
- ch. 15, v. 32, pg., 90
- ch. 15, v. 33, pg., 34
- ch. 15, v. 39, pg., 18
- ch. 15, v. 42-43, 51-55, pg., 63
- ch. 15, v. 51-58, pg., 67
- ch. 16, v. 1-4, pg., 74
- ch. 16, v. 20, pg., 90
- 47 2 Corinthians
 - ch. 1, v. 23, pg., 40, 41
 - ch. 3, v. 7-9, pg., 54
 - ch. 3, v. 7-9, pg., 54
 - ch. 3, v. 17, pg., 12
 - ch. 4, v. 6, pg., 16
 - ch. 4, v. 8-9, pg., 67
 - ch. 6, v. 14, pg., 62, 85
 - ch. 6, v. 14-18, pg., 62, 85
 - ch. 6, v. 16, pg., 55
 - ch. 12, v. 10, pg., 30
 - ch. 13, v. 1, pg., 62
 - ch. 13, v. 12, pg., 90
 - ch. 13, v. 14, pg., 12
- 48 Galatians
 - ch. 1, v. 12, pg., 82
 - ch. 1, v. 20, pg., 40
 - ch. 2, v. 16, pg., 80
 - ch. 3, v. 7-9, 29, pg., 64
 - ch. 3, v. 10, pg., 54
 - ch. 3, v. 24, pg., 54
 - ch. 3, v. 24-25, pg., 54
 - ch. 3, v. 28, pg., 3
 - ch. 3, v. 28-29, pg., 85
 - ch. 4, v. 4, pg., 12
 - ch. 4, v. 21-31, pg., 58
 - ch. 4, v. 22-26, pg., 25
 - ch. 5, v. 1, pg., 31
- ch. 5, v. 11-12, pg., 62
- ch. 5, v. 22-23, pg., 38
- ch. 6, v. 16, pg., 23, 64
- 49 Ephesians
 - ch. 1, v. 3-14, pg., 90
 - ch. 1, v. 17, pg., 82
 - ch. 2, v. 8-9, pg., 80
 - ch. 2, v. 9, pg., 19
 - ch. 2, v. 11-14, pg., 85
 - ch. 3, v. 6, pg., 64, 85
 - ch. 3, v. 17, pg., 29
 - ch. 4, v. 6, pg., 12
 - ch. 4, v. 18, pg., 3
 - ch. 5, v. 14, pg., 90
 - ch. 5, v. 18, pg., 44
 - ch. 5, v. 19, pg., 44, 69
 - ch. 6, v. 12, pg., 93
 - ch. 6, v. 17, pg., 7
 - ch. 6, v. 19, pg., 90
- 50 Philippians
 - ch. 2, v. 5-11, pg., 67
 - ch. 2, v. 5-6, pg., 12
 - ch. 2, v. 6-11, pg., 90
 - ch. 2, v. 7, pg., 12
 - ch. 4, v. 7, pg., 19
 - ch. 4, v. 13, pg., 23
- 51 Colossians
 - ch. 1, v. 5, pg., 5
 - ch. 1, v. 9, pg., 44
 - ch. 1, v. 15, pg., 67, 80
 - ch. 1, v. 15-20, pg., 67, 90, 91
 - ch. 1, v. 16, pg., 19
 - ch. 2, v. 9, pg., 12
 - ch. 2, v. 11-12, pg., 64
 - ch. 2, v. 13, pg., 54
 - ch. 2, v. 16-17, pg., 62
 - ch. 3, v. 10, pg., 18
 - ch. 3, v. 16, pg., 44, 68, 69
 - ch. 4, v. 3, pg., 90
- 52 1 Thessalonians
 - ch. 2, v. 5, pg., 40
 - ch. 2, v. 14-16, pg., 23
 - ch. 4, v. 13-17, pg., 63
 - ch. 4, v. 13-5.3, pg., 21
 - ch. 4, v. 16, pg., 63, 79
 - ch. 4, v. 16-17, pg., 63
 - ch. 4, v. 17, pg., 55
 - ch. 5, v. 1-6, pg., 79
 - ch. 5, v. 21, pg., 5
 - ch. 5, v. 23, pg., 27
 - ch. 5, v. 25, pg., 90
 - ch. 5, v. 26, pg., 90
 - ch. 5, v. 27, pg., 40

53 2 Thessalonians

- ch. 1, v. 5-9, pg., 89
- ch. 2, v. 1-12, pg., 21
- ch. 2, v. 10, pg., 20
- ch. 2, v. 17, pg., 44
- ch. 3, v. 1, pg., 90
- ch. 3, v. 10, pg., 36
- ch. 3, v. 12, pg., 28

54 1 Timothy

- ch. 1, v. 8-11, pg., 61
- ch. 1, v. 9-10, pg., 54
- ch. 1, v. 10, pg., 18
- ch. 1, v. 14, pg., 18
- ch. 1, v. 17, pg., 26
- ch. 2, v. 5, pg., 12, 81
- ch. 2, v. 5-6, pg., 81
- ch. 2, v. 6, pg., 20
- ch. 2, v. 11-15, pg., 21
- ch. 2, v. 13, pg., 16, 57
- ch. 2, v. 13-15, pg., 16, 81
- ch. 3, v. 5, pg., 36
- ch. 3, v. 15, pg., 5
- ch. 3, v. 16, pg., 8, 90
- ch. 5, v. 18, pg., 62

55 2 Timothy

- ch. 2, v. 15, pg., 5, 18
- ch. 3, v. 15, pg., 7
- ch. 3, v. 16, pg., 5, 7, 11, 12, 16, 44, 61
- ch. 3, v. 16-17, pg., 7, 12, 16, 61
- ch. 4, v. 8, pg., 30

56 Titus

- ch. 2, v. 13, pg., 43

58 Hebrews

- ch. 1, v. 2, pg., 19
- ch. 1, v. 3, pg., 90
- ch. 4, v. 8, pg., 18
- ch. 4, v. 12, pg., 7
- ch. 4, v. 15, pg., 12
- ch. 6, v. 16-17, pg., 40
- ch. 7, v. 11, 12, pg., 62
- ch. 7, v. 27, pg., 55
- ch. 8, v. 5, pg., 85
- ch. 9, v. 8-10, pg., 85
- ch. 9, v. 9, 10, pg., 62
- ch. 9, v. 12, 26, pg., 55
- ch. 9, v. 28, pg., 63
- ch. 10, v. 10, pg., 55
- ch. 11, v. 3, pg., 16
- ch. 11, v. 25, pg., 31
- ch. 13, v. 15, pg., 62
- ch. 13, v. 18, pg., 90
- ch. 13, v. 20, pg., 19

59 James

- ch. 2, v. 17, pg., 80
- ch. 2, v. 24, pg., 31
- ch. 4, v. 7, pg., 93
- ch. 4, v. 10, pg., 30
- ch. 4, v. 15, pg., 39
- ch. 5, v. 4, pg., 62
- ch. 5, v. 12, pg., 39
- ch. 5, v. 13, pg., 10, 69
- ch. 5, v. 15, pg., 39

60 1 Peter

- ch. 1, v. 10-12, pg., 18
- ch. 1, v. 23-25, pg., 26
- ch. 2, v. 9, pg., 30
- ch. 4, v. 8, pg., 90
- ch. 5, v. 5, pg., 89
- ch. 5, v. 6-7, pg., 43
- ch. 5, v. 8, pg., 93

61 2 Peter

- ch. 1, v. 20, pg., 11, 25
- ch. 1, v. 20-21, pg., 11
- ch. 2, v. 4, pg., 37
- ch. 3, v. 1-13, pg., 63
- ch. 3, v. 4, pg., 64
- ch. 3, v. 5, pg., 7
- ch. 3, v. 9-13, pg., 63
- ch. 3, v. 10, 12-13, pg., 66
- ch. 3, v. 10-12, pg., 79
- ch. 3, v. 16, pg., 7

62 1 John

- ch. 2, v. 2, pg., 20
- ch. 2, v. 7-8, pg., 18
- ch. 2, v. 9, 11, pg., 37
- ch. 2, v. 18, 22, pg., 64
- ch. 3, v. 4, pg., 61
- ch. 3, v. 15, pg., 37
- ch. 4, v. 3, pg., 64
- ch. 4, v. 9-10, pg., 37
- ch. 4, v. 20, pg., 37
- ch. 5, v. 2-3, pg., 62
- ch. 5, v. 7-8, pg., 8
- ch. 5, v. 13, pg., 5
- ch. 5, v. 14, pg., 38
- ch. 5, v. 20, pg., 58

63 2 John

- v. 7, pg., 64

66 Revelation

- ch. 1, v. 1, pg., 11, 82
- ch. 1, v. 4-8, pg., 82
- ch. 1, v. 10-19.21, pg., 83
- ch. 2, v. 17, pg., 18
- ch. 3, v. 1, pg., 19
- ch. 3, v. 2-3, pg., 79
- ch. 3, v. 11, pg., 83

ch. 3, v. 12, pg., 18
ch. 4, v. 1, pg., 83
ch. 4, v. 6-8, pg., 45
ch. 5, v. 1, pg., 19
ch. 5, v. 5, pg., 46
ch. 5, v. 9, pg., 18
ch. 6, v. 1, pg., 19
ch. 6, v. 5, pg., 19
ch. 8, v. 7, pg., 15, 16, 29
ch. 8, v. 8, pg., 29
ch. 8, v. 9, pg., 29
ch. 8, v. 10, 12, pg., 66
ch. 8, v. 10-11, pg., 65
ch. 8, v. 11, pg., 13
ch. 9, v. 1, 11, pg., 66
ch. 9, v. 1, pg., 46, 66, 93
ch. 9, v. 4, 18, 20-21, pg., 92
ch. 9, v. 7, pg., 13
ch. 9, v. 11, pg., 46
ch. 9, v. 14, pg., 93
ch. 9, v. 16-17, 19, pg., 2, 91
ch. 10, v. 4-7, pg., 40
ch. 11, v. 8, pg., 93

ch. 12, v. 4, pg., 66
ch. 12, v. 12, pg., 93
ch. 13, v. 14, pg., 55
ch. 13, v. 18, pg., 9, 46
ch. 14, v. 1, pg., 93
ch. 14, v. 3, pg., 18
ch. 14, v. 8, pg., 65, 93
ch. 16, v. 9-10, pg., 20
ch. 16, v. 12, pg., 92
ch. 16, v. 13, pg., 92
ch. 16, v. 14, pg., 92, 93
ch. 16, v. 16, pg., 2, 46, 92
ch. 18, v. 2, pg., 65
ch. 19, v. 7, 9, pg., 79
ch. 20, v. 14-15, pg., 37
ch. 21, v. 1, 2, 5, pg., 18
ch. 21, v. 2, 9, pg., 79
ch. 21, v. 17, pg., 46
ch. 22, v. 1-5, pg., 65
ch. 22, v. 7, 12, pg., 83
ch. 22, v. 15, pg., 20
ch. 22, v. 16, pg., 64