

Chapter 4: The Bible Written in Human Words

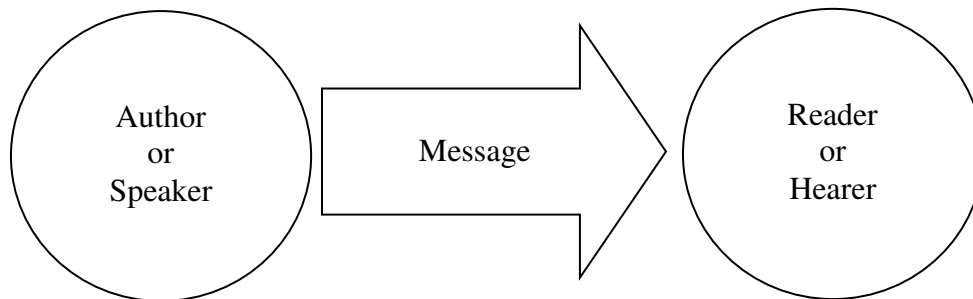
Introduction

If I want to speak with a Mexican, I need to use Spanish. If I talk to him in Chinese or Russian, he won't understand me unless he studied those languages at some point. In the same way, if I want to speak to a 5-year-old child, I need to speak on his level. If I use complicated, adult words, he probably won't understand me.

For good communication to take place, we need to speak (or write) on the hearer's (or reader's) level, in a language that he or she can understand. Well, the Bible is a communication from God to us. In the Bible, God is not talking to angels or demons or himself. On the contrary, he is talking to human beings. In order to communicate with us, God speaks on our level, using human languages. In fact, God uses human intermediaries as authors in order to communicate with other human beings.

A Communication Model

Here is a model of how communication takes place:



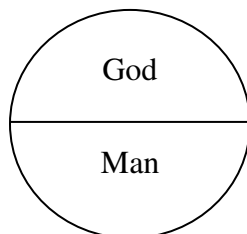
In order for verbal communication to take place, a speaker uses spoken words to express a message for a hearer to understand.

In order for written communication to take place, an author uses written words to convey a message for a reader to understand.

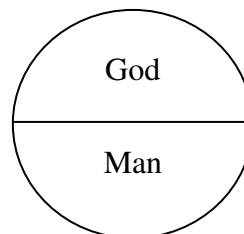
In reality, communication is a bit more complicated than this simple model can express. In later chapters, we'll explore some of the communication complications. One of those complications which we've already looked at is God's involvement. In the making of the Bible, God moved and guided (inspired) human authors to write his message in human words so that human readers could understand it.

This means that God is behind the communication process taking place via the Bible.

Theologians have noted the similarities between the *incarnation* of Jesus and the *inspiration* of the Bible.



Jesus, the living Word



The Bible, the written Word

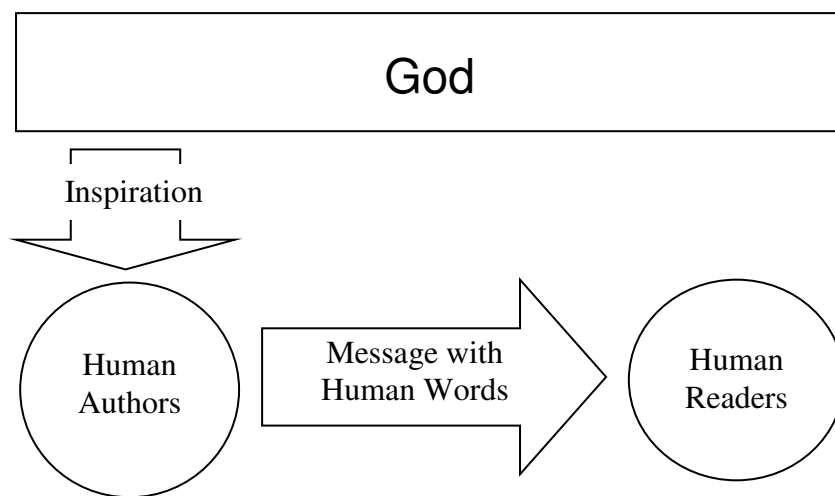
Jesus is true God, but he became a true human being in order to save us. He is completely divine but also completely human. The *incarnation* means that in Jesus, God took on human flesh and blood.

In a similar way, the Bible is 100 % God's Word, but it is also completely human, with human authors, human words, and human readers. *Inspiration* means that in the Bible, what God wants to say is communicated in human terms.

The human words give us access to God's message. Thus it is important for good Bible interpretation that we pay attention to each of the human factors.

Human Authors

First of all, **God used human authors to communicate his message.** Below is a modified communication model.



Each human author wrote:

- In his own words, that is, using his own writing style.
- In accordance with his own knowledge, that is, giving testimony from his own perspective.
- In accordance with his own circumstances, that is, speaking from his own historical context.

For example, an educated man from Spain speaks in a different style than an illiterate person from a barrio in Panama. Again, a professor from Oxford speaks a different style of English than a young gang member from Detroit. The same is true in the Bible. The letters (epistles) written by St. Paul have expressions that are different from those written by St. John. Although God guided them both, he allowed each one to write in his own style and in his own words.

Moreover, today's English is markedly different from the English of centuries past. When my daughters studied some of William Shakespeare's plays in school, they often had to consult a commentary. Shakespeare uses certain words and mentions certain customs that are not well known today. The situation is even worse when we read Chaucer, for example.

Well, in the same way the human authors of the Bible often speak of people, events, and customs which were well-known at the time, but which no longer exist today. Even the languages used – Greek and Hebrew – have changed over time.

The more we know about the human author of a biblical book, and the historical circumstances when it was written, the more we will be able to understand the message that God wants to communicate through that author.

We will explore more with regard to human authors in later chapters.

Human Words

In second place, **human authors wrote the Word of God using human language and human words.**

Each biblical text follows:

- The rules and conventions of human language
- The rules and conventions of human grammar and syntax
- The rules and conventions of human literature (genre, context, etc.)

For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote in Hebrew. Today, we have the advantage of English translations of the book of Isaiah. However, no translation is perfect. If you as a Bible interpreter do not know Hebrew, then you should be sure to consult with a number of different translations (and commentaries) in order to have a better idea of what the prophet originally said.

Also, the Bible contains different genres (types) of literature. Isaiah wrote prophecies in the form of poems; St. Paul wrote Christian teachings in the form of letters (epistles). The poetry of Isaiah has a lot in common with ancient Middle-eastern poetry outside the Bible. The letters of St. Paul have a lot in common with the way letters were written at that time. The more we know about human literature and its conventions, the more we will be able to understand the message that God wants to communicate through the Biblical literature.

We will explore more with regard to human literature and human words in later chapters.

Human Readers (Hearers)

In third place, **the Bible was written for human beings to understand and to act upon.** It was not written for the angels in heaven, but for us. We are to understand it, using our own human skills and abilities. Just as we read and understand the newspaper, so we read and understand the Bible.

Now, it's true that the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the Bible. However, he does so through our human process of reading. That is, as we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit facilitates and aids our human understanding.

Each human reader understands the Bible:

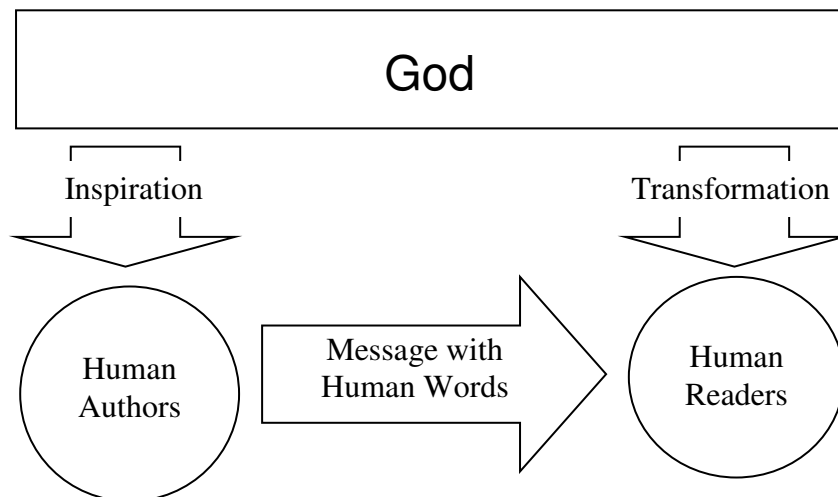
- In agreement with his or her human mental capacity
- In the context of other books that he or she has read
- In accordance with his or her own beliefs (faith or lack of faith)

For example, in Venezuela I became acquainted with several people who were illiterate. Obviously they could not read the Bible, since they couldn't read anything. The only way they

could understand anything about the Bible was if someone were to read it out loud for them. In a very obvious way, their own human abilities limited their understanding of the Bible.

On the other hand, we can grow in our abilities and in our understanding of the Bible. When I was a young child, I understood the Bible only in a very superficial way. As I grew older, I studied the Bible more and more. I read commentaries and other books about the Bible. Those other books, of course, are not inspired by God in the same way the Bible is. You have to be careful, because some of the things they say might be wrong or mistaken. However, those books often give information or point out connections that help us understand the Bible more thoroughly. As our human abilities and knowledge grows, so does our understanding of the Bible.

No matter how much or how little we understand, God definitely wants to use the Bible to touch our hearts and change our lives. The Word of God penetrates the heart – even when we don't comprehend every detail. Furthermore, the more God transforms us, the more we become like Jesus, the more we understand about God's Word. Below is a modified version of the communication model.



We will explore more with regard to human readers/hearers in later chapters.

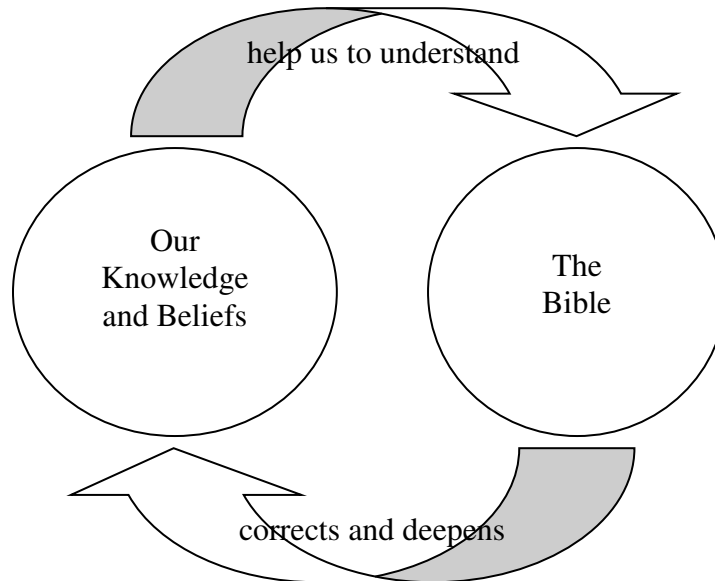
The “Hermeneutical Circle”

Although the Holy Spirit helps us, no human being (except Jesus Christ) ever becomes a perfect interpreter of the Bible. **Two things stop us from understanding the Bible perfectly:**

- 1. Our minds and our human abilities are limited.** You can't fit the ocean in a drinking glass. In the same way, our human minds cannot comprehend everything about God, or about God's Word. We are always limited. There is always something more to learn.
- 2. Our minds and our human abilities are sinful.** Sin darkens our minds. (Unbelievers are particularly susceptible – see Romans 1:21-22.) It is all too easy for us to make mistakes, to not listen to the Spirit's guidance and to misinterpret some part of the Bible.

Nevertheless, even though we don't understand everything perfectly, by God's grace we can understand enough to be saved. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit helps us little by little to deepen our understanding of God's Word.

Our gradual growth in understanding the Bible is sometimes called the **hermeneutical circle**. *Hermeneutic* means a principle or process of interpretation. Just like a circle has no endpoint, so by God’s grace we continually get better at interpreting the Bible. Take a look at the model below:



This is the way it works. Before we even open the Bible, we already have:

- Certain abilities or “competencies” (for example, we already know how to read and how to communicate in English)
- Certain knowledge (for example, most people already know that the Bible is a holy book, at least for Christians; they may know some facts about the content or history of the Bible)
- Certain ideas and beliefs (for example, some people believe in one God, while others believe in many gods or no god)
- Certain perspectives (for example, some people believe that the human race is getting better all the time, and that the future is bright; others think that the human race is getting worse, and that the future is dark)

Our knowledge, abilities, and beliefs give us a starting point to begin to understand the Biblical text. That is, we understand the Bible in the light of what we already know and believe.

Thus, the top arrow of the diagram means: **our knowledge and beliefs help us to understand the Bible.**

However, as we read the Bible, we learn more. Our knowledge and beliefs get better when we study God’s Word. In fact, our beliefs and our perspectives often change because of what we read in the Bible. For example, David Reed was once a Jehovah’s Witness, utterly convinced that Jesus Christ was not true God. However, once he started reading the Bible on his own (without consulting the “Watchtower” literature at every turn), he began to doubt what he had been

taught. The Bible itself convinced him that his earlier beliefs were wrong, and that in fact Jesus is God.

Thus, the bottom arrow of the diagram means: **the Bible corrects and deepens our knowledge and beliefs.**

As our knowledge and beliefs get more accurate and deeper, we have a better platform for reading and understanding the Biblical text. As we understand more of the Bible, it continues to correct and deepen our knowledge and beliefs.

In this way, the Holy Spirit leads us to grow continually in our interpretation of the Bible.

Conclusion

Thus, the Bible is God's Word, something that he wants to communicate to us. However, God uses human intermediaries and human words to communicate to us as humans. We can only access God's message through the human elements in the communication process. When we interpret the Bible, we need to take seriously the human authors and their circumstances, the human words and language being used, and the human readers or listeners to whom the message is directed.

Furthermore, our understanding of the Bible is always growing as we wrestle with the biblical texts and learn more. As we interpret the Bible, we need to be concerned not just with avoiding errors but also with deepening our grasp of what God is saying. The hermeneutical circle never ends until we are called home to be with the Lord and see him "face to face" instead of "dimly, as through a foggy mirror" (1 Corinthians 13).

Chapter 5: Human Authors and Historical Context

Introduction

A boss walks over to his secretary's desk and asks her, "Would you please write a letter to all our customers? Let them know about the wonderful new product that our company will be offering next month." The secretary types a draft of the letter on her computer and sends it electronically to her boss for review. The boss looks the letter over, makes a couple of small corrections, and sends the letter back to his secretary. She prints the letter out, he signs it, and she makes copies and mails them.

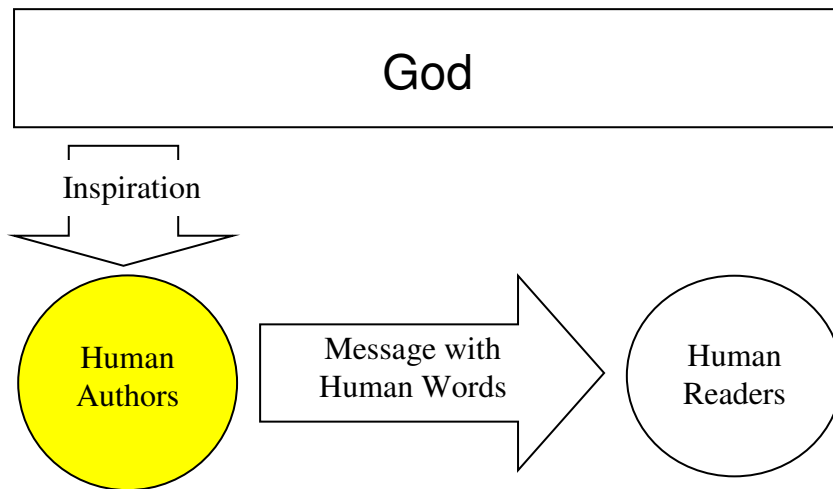
In this scenario, the secretary writes the letter in her own words. She also distributes the letter. In a sense, it is her letter. However, the boss is the one in charge of the whole process. He gets things going, he makes sure the letter says what he wants to say, and he signs the letter. In that sense, it is his letter. You could say that the letter is the boss' message in the secretary's words. The boss and the secretary are in complete agreement with regard to the letter.

Something similar happened when God guided human authors to write different portions of the Bible. God did not turn the human authors into robots. On the contrary, they used their own words – and they were the ones to distribute the message. However, God called them to write, he made sure that what they wrote was what he wanted to say, and he signed off on what they wrote. The Bible, then, is God's message in the human authors' words.

If we want to understand the Bible, we need to **understand what the human authors wanted to say**.

The Human Authors of the Bible

Look again at the model from last chapter:



God inspired (guided) different human authors to write the different parts of the Bible. These human authors expressed God's message in their own way. For example:

- 1) They wrote in Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages spoken at their own time and place.
- 2) They followed the conventions and rules for the literature of their time and place.

- 3) They often referred to the events and circumstances of their time and place.
- 4) They interacted with the worldviews and perspectives prevalent in their time and place.
- 5) They wrote first of all to the people of their time and place; secondarily, the message was also for the people who would come afterwards.
- 6) Each author wrote with his own style and characteristics.

The more we know about each of these factors, the better we will understand the message that each author intended to communicate.

The Historical Context of a Bible Passage

All of these factors form the **historical context** of a Bible passage. The historical context is the background, the environment, and the circumstances in which a given biblical text was written (or to which the text refers). Here are some examples of “historical” questions which may help us to understand different Bible passages:

- 1) Who wrote this Bible passage? What do we know about the author’s character and life? (His experiences and his character often influence the way he expresses his message.)
- 2) When was the text written? What was happening historically when the passage was written? (The historical situation also may influence how the author expressed his message.)
- 3) What social customs, practices, or conventions are referred to in the Bible passage? (Sometimes the biblical author assumes that the reader will be familiar with certain customs or practices which are no longer followed today.)
- 4) What type of literature is this text? What are the characteristics of that type of literature at that time and place? (The biblical authors generally follow or adapt forms of literature which were in use at their time and place.)
- 5) What historical events are referred to in the text? (Some events were well-known at the time of the author, but not so well-known today.)
- 6) What personal names (or geographical or political names) appear in the text? What do these names refer to? (Some names were well-known at the time of the author but not so well-known today.)
- 7) Who were the original readers (or hearers)? What did this Bible passage originally mean to them?

In general, the more we know about the human author and his situation and background, the better we will be able to interpret the message that God wanted to communicate through him.

Thus, the seventh guideline for biblical interpretation is:

7. **Take into account the historical context of the Bible passage**, that is, the human author and his culture, background, people, and historical situation.

For example, you can’t fully understand the prophecies of **Haggai** without knowing something about the historical situation when Haggai spoke. In general, we need to know that God allowed the Israelites (the Jews) to be conquered and to go into exile, because of their idolatry and injustice. After many years, God opened the door for the Jews in exile to return to their native

land. They lived under a Jewish governor, but King Darius of the Persian Empire had the final word. With this background in mind, we can understand why Haggai exhorted the people to rebuild the temple. The first temple had been destroyed at the time of the exile. We can also understand why Haggai criticized the people for repeating the sins of their fathers. Like their forefathers who suffered the exile, the Jews at Haggai's time were apathetic towards God, content to build their own luxurious homes while the temple of God was in ruins.

How Important is the Historical Context?

For many interpreters, the main goal of biblical interpretation is to understand what the human author had in mind when he wrote each passage. After all, this is the goal of most of our everyday communications. Authors want their readers to know what they have in mind and to respond to it. Readers want to know what the author desires to communicate.

For example, if I tell you that the train from Chicago arrives at 10:00 am, I'll be disappointed if you think I'm talking about a plane rather than a train. You'll be disappointed too if you go to the airline terminal only to find out that you should have gone to the train station. This would be considered a "misunderstanding" or a "miscommunication." The communication process failed. Perhaps I mumbled or misspoke. Perhaps you didn't listen very carefully. Perhaps one of us doesn't speak English very well. No matter what the problem was, it's clear that the goal of communication was for you to accurately perceive and act upon what I had in mind – and it didn't happen.

In the same way, many biblical interpreters feel that the meaning of any given biblical passage is what the human author intended to communicate when he wrote it. In order to better understand the human author's intentions, we need to pay special attention to the historical context. It is assumed that since God was guiding the human author, what the human author had in mind is also what God had in mind.

But wait a minute... God is much greater than our human minds can comprehend. What if God wants to communicate more than what the human author understood? For example, when Isaiah prophesied about Jesus Christ (see Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12), how much did he really understand about all the details of Jesus' death and resurrection? Surely Isaiah understood some things, but did he really grasp everything that God had revealed to him? To take another example, when the author of 1 Chronicles wrote about King David, did he fully understand all the details of how David foreshadowed the coming Messiah, Jesus? One final example: the prophet Daniel freely confessed that he did not understand everything that God revealed to him (Daniel 8:27, 12:8).

Now, you'll notice that all these examples are taken from the Old Testament and have to do with prophecy (or foreshadowing). However, some biblical interpreters have applied this in an extreme way to every part of the Bible. They believe that every part of the Bible has a "higher sense" or a "higher meaning" which goes beyond what the human author might have intended. They believe that there are "levels" of meaning. If this is true, then the historical context will only help us understand the "lower level" of meaning in the Bible.

Usually it's not a good idea to take things to extremes. In the history of biblical interpretation, there are many examples of people who had a good idea, but ignored other important principles of interpretation. These interpreters would push their one favorite idea or principle far beyond its reasonable limits, to the exclusion of other mitigating factors. Many of their conclusions, then, were flawed or did not agree with other portions of the Bible or with common sense.

So we need to be careful not to overemphasize the difference between God and the human authors of the Bible. Yes, it's true that God sometimes revealed things to his prophets that they did not fully understand at that time. However, God still used those human authors, with their human rules of language, to communicate with human readers. We can only access God's intended message through the human intermediaries. There is no evidence of any "higher meaning" that is radically different or disconnected from what the human author intended to communicate. Today, we may see some details that were unclear in Old Testament times. However, this is a matter of filling in some blanks, not going off in a radically new direction.

Let's look at a couple of examples of interpreters who pushed the idea of a "higher meaning" disconnected from the historical, normal sense of a text.

Allegorical Interpretation

During the time of the early church (just after the apostles' lifetimes), a number of biblical interpreters promoted what later became known as the **allegorical method of interpretation**. An "allegory" is a story in which the characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas – usually ideas about human life, about God, or about a political situation. The proponents of the allegorical method saw the entire Bible as an allegory or series of allegories. According to them, every verse could hold a hidden, symbolic, "spiritual" meaning which might be quite different from the plain, normal sense of the words.

Now, let's be clear. Some portions of the Bible do include symbols. For example, in Galatians 4:21-31, St. Paul presents an "allegory" using Hagar and Sarah as symbols of the old covenant and the new covenant. However, other portions of the Bible are "literal," that is, the words are meant in a plain sense, not a symbolic sense. Normally, we can easily tell when a text is literal or symbolic, because the literary conventions (common rules) clearly indicate which is which.

However, the interpreters who followed the allegorical method felt that every part of the Bible – even those parts would not normally be thought of as symbolic – in reality had a deeper meaning, a different meaning than the usual sense of the words used. According to them, God had hidden spiritual messages underneath the surface, messages that only the wise could decipher.

The allegorical method is often associated with the **Alexandrian School** of interpretation. For a long time, there was a famous catechetical school in Alexandria, Egypt. Several of the directors of the school were renowned for promoting this method of interpretation.

Origen, a well-known Bible scholar, probably did the most to popularize the allegorical method. Origen asserted that there were three different meanings in almost every Bible passage:

- 1) The least important meaning was the literal meaning of the words in the text. If the Bible passage was speaking of a historical event, the details of that event would be the surface meaning of that particular passage. For example, Genesis 37 states that Jacob made a special coat or tunic for his son Joseph. The least important meaning of this text is simple: a man named Jacob lived at the time of the Patriarchs and had a piece of clothing made for his son named Joseph. According to Origen, anyone can understand this surface meaning.
- 2) A somewhat more important meaning is the moral conclusion that one can take from the Bible passage. For example, Genesis 37 teaches us that we should avoid favoritism in our families. Jacob, after all, showed such favoritism to his son Joseph and thereby opened the door for many negative consequences.

- 3) The most important meaning is the hidden message hidden in the Bible text, which few are able to understand. This is the allegorical sense. According to the allegorical interpretation, each part of the story in Genesis 37 has a special meaning. The tunic is a symbol that represents wisdom, philosophical thought. Joseph represents the Christian Church. The 10 brothers represent those evil people who would like to eliminate philosophy from the Church. Thus, according to Origen, Genesis 37 means that ill-intentioned people (represented by the brothers) want to remove wisdom and philosophy (symbolized by the tunic) from the Church (symbolized by Joseph).

This allegorical interpretation had its roots in ancient Greek philosophy. While there were many different schools of thought in Greek philosophy, most of them agreed that material things – and the physical world – was imperfect, flawed, unworthy, even evil. Perfection and true goodness could only be found in the spiritual, the ideal, the non-physical. Most Greek philosophers cringed at the old Greek myths about the different gods. According to the myths, these gods were very imperfect, and often took on material form to fight or even to have sex with mortals. How could that fit with lofty Greek philosophy? The philosophers solved the dilemma by considering the myths to be allegories. They looked for a deeper meaning that did not involve supposedly perfect spirits dirtying themselves with the material world.

As the Jews became exposed to Greek philosophy, some of them embraced these ideas. They applied this allegorical method to the Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament included a number of things that would be embarrassing for a good philosopher. How could a Greek philosopher explain, for example, that God (who is perfect) would stoop to creating the physical world? How could a philosopher explain the stories in Genesis about Noah getting drunk or Dinah being raped?

Philo, a famous Jewish interpreter of the Bible, embraced allegory as a method for interpreting the Old Testament. Philo's goal was to integrate Greek philosophy with the wisdom of the Scriptures. A number of Jewish rabbis seem to have practiced a similar method. The Christian interpreters of the Alexandrian School were just following in their footsteps.

As the years passed, different interpreters gave their own slant to the allegorical method. Augustine, for example, insisted that all allegorical interpretations had to be in line with accepted Christian doctrine. This would eliminate some of the wilder ideas.

By the time of the Middle Ages, the allegorical method was fairly well established in the Roman Catholic Church. Many Roman Catholic theologians looked for a “four-fold” sense in each Bible passage:

- 1) The “literal” sense – the clear, normal meaning of the words used. For example, according to the literal sense, if the Bible speaks of Jerusalem, it refers to the physical city of Jerusalem in Palestine.
- 2) The “allegorical” sense – the spiritual, hidden meaning behind the words. For example, according to the allegorical sense, Jerusalem would be a symbol of the Christian Church. In the Middle Ages, this sense was thought to correspond to a “faith” meaning, that is, something that leads us to believe.
- 3) The “tropological” or “moral” sense – the moral conclusion that the passage promotes. For example, according to the tropological sense, Jerusalem would be the Christian's

soul. In the Middle Ages, this sense was thought to correspond to a “love” meaning, that is, something that teaches us how to act.

- 4) The “anagogical” sense – a pointing towards heaven, towards the future. For example, according to the anagogical sense, Jerusalem would be a symbol of heaven (or Paradise). In the Middle Ages, this sense was thought to correspond to a “hope” meaning, that is, something that leads us to look ahead towards heavenly blessings.

Again, we need to be clear. The word “Jerusalem” might be used in a literal sense in one part of the Bible (for example, 2 Samuel 5:5), but it might be a symbol of heaven in a different part of the Bible (for example, Revelation 21:2). However, the proponents of the “four-fold sense” sought to find both literal and symbolic (“spiritual”) meanings in all the passages of the Bible.

The Problem with the Allegorical Method

The problem with the allegorical method is how to determine what the “hidden, deeper meaning” is. You can invent any kind of meaning you want – but that wouldn’t necessarily be what God wants to communicate. How can you tell if the “allegory” you’ve discovered in the passage is really God’s hidden message or just something out of your own imagination?

In ancient times, the Gnostics used the allegorical method to give a different meaning to any biblical text that didn’t fit their ideas – and their ideas were not Christian at all. The Gnostics insisted that Jesus had not truly become a physical, human being. They believed that everything in the physical world was evil. In order to escape the trap of the material world and reach a pure, spiritual existence, humans needed the help and guidance of different spiritual beings and needed to have special knowledge. This knowledge was supposedly hidden in the Scriptures.

Today, some cults (like the so-called “Christian Science”) and even novels (like “The DaVinci Code”) promote similar ideas. They assert that the real message of the Bible cannot be found in the normal sense of the human language used. Rather, according to them, the words of the Bible form a sort of “code” and one needs the “key” in order to understand the true message.

That message is almost always anti-Christian. For example, Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of “Christian Science,” wrote a book titled “The Key to Understanding the Scriptures.” According to her, the physical world is an illusion, “sin” is having a mistaken idea, and “salvation” means correcting your idea of the world. A true Christian Scientist will never go to a doctor because sickness is believed to be an illusion related to wrong thinking. These ideas are very far from what the Bible says very clearly. However, Christian Scientists believe that their key uncovers a very different hidden message in the Bible, a message which contradicts the Bible’s plain meaning.

In the end, the allegorical method takes a good idea (that the Bible is God’s Word) to such an extreme that it neglects other factors in interpretation (that God used human authors and human language to communicate his Word). We have no access to God’s message except through the human elements that God used. If we want to know what God is saying, we have to follow the conventions (normal rules) of human language. Whenever we try to go beyond human language and seek a “key” to crack the “code,” we end up inventing our own ideas instead of listening to what God is saying through the human authors.

Opponents of the Allegorical Method

In the early church, some interpreters rejected the allegorical method. Since many of them spent time teaching and preaching in Antioch, the group became known as the **Antiochene School** of

interpretation. The Antiochene School was not a catechetical school like the one in Alexandria; it was just a school of thought, a group of like-minded interpreters.

The Antiochene interpreters insisted that the true meaning of a Bible passage must be built upon the clear, normal sense of the text. For example, according to the Antiochenes, the story of Joseph in Genesis 37 has nothing to do with philosophy or the Church. On the contrary, in Genesis 37 God is using the example of Joseph and his family to teach us about sin and about God's providing – and to show us how God preserved the promise of the coming Savior by protecting the family line from which Jesus would come.

Now, let's be clear. The Antiochene interpreters recognized that there are symbols in different parts of the Bible. However, the Antiochenes felt that anyone could see which parts were symbolic and which were not. Obviously, the biblical narrations, laws, and teachings (among other things) had to be interpreted literally, not allegorically. Even with the symbols in the Bible, very often the text itself gave some indication of how they were to be interpreted. According to the Antiochenes, you find the meaning of the Bible through the normal rules of language.

The famous preacher John Chrysostom was one of the Antiochene interpreters. So was the controversial bishop Theodore of Mopuestia. Theodore took the Antiochene principles to extremes. He was so concerned about interpreting things literally, he denied that many messianic prophecies actually had to do with Christ. If there was any detail in the prophecy or in its context that did not fit Jesus' life perfectly and literally (according to Theodore's perspective), he insisted that the entire prophecy could not refer to Christ. Unfortunately for Theodore, many prophecies in the Old Testament do use symbolic language. Thus, again we see the dangers of taking one interpretive principle to extremes without considering other valid factors.

The "One Literal Sense"

As we've seen, during the Middle Ages the allegorical method was popular. Many theologians interpreted the Bible according to the "four-fold sense." While they did not deny the literal meaning of the text, they felt that the allegorical meaning was higher, more spiritual. There were, of course, a few interpreters who focused on the plain, normal meaning of the words; but there were not many of them.

The Reformation changed all that. Martin Luther and the other leaders of the Reformation wanted to get back to the original meaning of the Bible. They felt that the Roman Catholic theologians had added many human traditions and human ideas to the pure Word of God. Some of those traditions and ideas (purgatory, indulgences, masses for the dead, etc.) were not only unbiblical but contrary to the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus, the Reformation leaders were not willing to let theologians change the message of the Bible by allegorizing it. They insisted that any interpretation of the Bible must be in accordance with the clear, normal meanings of the words in the text. Instead of a "four-fold" sense, they insisted on looking for the "**one literal sense.**"

Now, let's be clear. When the Reformers spoke of "one literal sense," they did not mean to be "literalistic." A literalistic interpretation does not recognize symbols, metaphors, or figures of speech in the text. The Reformation theologians did indeed take seriously the symbols and other literary devices which might be present in a given Bible passage. However, they insisted on reading each biblical text on its own terms, not trying to find hidden, allegorical meanings that had nothing to do with the plain, normal understanding that any reader could comprehend.

The Reformers made the radical claim that anyone could read and understand the plain message of the Bible. Interpretation was not limited to just the learned few who were proficient in the allegorical method.

Thus the **eighth guideline** for healthy biblical interpretation is:

8. Interpret the Bible passage according to the clear, normal sense of the language used in the text.

This means that the meaning of the Bible passage does not have a lot of different “senses” that change according to the allegorical key that one uses. On the contrary, each Bible passage has one plain meaning which can be found through the common understanding of language and literature, not special codes.

Like the Reformers, many theologians call this idea the “one literal sense.” However, we need to be careful when we use the word “literal.” Obviously the Bible contains parables and prophecies which use symbolic language. However, the normal conventions of language and literature make it clear when symbols and figures of speech are being used and when they are not. There is no need to look for hidden messages or multiple meanings. The meaning of the text is made plain by the words and language used.

Perhaps it would be better to call this idea the “clear, normal sense.” That phrase takes into account both the figurative language and the literal language found in the Bible.

In any case, we need to keep in mind the fact that God used human authors with human words to communicate. For this reason, we can expect to understand God’s message by using the normal rules of human language and literature.

Example 1

Here is an example of using the **historical context** to understand a Bible passage:

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

This passage speaks of a specific problem that was happening during the worship services in the Christian church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 11 states that the women of the congregation should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy in the worship service. They should do this, it says, because the husband is the “head” of the wife.

What does this mean? Why was it important for the women to cover their heads while the men didn’t have to do so? And why don’t we insist on women covering their heads today? Are we disobeying God’s will?

The historical context of the passage helps us understand it. At the time when 1 Corinthians was written, the city of Corinth was a big center for idol worship. There were temples everywhere dedicated to different gods and goddesses. Acts of idol worship were part of every public event (including the famous Isthmus Games, which were athletic games similar to the Olympic Games). In the marketplace, it was almost impossible to find meat that had not been sacrificed to some idol or other. In some of the temples, the idol worship included prostitution and homosexual acts. In fact, Corinth was famous for its sexual perversions.

In Corinth, when a man prayed in the worship service in the pagan temples, he had to cover his head in the presence of the image of the god or goddess. Archaeologists have discovered ancient statues in Corinth of men in the act of prayer; they all wear special head coverings. By contrast, 1 Corinthians 11 insists that in the Christian worship services, the men are not to cover their

heads when they pray. According to 1 Corinthians 11, the man is the image of the true God. Therefore he should not cover his head. This is radically different from the customs in the pagan temples. In effect, 1 Corinthians 11 is saying that men who are Christians should not dress like the men who are idol worshippers when they pray. (See also 1 Corinthians 10:14-21.)

On the other hand, the situation for women in Corinth was markedly different. In Corinth, women normally wore head coverings (veils) – with one exception. The prostitutes – especially the temple prostitutes – did not cover their heads. If a woman went around without a veil in Corinth, she was telling the world that she did not belong to any man, and that she was free and willing to have sex with different people. If a wife took her veil off in public, it was a slap in the face towards her husband.

1 Corinthians 11 insists that Christian wives should cover their heads because they are under the “headship” of their husbands. They are not prostitutes and especially not temple prostitutes. They may be free in Christ, but that is not an excuse for acting scandalously and disrespectfully towards their husbands. In effect, 1 Corinthians 11 is saying that women who are Christians should not dress like the women who worship idols and/or are sexually promiscuous. You can find more details about the historical context of 1 Corinthians in the book After Paul Left Corinth, by Bruce Winters.

Thus, several things are very clear in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. First of all, in the worship service the man should honor Christ. Secondly, in the worship service the woman should respect the headship of her husband. Both men and women should express these attitudes in the way that they dress, even if it goes against the customs common among the unbelievers in Corinth. Apparently this was the practice in many different Christian congregations (see verse 16).

What does the phrase “because of the angels” (see v. 10) mean? Some interpreters think that it means that the angels themselves would be ashamed of the scandalous behavior of the women at Corinth. On the other hand, the word translated “angels” could also be translated “messengers.” Some interpreters think that “messengers” refers to people from outside the congregation who were present at the worship service. These people might be visitors from a different Christian church or representatives from important people at Corinth who were curious about the Christian faith. In this case, the behavior of the women would give a bad testimony to those messengers. We can’t be completely sure which of these explanations is correct; both fit with the context of the passage.

Why then don’t we insist that women wear head coverings in the worship service today? Because today, if a man wears a head covering, it does not announce to everyone that he is praying to idols; and if a woman lacks a head covering, it is not a signal that she is a prostitute. The historical context is different.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, the eternal principle is the order that God has laid out for us. In the church, the man is the “head” of the woman, Christ is the “head” of the church, and God the Father is the “head” of Christ (see v. 3). This order has been set by God since he created the world and nature (v. 8-9). It is not something that changes in different societies.

However, covering the head was a special application of this principle at one time and place. It was an expression of the natural order created by God (see v. 14-15). Today, we still need to honor Christ and respect God’s established “heads,” and the customs we follow in our worship services should reflect that respect and honor.

Example 2

Here is an example of how the **clear, normal sense of the language** can help us avoid misinterpretations of the Bible:

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

This passage declares that God created the world and everything in it, including humans, in seven days.

The following is an interpretation of the **Kabalah** of this passage:

When we study the Torah (Pentateuch, Bible) we must understand that all the words of the Torah and all other sacred books just appear to be words associated with our world. The words however represent spiritual objects and roots, which are under no circumstances connected to our world. There should be no confusion of these spiritual concepts and physical objects. The Torah contains the sacred names of the Creator, which represents the degrees of His attainment. This is similar to how we designate a name to an object in our world depending on how the object manifests itself to our senses. The entire Torah describes the levels of approaching and sensing the Creator...

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth refers to making of two properties: egoism and altruism. The egoistic property of earth gets corrected with the help of altruistic property of heaven. The correction process consists of seven states, called seven days of creation. Naturally, this is a conditional name. It has nothing to do with the seven days on earth; it does not refer to either day and night or light and darkness on earth. Rather, it refers to the spiritual states and spiritual sensations of a person who passes through these stages of correction. It talks about the system in which one's soul is corrected while existing at the level called earth. (excerpt from "The Wisdom of Kabalah," http://www.kabbalah.info/engkab/the_secret_meaning_of_the_bible.htm)

Kabalah is a form of Jewish mysticism which has attracted some Christians as well. It is quite widespread – even while I was a missionary in Venezuela, my wife and I had contact with a number of school teachers who followed Kabalah. As you can see, the kabalistic way of interpreting the Bible sees each word as signifying something entirely different from its normal meaning. "Creation" actually means "stages of soul correction;" "heaven" is "altruism" and "earth" is "egoism," "7 days" is actually "7 states of the soul," etc. Where did the interpreter get these meanings? Out of thin air. He – along with others who follow Kabalah – just made this stuff up. There is absolutely no indication in the biblical text that any of these ideas are present.

You or I could easily make up other interpretations. For example, let's apply Genesis 1:1 to the act of writing a book. Let's say that "in the beginning" means "when you first sit down to write." Let's make "God" a symbol for the "author." Then "created heaven and earth" means "describing the setting, the universe, in which the story takes place." Great! Now Genesis 1:1 is a secret code that actually means "When an author first sits down to write, he describes the setting of the story." What's the difference between our made-up interpretation and the kabalistic interpretation? Nothing at all – except perhaps that the Kabalah talks about the soul and therefore sounds a bit more spiritual.

If we pay attention to the **clear, normal sense of the words**, then Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 means something quite different. It means that God, a personal, spiritual being, made everything and everyone that exists in the physical universe. This assertion is a key part of the Christian faith.

Now, let's be clear. Some Christians do not interpret everything in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 in a literal way. Some Christians believe that the “days” might have been much longer than a literal, 24-hour day. Other Christians believe that the details of the “seven days” are just a poetic way of saying that God made everything, not a scientifically detailed description of the process. Personally, I don't see any good reason not to take the whole account literally. (We can discuss the debate over evolution some other time.) However, whether or not you believe there are some figurative elements in the account, it is crystal clear that Genesis is speaking of a material creation at the beginning of time, not “stages of a soul being corrected.” If God wanted to tell us about the correction of souls, the author of Genesis could have used words meaning precisely that. He didn't do that. He used words that we could understand, to speak of God's creation of the universe.

Conclusion

Theologians sometimes speak of **exegesis** and **eisegesis**.

Exegesis is an explanation, exposition, interpretation of what a text says. Exegesis draws out the meaning from a text in accordance with the context and discoverable meaning of its author (see Wikipedia).

Eisegesis is imposing one's own presuppositions, ideas, and biases onto the text. Eisegesis is “reading into” a text, forcing the text to confirm one's own ideas rather than seeking to understand what the author of the text was trying to say.

If we overlook the **historical context** and the **clear, normal sense of the words**, then it is easy to fall into *eisegesis*, to read our own ideas into the text rather than seeking to understand what God wanted to communicate through the human author. If we want to know what God says, we need to take into account the **human author** that God used to communicate to us.

In the following chapter, we'll look at how some modern interpreters have distorted the historical context through “higher criticism.”