# 5 | Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures

*Principles for responsible interpretation of the Old Testament*

**Enrichment Version**

The Enrichment Version is designed for those who wish to explore principles that lead to honorable procedures for comprehending and applying the Old Testament without the intention of pursuing either a certificate or a degree. This syllabus is identical to the one used by credit and degree-track students, except for deletion of Internet articles, videos, listings of secondary resources, exams, and writing assignments. There is nothing to submit for professorial review or grading. Therefore, the Enrichment syllabus is available for downloading without cost. Interested parties may glean a substantial knowledge, comprehension, and understanding of Old Testament exegesis through this guide.

The primary task of the course is to determine how select texts of scripture should be studied to understand the author's original intent and modern application. It is assumed that the student has a working knowledge of the nature and content of the Old Testament.

The course is organized in five modules. These modules are designed to help develop a framework for personal investigation into various parts of the Old Testament. The modules are (1) Interpreting Old Testament Literature, (2) Narrative and History, (3) Law, (4) Prophetic Announcements, and (5) Lament, Praise, and Wisdom.

**Objectives**

• Formulate the mechanics of biblical interpretation.

• Apply rules of interpretation to biblical literature.

• Recognize, evaluate, and use rules of interpretation in various literary genre.

## Course Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, the student will be able to

1. Relate key factors in interpreting Old Testament literature

2. Analyze the role of literary genre in interpreting the Bible

3. Apply principles of interpretation to biblical passages

## A Letter of Introduction

By now, you have undoubtedly taken several courses from NationsUniversity. If you have followed the recommended order, you have been introduced to the story of the Old Testament and have explored its

theological meaning. You are now ready to consider how you can undertake your own independent study of scripture and be reasonably sure you have understood it properly.

This course, "Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures," promises to offer some constructive guidelines for your future study of the biblical text. Why, you ask, should I need "guidelines"? The answer is rather simple. Guidelines help avoid pitfalls that can lead to wrong interpretation. For example, when interpreting the Psalms, one sees two lines that look almost identical. The first inclination may be to think the author is laying down two separate thoughts. But by understanding something about the feature of parallelism within Hebrew poetry, you are more likely to perceive that the author is using different words to stress a point. Again, one modern approach to prophetic literature may lead to the conclusion that all prophetic literature is predictive in nature. And, one might surmise that predictive prophecy always comes to pass in literary terms. We shall explore the nature of prophetic literature from a biblical perspective. But we need to have some guidelines to keep us on track with interpretation.

What you have learned in the past will not be lost in this course. Rather, you will find yourself being much more at home with the biblical text. And you will grow more certain of your footing as an interpreter of the sacred text. The object of higher education is not that we give you all the answers. The object is for you to become an able interpreter of the Word so you can grow in faith and can teach others much more accurately.

The study is not exhausting. But it does require dedication.

## Procedure

1. The syllabus has five modules. Review each module to see the layout of the course.

2.  Following your review, begin your work with Module 1. Read the syllabus carefully.  Complete the activity.

3. As you come to the end of Module 1, review the material to make sure you have not missed anything.

4. Once you have completed the exam over Module 1, move on to the other modules.

## Things to Know

1. Terms: apocalyptic, exegesis, genre, hermeneutics, lament, praise, translation, wisdom

2. The task of achieving good translation, exegesis, and hermeneutics—in that order

3. The nature of scripture, covenant, ancient legal legislation, Hebrew poetry, and wisdom (proverbial) literature

4. The goal of interpretation

5. The components of narrative

6. The nature and function of prophecy, including oracles of salvation and announcements of judgment

7. The nature and function of apocalyptic, lament, praise, and wisdom

8. Rules for interpreting apocalyptic, historical narrative, covenant legislation, and proverbial literature

## Copyright Policy

# Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures

One person may pick up a Bible, start reading it, and declare that it does not make sense. Another may read a passage haphazardly and make a personal application that has no resemblance to the inherent meaning of the passage. Still another may shun certain biblical books, because they seem to be boring or fail to suggest relevancy. What do these responses imply? They imply a lack of understanding of the nature of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Every person who opens a Bible is an "interpreter." Whether conscious of it or not, when one reads a biblical passage, one draws from it a certain conclusion. That conclusion may be driven by a prejudice against a particular book or the Old Testament as a whole. It may be that one is looking for a piece of information that will prove a point or satisfy a curiosity. Or, it could be that the person is doing some serious investigation. Regardless of the pre-condition that governs the reading, one is more likely to extract the correct interpretation and application if one understands linguistics and follows simple guidelines.

Since the modern student was not part of the "original" audience, a biblical text may appear remote. Interpretation may even appear irrelevant. Should one, therefore, conclude that the text is of no benefit to modern people? If the Bible is taken to be God's book, it will have meaning for all persons. Yet, it does not follow that all portions of scripture issue "commands" to all people in all time periods.

Assuming the Hebrew Scriptures have relevance, what is biblical interpretation about? The short answer is that interpretation is about knowing God. The value derived from interpreting the Old Testament can be measured in terms of personal spiritual enlightenment. If value to Old Testament study is to result, then it follows that correct interpretation is requisite to application.

This course carries the word "exegesis" in its title, for this is where the primary interest lies. "Exegesis" comes from the Greek and means to "draw out." It has become a technical term for comprehending a text within its original setting. In this instance, exegesis is a discipline that draws out the inherent meaning of a particular biblical text. However, to limit the course to strict exegesis would be shortsighted. Consequently, we are obliged to use several terms in our effort to convey the idea of what sometimes appears as a three-phase process: (1) drawing out the meaning inherent within the passage, (2) determining the meaning of that passage, especially in view of its implementations, and (3) application for modern audiences.

Because not everyone assigns the same meaning to the terms, we will makes some arbitrary distinctions. As an extension of technical "exegesis," the term "hermeneutics" has come into play to denote the use of methodological principles that extend the basic idea of strict exegesis. In other words, hermeneutics often includes both meaning and application. For analysis sake, we may limit exegesis by the question, "What does the text say?" Hermeneutics then would be concerned with this question: "What is the extended meaning of the text and how is this meaning to be applied?"

Other terms may be used in a general sense, such as interpretation and exposition. When used, they simply represent an act of explaining, uncovering, revealing, or displaying. The term application will be used to suggest how the meaning of a passage is to be used. The choice of this term suggests a specific

demand that the meaning of a passage makes.

The definition of terms may be straightforward, but stock definitions do not determine interpretation. If one presupposes a literary text (in our case, a biblical text) has an *inherent* meaning, and comprehending that meaning is essential to proper interpretation, then exegesis plays an essential role. But if one presupposes otherwise, then the importance of exegesis is diminished. Further, if a passage is connected with a desired action, then the full three-phrase process is not achieved until the action is undertaken.

You should be aware of three different assumptions that people make about interpreting the Bible.

1. Some assume that the actual intent of the author should govern the understanding of any given biblical text.

2. Others assume that an external force--be that a church, organization, or society--assigns meaning to a given biblical text.

3. Still others assume that the individual reader can give meaning to a biblical text as he/she experiences it.

It is conceivable that all three of these can be in agreement--author, tradition, and reader--but more often than not, different assumptions will yield different conclusions.

This course rests on assumption 1 above. This means that the control for interpretation is the author's original intent, not an outside organization, and not a modern person's experiential response to a reading. A premium is placed on the type of exegesis that seeks original intent, even when authorial intent may not always be visible. When they offer a fuller or extended meaning to Old Testament passages, New Testament writers do not violate the assumption.

Exegesis presumes justice is done to a text without speculation. It begins with finding the meaning--the meaning for the original readers to the extent possible. This may require the use of archaeological finds, ancient documents outside the Bible, and other materials that can shed light on the context. But the focus is on grammar, genre, and vocabulary.

The course is organized in five modules: (1) Interpreting Old Testament Literature, (2) Narrative and History, (3) Law, (4) Prophetic Announcements, and (5) Lament, Praise, and Wisdom. These modules are designed to help you develop a framework for your own investigation of various parts of the Old and New Testaments. Module 1 examines the need to interpret the Old Testament and the basic theory that lies behind interpretation. The ultimate quest is to be able to do your own study and learn how to handle the Scriptures properly so you can make appropriate application.

# MODULE 1 Interpreting Old Testament Literature

"Interpretation" is a common term that connotes the idea that something has been explained. To interpret is to understand what something means. As already noted, interpretation includes exegesis and the extended meaning of a text.

Exegesis involves technical literary skills. Interpretation uses these skills to determine what should be done with a passage. For example, exegesis of Prov. 11:1 is simple: "The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight." The setting, of course, is a time when ancient scales could be easily manipulated to short-weigh agricultural products. The inherent meaning of the passage is that dishonesty (the lack of integrity) is against Yahweh's nature. He is pleased with honest trading. And this is a fair interpretation of the proverb. Yet, the larger question is, Does the principle found in the proverb

apply only to weights?  What about measurements, promises, and other dishonest actions?  What applications may be made of this proverb in modern life?  Or, better yet, What implications does the proverb have for Christians?

Another example may be found in Mal. 3:8, where a careless Jewish community is charged with withholding proper sacrifices.  The accusation begins with a question: "'Will a man rob God?' Yet you rob me.  But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings."  The exegete may begin with the sacrificial system and may observe the rabbinic form employed by the 5th century prophet.  The larger context may indicate the nature of the failure in offering sick animals.  Surely, the present community needed to rectify the situation, but how would future Jews profit from the condemnation?  What implication does the passage have in light of the end of the sacrificial system and the establishment of the New Covenant where tithing is replaced by purposed giving?

Some passages pose difficult exegesis but may have a clear application.  In Gen. 6:4, the text states, "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days--and also afterward--when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children with them."  Two features are bothersome in this passage.  One has to do with the identity of the Nephilim.  The second pertains to the identity of "the sons of God."  But the implication is that marriages that mix good and evil elements tend toward corruption.  In exegesis the passage is descriptive of a past activity and is preliminary to explaining the story of the Flood.  Yet, it supports a principle.  And beyond the principle, it testifies to the judgments of God against evil.

In pursuing interpretation of the Old Testament, an important issue must be raised that will affect interpretation of Old Testament literature. It is the same issue that modern nation states face when interpreting their constitutions.  If the constitution was written in a time when circumstances were different from the way they are today, a question of its continuing legitimacy may be posed. If so, several options are open: (1) continue to apply it literally, (2) discard it and replace it with a new one, (3) revise it, (4) amend it, (5) ignore it, or (6) treat it as a "living" document. Sometimes, a government may apply more than one choice, such as amending the constitution and treating it as a living document or giving lip service to it but ignoring unattractive stipulations. To illustrate how the options work, a constitution that does not allow women to vote may be amended to allow women's suffrage.

If a national constitution is held to be a "living" document that can be adjusted to modern times, then rulings that go beyond (or come short) of the intent of the framers of the constitution can be enforced.  This is commonly done through court rulings on issues involving human rights and freedoms.

We can understand the need for human documents to be "reinterpreted" to fit the times. However, can the same rules be applied to the Bible? To do so is to admit that the Bible is outdated and that humans have the right to change, ignore, revise, or treat it as a "living" document. If, on the other hand, the Bible is of divine origin, the issue is not the same. For example, who has the right to change the injunction regarding adultery and fornication?

When interpreting the Old Testament, still another issue faces us. For the Jew, oral law may become the official interpretation of the written law. For the Christian, the Old Testament is not "binding," as it represents the "old" covenant that has been "nailed to the cross." How, then, does the Christian treat the Old Testament? Is it useless, instructional, or what? We shall examine these issues as we proceed with our study.

The module is broken into three parts.  These are Unit 1 The Need to Interpret the Bible, Unit 2 The Task of Interpretation, and Unit 3 Interpreting the Old Testament in Translation.


## Unit 1. The Need to Interpret the Bible

To some, the Bible needs no interpretation. It simply needs to be read! Others hold that its message is so shrouded in mystery that only specially endowed people can understand it. Perhaps the more balanced approach lies somewhere in between. The general message of the Scriptures can be understood by everyone, yet greater comprehension requires more than casual reading.

Passages of scripture often generate discussion and debate, not over what the text *says,* but over what the text *means.* Such disagreements suggest that the critical issue in biblical study in not front-end exegesis, *i.e.,* identifying literary genre, vocabulary, and grammatical construction. The crucial matter is understanding what the author meant when he chose specific genre, vocabulary, and construction. After this comes the quest for how the passage may find legitimate standing for a modern audience. The *need* to interpret the Bible rises from an urgency to discover "truth" that may beg for application in current circumstances.

The intended meaning of a text may become obscured if the reader does not observe proper rules or guidelines. One may be careless and simply overlook the obvious meaning. One can read a personal interpretation into the text and miss the inherent meaning. We need to learn how to interpret the Bible accurately so many of the ignorant disputes will disappear.

As a foundation on which sound interpretation may be achieved, the discussion in this unit addresses three topics. These are (a) The nature of scripture, (b) The scope of interpretation, and (c) The interpreter. As you work through the unit, two questions should be kept in mind. How can one be sure that the biblical text is handled properly? How can one be certain of the meaning of what one reads? We believe these questions are reasonable. You should not be threatened by either of them.

If the Bible is of God, it must be both true and relevant. If it is relevant, it's content should impact one's life. The optimum goal of interpretation is, therefore, to touch lives in such a manner as to change, modify, encourage, confirm, or correct them in keeping with the will of God. Therefore, everyone needs to discover the message of the Bible.

**a. The nature of scripture.** Inasmuch as "scripture" is considered sacred, reading the Old Testament should be undertaken with a sense of awe. Its message is uniquely God-breathed. At the same time, the Bible is a written document that begs to be heard in its setting. It is a literary piece that employs a variety of literary forms. Since the Bible is written in human language, it is to be interpreted in keeping with writing techniques common at the time of composition. Yet, the Bible is not mere history or biography or short story or wisdom or poetry. It intends to impact the life of every contemporary reader *spiritually.* One reads, studies, and interprets in order to know God.

The Scriptures are the product of over a millennium of writing activity. They were shaped by a variety of writers and styles. Together, the books of the Bible comprise a single entity. There is remarkable consistency in the Bible in terms of its themes and ideas. Consequently, one should not read in an attempt to find contradictions but with a view toward spiritual enlightenment.

If one begins with humanistic assumptions, then one will regard the Bible as the product of imperfect men who are trying to explain their place on earth. On the other hand, if one begins with God, whose revelation of himself is found in the Bible, the perspective will be much different. The former makes man the ultimate source of understanding; the latter looks to God for meaning.

For the believer, the Hebrew Scriptures tell God's story. When approaching this body of literature from that perspective, individual pieces become parts of a living organism. None of the compositions are cold ancient history or antiquated legal codes. They have vibrancy about them and contain treasures of divine wisdom.

The Bible is written in two basic literary forms: narrative and poetry. We shall say more about narrative in Module 2. Let us mention here a most prominent feature about poetry--the use of parallel lines. Rather than use rhyme to set lines in parallel, the Hebrews made their lines synonymous or continuous. Psalm 8:4 provides a good example of synonymous lines, where "what is man that you are mindful of him" is followed by "the son of man that you care for him." *Man* and *son of man* are equal. Both terms identify the human being as the object. Being *mindful of him* and *caring for him* mean the same thing. The arrangement is simply to emphasize God's attitude toward his creation.

In Psalm 8:3 parallel lines are continuous. That is, the thought of the first line is continued in the second. The author begins with, "When I consider your heavens" and continues with the idea that they

are "the work of your fingers."  The second line points back to the first.  In lines three and four, the author connects with the thought by noting "the moon and the stars" as the prominent features of "your heavens"--hence the two ideas run in parallel.  These heavenly objects, "you have set in place" becomes parallel to "the work of your fingers."  So, lines one and two and lines three and four complement each other.  But lines one and three also complement one another as do lines two and four.

As you become familiar with the routine of parallel writing, you will be able to appreciate the more complex formulations found within Hebrew poetry.  Recognizing parallelism is essential to interpretation.

Some psalms are built as an acrostic.  The most remarkable one is Psalm 119.  Here, every eight verses begin with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet--in sequence.  The first eight verses begin with the initial letter of the alphabet--the letter Aleph.  In translation, this is not evident, as the feature is impossible to capture in the receptor language.  Words in translation simply do not begin with the same letter.

**b. The scope of interpretation.**  The Hebrew Scriptures are a composite of literary works produced in ancient Israelite culture intended primarily for ancient Israelite people. For modern people to comprehend the message of these writings, they must bring them into a language of their own comprehension. They will need to understand the circumstances surrounding these writings. They must also ask about the relevance of the message of these books to modern life.

The Hebrews from Moses' time forward lived under the regulations of the Law of Moses. This being the case, we will understandably question the applicability of biblical literature to a non-Jewish audience. However, to label the books of the Old Testament as ancient history of the Jewish people and proceed to treat the corpus as something which has no relevance for today discounts its value and renders its study nearly useless. It also overlooks the true nature of the literature itself.

The interpretative process can involve the whole text or a portion thereof. A pericope (a short passage of text within a larger text) should be harmonious with the text as a whole. An exception may be a cited text that bears no relationship with the entire body of Scripture. Herein, one faces a primary question. Are biblical references related to the whole of a particular composition or is the biblical text disjointed? If one assumes that a biblical book is a unified whole and that its constituent parts comprise meaningful elements of the whole, then it follows that interpretation of the various parts must be done within the framework of the whole. In the case of quotations from outside sources, the original quote will have its own context and the biblical author may be using it to support his own goals. In this case, there may be an original interpretation and a secondary interpretation that fit the biblical author's purpose. In the case of the Psalter and the Book of Proverbs, individual psalms or proverbs are much more loosely related than are narratives that appear in other biblical books. So, one may need to analyze carefully the wording of individual psalms or proverbs when relating them to the whole corpus.

Determining what application should be made for the present day defines a secondary task of the course. The endeavor recognizes three audiences in the interpretative process: (1) an original audience, (2) a secondary audience, and (3) a present-day audience. The original audience would have been the people to whom an oracle, law, or statement was first directed, often in oral form. The secondary audience would be the people to whom a biblical composition was directed in written form. The present-day audience includes the contemporary reader. In all events, the literary genre of the written composition must be taken into account, whether the genre be narrative, poetry, legal, apocalyptic, praise, wisdom, or some other. Additionally, background material, linguistics, contexts, and hermeneutical principles will play an important role in determining the proper meaning of a biblical text for all audiences addressed.

**c.  The interpreter.**  When one reads the Bible in a language other than its original language, one is reading the "interpretation" made by others.  Scholars wrestle with which word to use to translate the original Hebrew.  Since languages differ in vocabulary and syntax, scholars make an educated guess about which word to use to translate a particular Hebrew word.  They also must decide whether to be consistent when the vocabulary in the new language offers more specific nuances.  So, in a sense, "interpretation" has already taken place before the reader has an opportunity to read the text.

Beyond the translator, every reader of the Scriptures is an "interpreter," for the reader must make sense of the words of the text.  What do the words mean when they are called individually?  What do the words

mean when placed in relationship in a sentence or paragraph?  The reader will tend to filter the text through his/her own understanding of the vocabulary.  Common usage of a language often conveys nuances to words that were not there when the text was first translated.

The way one goes about interpreting the text is influenced by personal experiences, cultural outlooks, and linguistic perceptions.  Or a passage may trigger in the reader's mind some idea that is actually foreign to the text.  Again, the reader's understanding of the meaning of a particular word may suggest something other than what the author intended to convey.  There is also risk of accepting a popularized interpretation without examining the text itself.

Because one sometimes hears what one *wants* to hear, the true message may go undetected.  For example, the word "sacrifice" may bring to mind the killing of an animal and placing it on an altar.  If the reader elects to push the act out of mind because it appears repulsive, he/she may fail to see the significance of the sacrifice.  Interpretation is concerned with more than word identification; it is concerned with contextual meaning.  Yahweh's command to Abraham to offer his son in sacrifice is hardly something that one would take personally or even condone for today.  The meaning is clear for Abraham, and its application is limited to one specific person.  Interpretation in this instance has more to do with Abraham's faith than with understanding the particulars of the incident.

Every person or group who claims to follow the Bible will base beliefs and practices on scripture.  Nonetheless, aberrations may result from poor interpretations.  This happens when passages are taken out of context or are simply misunderstood.  Another thing that can happen is that one may claim a private revelation or insight and pass it along as God-given.  This is why rules become necessary to govern interpretation.  Such rules must preserve the integrity of the biblical text and support interpretations that are in harmony with the Bible in general.


## Unit 2. The Task of Interpretation

Considering the antiquity of the Bible and the variation found in its literary formation, the task of interpretation appears to be a formidable one. Yes, indeed, the book is large, covers a long period of time, and embraces many topics. Furthermore, if the Old Testament is taken to be "sacred," it should be treated with respect. Its message is precious. It begs for careful effort at understanding.

The text of the Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew, with a few sections in the more widely used Aramaic language. Standard Hebrew genre, idioms, and vocabulary characterize the entire composition. This means (1) that the text reflects the language that was standard at the time and understood by the commoner and (2) the authors used the full range of literary genre characteristic of ancient Hebrew. Consequently, interpreting the Old Testament must be done in keeping with the forms of the ancient Hebrew language.

To arrive at the proper meaning of Old Testament texts for today, one is obliged to seek first correct "exegesis." That is, one will consistently ask, What did it mean in its original setting? Then one should be sensitive to New Testament insights. New Testament writers often quote the Hebrew text or the Septuagint (Greek translation). They sometimes extend the meaning of those texts. Here is where the interpreter must observe closely the purpose of the quotations. Please consider two precautions.

One, you may be tempted to interpret an Old Testament passage in light of the New Testament when the New Testament never makes a specific connection. To illustrate, observe that Gen. 3:15 mentions the enmity between Satan and Eve's offspring: "He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Traditionally, this verse is taken to predict Jesus' defeat of Satan, yet the New Testament never connects this passage with Jesus.

Two, you may feel pressured by your associates to miss the original message of Isaiah by insisting that Isaiah spoke exclusively of Jesus' birth of a virgin (Isa. 7:14). Avoid straining to make the Bible say something it does not say because you want to stand in with the crowd or you feel you must defend the Bible against criticism. Simply take the Bible for what it is and what it says. Your task is to interpret, not

judge, correct, or hide its meaning. Once you have done a responsible job of exegesis, you are ready to moves to present-day application.

**a. Goals of interpretation.** Identifying the "goals," "aims," or "objectives" of interpretation is easily confused by the array of words used to describe the task.  In normal parlance, the three terms are synonymous.  In modern education circles, goals and objectives are artificially distinguished.  Current education specialists also speak of student learning outcomes as something the student should be able to do with the learning.  In the instance of this course, it will be sufficient to say the "goals" of interpretation are (1) to find the inherent meaning of a biblical text, (2) to extract the implications of that text within contemporary settings, and (3) to provide the foundation for sound theology and application.

As for student learning outcomes, you should be able to determine the meaning of a text and extrapolate the implications for today's world.  You may even become an expert theologian, handling the biblical text correctly.  But in spiritual matters, this is only the beginning.  Unless you adapt your life so that you are living in concert with the implications and the theology, the outcome is incomplete.

*Theological study.*  Theological study begins with exegesis.  Theology does not establish the critical apparatus of a biblical text--that is left to textual critics.  Theologians do not determine what a passage means.  Rather, exegesis is the foundation for sound theology.  The discipline draws from the interpretation of many passages in an effort to portray a complete picture of the themes it treats.  Most theological treatments are thematic rather than expositions of continuous text.

*Application.*  The final and practical end result of interpretation is application. For application to be valid, it must be either what the author intended or in concert with his writing. If not, then one cannot say the text has received justified application. One may say that the application was suggested by the text or prompted by the text. But one could hardly be correct and say one had applied the text. For example, one may read a passage from Leviticus, where Israel was instructed to offer an animal sacrifice as a sin offering (Lev. 4:13-21) and attempt to make application by making a financial contribution to the church. While one may be moved to thank God through giving of his resources for a worthy cause, this is not an application of that passage. The closest one can get to an application is to realize that Jesus became a sacrifice for our sins, but even that is not a good hermeneutical procedure for this reference.

Interpretation should not be undertaken with the intent to discover some *new* thing but with the desire to unveil the *right* thing. If we assume the author presents the correct and authoritative meaning, the authors' intention becomes a controlling factor in achieving good interpretation. Application remains a personal matter.

**b. Exegesis.**  As noted earlier, "exegesis" comes from the Greek language, where it means "to draw out" or "unfold."  When applied to the study of the Bible, it suggests making a careful investigation of a text of scripture for the purpose of uncovering *the meaning intended by the writer of the text.*  The task of exegesis must take into account the *physical environment* in which the passage was cast, the *historical background* of the passage under review, and the *literary forms and vocabulary* used to convey the meaning of the passage.

*Physical environment.*  The physical environment becomes important in exegesis when the culture, geography, or political circumstances are reflected in the authors' writing.  All kinds of circumstances stand behind biblical passages--a military threat, a personal tragedy, a time of jubilation, remorse, and a myriad of others.  Certainly, these influence the text and should be taken into account by the exegete.  Since the Bible was written in time, culture, and particular historical circumstances, the task of exegesis must begin with the setting.  When settings are difficult or impossible to determine, tentative conclusions may be in order.

*Historical background.*  The historical background pertains to the events that led to the writing itself.  If one can discover the occasion for writing, one will be in an improved position to understand both the author's purpose and the circumstances he addressed with his primary audience.  Knowing as much as possible about the people addressed, the approximate time of writing, and the events to which the author alludes will be important to correct exegesis.

*Literary forms.*  As literature, the Bible partakes of literary conventions.  Good interpretation requires recognition of the type of literature being read.  The Bible is often misunderstood because the reader fails to observe the literary genre.  The Old Testament is a book produced by the ancient Hebrews.  The literary forms found in these Hebrew Scriptures reflect the style of the times.

If literary form or genre can be described as "a group of items with common characteristics," then it follows that the type of writing in one text may be distinguished from another type of writing in a second text by its literary features.  Keep in mind that the original authors probably did not sit down and say, "I am going to write narrative."  The identification of genre is a modern technique designed to increase our understanding of written language.  It goes beyond the most obvious distinctions between simple prose and poetry.

In biblical interpretation, genre criticism works with the canonical form of the text.  A value of genre criticism is that it forces the interpreter to focus on the text as a whole.  Prose is best seen as three different genres: history writing, legal codes, and narrative.  Poetry, on the other hand, is best divided into psalms of lament and psalms of praise.  Wisdom is divided into proverbial and non-proverbial forms.  The genre that involves features of form is narrative.  History writing functions to present a chronicle of Israel's relationship with God.  Law includes covenant and ritual.  A genre that contains a word from Yahweh, reassurance, and an affirmation of God's commitment to his promises is that of oracles of salvation.

Announcements of judgment function to inform either the king or the people of God's impending wrath.  Apocalyptic functions to encourage the saints who are caught up in the crises of living in an evil world.  Lament has a form of an invocation and plea to God, a complaint, a petition, and a statement of confidence in God's response.  In terms of content, praise seeks to share primarily one emotion or experience, one response to a celebratory event, act of deliverance, or truth.  Proverb functions to help devotees of wisdom develop the skill of handling everyday decisions.  Non-proverbial wisdom is known to encompass units longer than single-statement proverbs such as parables, wisdom poems, and dialogues.

The various genres within biblical passages should be reflected in any contemporary application one seeks to make.  The original meaning of a passage should be established within its historical and literary context first before any attempt is made to make application.  Then, one may find that correct interpretation of a passage may have a limited number of applications.  One should be careful not to abuse a biblical text.  Remember, "inspiration" pertains to the author, not the reader.  The reader's understanding is conditioned on comprehending the author's intent.

When one studies literature, one does not generally consider it to be "inspired."  The term may be used of literature when someone wants to express the idea that it has been uplifting, encouraging, and motivating.  But when reference is made to the Bible as being "inspired," this is hardly what is intended.  The idea of "inspiration," when used with reference to the Bible, is that it is somehow "God breathed."  It has a divine touch.  Just how divine inspiration worked is the subject of much debate.  Some would say God dictated the words.  Others would contend that God inspired the thought.  Still others may feel that God guided the thoughts and pen of the human author.  The Bible affirms divine guidance without explaining it.  Here, we are concerned to affirm the concept and then read the text carefully.  Inspiration suggests truth rather than error.  The analysis of literary form within biblical literature should strengthen the interpretative process rather than diminish it.

**c. Hermeneutics.** While "exegesis" is concerned with the text in its original setting, "hermeneutics" (as used in this course) is concerned with contemporary application. As a discipline, hermeneutics gives attention to the principles that guide the reader to justified conclusions regarding meaning for the present. Some students wish to begin with application, but application could be skewed if the exegesis is done poorly. The control for application lies with proper handling of the text. Otherwise, the original loses its meaning and the application becomes suspect. Scripture is indeed relevant. Yet relevancy derives, not from a present circumstance, but from the nature of scripture itself. Scripture is relevant to me because God so spoke or acted, not because I have an unfulfilled spiritual urge.

One may begin, therefore, with the assumption that understanding something written depends on context. There may be three levels of context: (1) original setting, (2) literary form, and (3) present circumstances. The original setting may refer to either the first audience--those who heard the actual oral presentation of

the material as a speech or prophetic utterance or the second audience—the ones for whom the written report was originally intended. Literary form governs the way the text is handled, whether literal or poetic or figurative. The most tenuous of the three is the last--present circumstances. Here is where hermeneutics becomes critical. If the method of arriving at appropriate application is flawed, the interpretation can produce more harm than good. For example, if my hermeneutic were to suggest that everything the apostles did is a model for contemporary living, then we would be limited to walking, animal riding, and boating as means of transportation. In this event, I would become a slave of a method of interpreting the text, advocate a bad position, and cause undue conflict with those who did not agree with my hermeneutic.

*Activity.* Open your Bible to 2 Samuel 22. What can you discover relative to an immediate, literary, and distant context?


# Unit 3. Interpreting the Old Testament in Translation

Unless one can read Hebrew, the basic tool for exegesis is a good translation, be that the Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish, or any other version. To some extent, the ability to do good exegesis is determined by the quality of the translation and the ability of the reader to understand the translation.

A "translation" cannot attain an exact match in any receptor language. Word meanings and literary forms differ. A translation can come close enough to guard the true meaning of the text, but it will never displace the need for original language study.

Another limitation posed by translation is that, over time, it becomes antiquated. Translations that have been in print for decades tend to become obsolete. With the emergence of new vocabulary and changes in word meaning, new generations of people become less familiar with the older vocabulary of their own language. Consequently, what may have once been a good translation may now be a difficult translation to read. For this reason, new or revised translations are needed. If one is going to use a translation, it needs to be one that he/she can understand. The purpose of translation is defeated if the reader has to re-translate from an archaic version.

For the average reader, translation should be a simple matter of matching words from the original Hebrew Bible with words in the receptor language. But those who use more than one language or who have experimented with computer translations quickly realize that the process is much more complex. Three basic problems face translators: (a) establishing the text to be translated, (b) determining how literal to make the translation, and (c) choosing the precise words capable of conveying the meaning of the original text. In this unit, we shall look briefly at each of these topics.

**a. Establishing the text to be translated.** No original manuscripts of the Bible have been preserved. But thousands of ancient manuscripts or manuscript fragments are extant. If the Bible had been preserved in a single manuscript, then determining the text to translate would offer no choice. But among the many manuscripts and fragments, there is some discrepancy. Most of these discrepancies are spelling errors, repeated words or lines, and differences in recorded numbers. However, some alternate readings, additions, and omissions may be detected among the manuscripts.

The discipline that examines the various manuscripts, fragments, and versions with the intent of arriving at a single correct text for translation is called *textual criticism*. In reality, textual critics do not determine the correct reading. Rather, they document the evidence for alternative readings against what appears to be the oldest and most likely original reading. They look at such matters as the majority reading, the most ancient rendition, and the source for alternative renderings. Textual criticism is the friend of translation, for it gathers all the evidence on which the translators may decide how the translation should read.

As for hand-written manuscripts and fragments of the Old Testament, the majority of these date from the period after the 11th century C.E. Perhaps the most important Hebrew texts come from the Qumran

community, which flourished during the century preceding Jesus.  The Qumran texts were discovered only during the mid-20th century.

 In addition to the Hebrew texts, several ancient translations of the Old Testament are extant.  The most notable and important of these are the Greek translations, known collectively as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX).  The original LXX dates from before Christ, although the major existing LXX manuscripts come from after the 4th century C.E.  Aramaic, Syriac (called the Peshitta), Old Latin, Vulgate (Jerome's version in Latin), Coptic (Egyptian), Ethiopic, Armenian, and Arabic versions are also used by textual critics to help establish the original text.

With so many materials and variables, textual critics face a mammoth task.  But the fact that so much material exists strengthens the case for the Bible.  If there were only one extant text, and it were not the original, how could anyone verify its accuracy?  Although confirmation is overwhelming, questions remain as to the exact reading of some verses.  Even though a standard printed text of the Old Testament may be available to the translators, scholars may differ as to whether one variant reading should be preferred over another.

**b.  Determining how literal to make the translation.**  A second major decision by translators is to decide how close they want to stay to the grammatical constructs of the Hebrew text.  For example, the first verse of the Bible rendered in a precise manner according to Hebrew structure would read, "In beginning he created gods the heavens and the earth."  Obviously, English-speaking people do not structure their sentences in the same way as did the Hebrews.  And some knowledge of language and the use of *elohim* is necessary for understanding what the verse intended to say.  The absence of the definite article makes a difference in English, but not in Hebrew.  Therefore, the English reads, "In *the* beginning," which is implied in the Hebrew.  The verb precedes the subject in Hebrew, but not in English.  Additionally, the verb carries with it the masculine form to match the noun, but this does not hold in English.  The word used for God is plural in the Hebrew, but this does not necessarily imply a plurality of gods or suggest a trinity.

From the above illustration, one can see that translators are doing more than "transliterating" words.  They attempt to put into a second language the full impact of the original statement.  So, translators must decide how best to do this.  How close should they stay to the original language structures if these structures impede putting the meaning of the text in the new language?  The opposite extremes of the pendulum are "literal" (exact) and "free" (paraphrased) translations.  *Literal* translation stays close to exact wording and order.  *Free* translation is more concerned with conveying ideas imbedded within the original writing.  The freer the translation, the more the reader depends upon the translation for interpretation.  The more literal the translation, the more responsibility the reader must assume for interpretation.

Still another concern has to do with handling those matters which have no counterpart within modern culture.  Some versions translate weights, money, and distances with terms used by modern people.  Other versions retain the original term, perhaps with an explanatory footnote.

**c.  Choosing the precise words which convey the meaning of the original text.**  Biblical content was conveyed through the use of conventional *literary forms and vocabulary*.  Consequently, an awareness of literary forms becomes imperative.  A striking example is the feature of parallelism used in passages developed in Hebrew poetry.  Equally important to correct exegesis is an understanding of apocalyptic.

The Hebrew language has a much smaller vocabulary than either Greek or English.  Therefore, Hebrew words are more often defined by their contexts.  Context refers to sentences that precede or follow a given passage.  The context thus provides meaning to words which could carry somewhat different meanings in other contexts.  For example, the word *ab* can mean "father" in one context and "ancestor" in another.  Beyond the words themselves, the larger context looms as a determining factor in exegesis.  What has gone before and what comes later reveal much about the intent of a particular sentence.  A primary question to keep in mind is, What did the author intend to convey?

Words often have multiple meanings, depending on the context.  Their primary meanings can also change.  Therefore, translators are not consistent in rendering Hebrew words with the same word in the

receptor language.

With respect to Hebrew construction, the word "and" begins many sentences in the Hebrew Bible as a matter of course. The word does not necessarily connect the new sentence with the preceding one. It is a characteristic of Hebrew writing and carries no particular meaning. Should translators translate every "and"?

Another choice translators must make is with reference to euphemism. Do they find another euphemism to replace a term or do they translate the euphemism? For example, do you translate "he relieved himself" as "he made a rest stop" or "he went to the toilet"? In summary, translators must remain faithful to the original text, but their goal is to convey equivalent *meaning* and not exact words or structure.

# MODULE **2** Narrative and History

Much of the Old Testament was written in poetic structure, but a significant portion was composed as narrative. In fact, narrative is the most common form of writing. Nearly every book of the Bible contains some narrative. Narrative, according to the English dictionary, is defined as an "account of connected events in order of happening." Hence, narrative provides a good literary form for writing history.

When narrative is the dominant and controlling feature, it may incorporate different literary forms in the process of telling a story. Within narrative, one may find sections of poetry, genealogical listings, enumeration, and a host of other literary genre. Narrative provides the glue that holds different elements together. It provides the setting for showing relationship between various components that the author chooses to bring together to communicate ideas.

Within biblical narrative may be found an account of select past events, which we shall call "history." The major difference in *biblical* history and *secular* history is that biblical history relates events for the purpose of disclosing divine purposes and actions. Facts are facts wherever they are found. So, it is not the nature of either biblical or secular history to distort information. It is the *interpretation* of the facts recorded that may separate the two.

This module introduces you to the uniqueness of biblical narrative and history and offers activities that provide experience in exegesis. The study activity will force you to do fresh analysis. Preliminary to working with the biblical text, you should become acquainted with the nature of literary forms of narrative and history writing. The three units are (1) Narrative, (2) History, and (3) Engagement.

## Unit 1. Narrative

Since the backbone of biblical revelation is narrative, narrative fashions and frames the story and message of the Bible. Unlike the Qur'an, which is composed wholly in poetic structure, the message of the Bible is conveyed largely through weaving together various episodes of divine-human encounter. These episodes are not isolated experiences but events spread over a considerable time period and connected through an overarching theme.

Biblical narrative, like all narrative, is driven by a purpose. Each of the independent or semi-independent compositions has a specific role. In some instances, the narrative may describe why God permitted a given action, such as the destruction of Jerusalem. In other instances, the text will provide the reader with background for God's redemptive action, as with the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Or, it may fill in details about life during the days of the judges and show how a Moabitess became the ancestor of King David. It may detail the giving of the covenant at Sinai, present legal codes, or describe the building of the tabernacle. Thus, narrative became the natural form for recording God's relationship with Israel.

Correct interpretation will always be closely aligned with the purpose of writing. Never should the reader presume a lack of reason for the composition. For example, to look at the genealogies incorporated within a narrative and pass over them because they appear to be boring is not a responsible reading of the text. Genealogies exist for a reason. The interpreter asks, Why? One will also look for a relationship between that part of the narrative that comes before and that which follows.

When it comes to application, discernment is required. How does one read a Bible story and find in that story a modern "to do list"? Starting from the beginning point, we assume that the inherent intended application pertains to the original audience addressed by the author. For example, if the story is directed to ancient Israel, we may speculate that it was to remind them of what God had done for them, encourage them, warn them against idolatry, foretell a future event, provide a record of God's action, or some other reason. The point is that the composition was written for someone else's benefit. So, what application does it have for the present? Surely, the content serves us with background to what God did in Jesus, so that could become an academic application. But for us, that is still past. What about current meaning when the Old Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant? If Christians are no longer bound to the Law of Moses, that leaves us with "principles" and "illustrations." Once the principles can be isolated, they can be quite powerful. For example, the story of Lot in Sodom may not play well in a modern society, but it becomes a strong warning to all who engage in loose living arrangements. The interpreter must exercise care when identifying principles and when applying them. Just remember, the text still controls the application, not an imposed interpretation.

The three sections of this unit are calculated to introduce the subject and to give you some experience in interpretation. These are (a) The components of narrative, (b) Interpreting narrative, and (c) An example of exegesis.

**a. The components of narrative.** Narrative is story. The word "story" itself suggests neither something that is true nor something that is false. But when used of biblical narrative, it can stand either for the larger story of God's activity in the world or it can refer to a single incident within that larger story. While the smaller stories or narratives form a part of the whole Bible, each composition stands alone. Within each composition may be smaller units that can be treated individually. This is where the separate components of narrative apply.

Walter Kaiser has outlined eight components of narrative: scene, plot, point of view, characterization, setting, dialogue, structural levels, and stylistic devices ("Narrative," *Cracking Old Testament Codes,* ed. E. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., p. 70). Each of these components will contribute to the interpretation of a biblical text.

1, The *scene* represents something that took place at a particular time and place.

2. The *plot* represents the sequencing of incidents and episodes as they revolve around some type of conflict.

3. The story may assume a particular *point of view* that will qualify it in some way. For example, there may be a difference in the way one interprets events than the way one's enemies sees them.

4. A defeated king will not record his defeats; a secular orientation will dismiss the idea that God has a role in events.

5. The *setting* of a story in the Bible functions to add atmosphere to the story as it connects with past events. It introduces detail that will become important in future references. It will also locate the plot and the characters in a space/time world.

6. *Dialogue* within biblical narrative often carries the theme of a passage and carries the story with the actual words of the characters.

7. The story may also be created at multiple *structural levels,* as it offers sub-plots. For example, the author will introduce a topic, only to return to it later when he has dispensed with another topic of interest.

8. Repetition is a *stylistic device* used in Hebrew prose to express a certain emphasis, meaning, or development of the text.

The literary device known as "inclusion" is found in narrative to indicate the beginning and end of either the whole narrative or one of the important scenes within the narrative. This is accomplished by repeating the identical clauses or words.

Chiastic patterns are found in dialogues as well as in whole scenes. "Chiasm" is named for the inversion or crossing of related elements in parallel constructions. Chiasms may involve words or clauses in parallel lines of poetry within an entire narrative.

**b. Interpreting narrative.** A biblical story or narrative has a plot with characters and the report of events. Unless otherwise indicated, the report should be taken as historical. The validity of the account should not be disputed, unless there is conclusive evidence to the contrary. Neither should the plot and characters be interpreted as allegories or symbols of some deep, mysterious message.

The biblical text may not answer all questions of curiosity raised by the reader, but it does fulfill the purposes of the author quite adequately. The fact that more is not said may be because more explanation is unnecessary. Sometimes motives and causes are revealed; sometimes they are withheld. At any rate, one must not draw from the narratives more than is revealed. The reader should avoid developing elaborate hermeneutical patterns for modern application, for he/she is not required to know more about a passage than what the author discloses.

Narrative does not necessarily contain teaching for later generations. Its descriptions may not have been intended for the purpose of revealing reality. Narrative may *illustrate* a teaching but come short of offering propositional truth. Not every event contained in a narrative is approved by God or is right by any standard. Narratives do not necessarily provide a good model for others to follow. The characters may be imperfect. Their accounts may be incomplete. They have specific, limited purposes which must be observed in interpretation. Biblical narrative serves a higher purpose than simply providing a moral lesson. Narratives may illustrate moral principles, but care must be exercised in drawing conclusions.

To control against allegorizing, resist the urge to see secret meanings that are not specified in other references. Resist interpreting an Old Testament narrative with a New Testament interpretation unless the New Testament makes such interpretation clear. Resist extracting meaning from a partial text when the entire text makes such interpretation questionable. Be careful not to use a narrative as a proof text for your own opinion. Otherwise, you will find a passage somewhere that falsely appears to uphold your ideas. Be careful to interpret a narrative in keeping with any clear statement implied by the text itself.

Following are some positive guidelines for interpreting narrative.

1. Visualize the words and actions that comprise the scene
2. Note how the story moves from its beginning to its conclusion
3. Identify the author's perspective as he tells his story
4. Pay attention to the personality traits of the characters
5. Note the details revealed in the text and determine their bearing on the overall story
6. Study the dialogue between characters
7. Ask if the elements within the scene have a relationship
8. Consider how the stylistic devices within the narrative may help convey the author's message

**c. An example of exegesis.** Work through the following biblical texts with a view toward discovering the various components outlined by Kaiser. It will be important that you clear your mind of a preconceived interpretation of the text under consideration. Focus first on the obvious. Reserve "interpretation," especially "theological" interpretation, until you have finished your study of the "narrative" before you. Resist turning to other passages. Certainly, there will be a time to compare similar biblical texts, but this exercise is to force you to grapple with the text at hand. You must deal with it in its own context, at face value. Here are critical questions to ask of each biblical text:

1. What actually transpired?

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2. Was the event described honorable or dishonorable?
3. What does the narrative tell the reader, either explicitly and implicitly?
4. What was the purpose of the narrative?

### *Example of Exegesis: Gen. 3:1-5*

*(1) Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (2) The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, (3) but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" (4) "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

The original text had no separation of chapters. The passage at hand continues the thought of the closing verse of the second chapter. That verse reads, "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." The notation about their condition will prove to be relevant later (Gen. 3:8-11). As for the immediate passage, notations in 2:25 and 3:8-11 bracket the content of Gen. 3:1-10. Gen. 3:1-7 will explain how the two humans came to experience shame at being naked. This point is important to the text, but it does not reveal the theological meaning of the text.

Gen. 3:1 is tied to the making of man and woman, but it introduces a new thought. That thought is developed against the background of 2:8-9 that indicates God placed man in a garden that contains all kinds of trees. In the middle of that garden were "the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." We learn from 2:16 that man was free to eat of the fruit of every tree in the garden, except "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God forewarned of the penalty, should he eat of it: "for when you eat of it you will surely die" (2:17).

The opening three verses of chapter 3 introduce the activity of Satan in an otherwise perfect setting for human life. The author describes Satan or the devil as an animal. In doing so, he is not saying Satan is a real snake; he is describing how Satan works. Just as the serpent is a crafty creature, Satan approaches the human pair in the form of a serpent and in that form, he speaks to Adam and Eve. Satan retains this identification with the serpent elsewhere in the Bible, along with other designations (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

The use of the term "LORD God" connects the Creator with the making of the serpent. It does not specifically say that God created Satan, though that conclusion may be assumed from other passages. The passage at hand seems to be saying, "God made the serpent; the serpent is crafty; Satan assumed the form of the serpent and proceeded to tempt Eve."

What becomes important to the text is what Satan says to the woman. We may rationalize why Satan chose to address Eve rather than Adam or the two of them together. Is it that he knew she would be more inclined to succumb to temptation than would Adam? Furthermore, did Satan understand the constitution of man and woman so well that he could anticipate that the woman could be tempted and that the man would follow her lead and eat of the forbidden fruit, even though he was not tempted? There are surely more questions which we would like to raise than are addressed by the text itself. So, we should not speculate greatly, but leave other texts with the task of answering our inquisitive nature, if indeed other texts do address our questions. We should ask no more of the text than the text is willing to tell us. But the following conclusions seem justified. (1) Satan is a genuine "personality." (2) Satan is crafty. (3) Satan is able to tempt. (4) Satan works in opposition to God and is unafraid to contradict him. (5) Satan knows what is going on in the human environment. (6) Satan offers no blessing; his goal is to destroy. Elsewhere in the Bible, Satan is shown to be subservient to God, but that is not specified in these verses.

As is often the case in biblical narrative, the thought of 3:1 is picked up from a previous verse (2:16), yet here with a twist. God had said, You are free to eat from any tree, except one; Satan asks if God had forbidden eating fruit from any tree. His words appear to be a ploy, not simply misinformation or deceit. Eve corrects Satan with an accurate answer, singling out the tree in the middle of the garden, *i.e.,* of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She then added the penalty for eating. To this, Satan boldly called God a liar when he said, "You will not surely die." Satan offered a reason for God's

prohibition: for God realizes you will come to know good and evil. From a rational point of view, Satan revealed nothing. Why would God name the tree if he did not know the results of human consumption? But what Satan intimates is that man would become like God in that he knows the difference between good and evil. Furthermore, he suggests that God is jealous of his position and is attempting to preserve it for himself. To have this capacity is presented by Satan as having divine qualities. Note again that Satan offers nothing. He attacks God's sovereignty. He attempts to persuade the woman to believe him rather than God. Through his deceit, Satan attempts to elevate himself. Again, from a rational point of view, it does not make sense. God had created the couple; they enjoyed the fruits of God's labor in the garden; he could have withheld the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from the garden. Why should Satan be believed? The verse is really telling us more about Satan and ourselves than about God.

The author does not identify the "kind" of fruit that hung from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like the serpent, the tree itself was used as an instrument. The kind of fruit is not an issue and is not essential to the interpretation. What is essential is what happened when the pair ate the fruit. They were endowed with the ability to distinguish good from evil. This ability brought a mixed blessing. The end result for man was death; the ultimate blessing came from God in Jesus Christ. This latter point is not revealed in the text at this point, but becomes clear in the rest of the Bible. In the matter of death, the sentence of physical death occurred on that day. In the matter of spiritual separation from God, it was immediate. Was the punishment physical death or spiritual death? A case can be made for both, and so one should be careful when pushing for one interpretation over the other. What is evident is that instant physical death was not implied.

Beyond the verses selected for exegesis, we are introduced to Satan's power to tempt the woman and play to her sensual pleasures. The passage is a prelude to God's response to man's sin, both with regard to Adam and Eve and with respect to future generations. Hence, the set of verses isolated above is part of a much larger story. The larger story cannot be understood without them; these verses themselves are near meaningless without the larger story.


# Unit 2.  History

Basically, the Bible is a work of theology.  That is, its themes pertain to God and his actions among mankind.  It begins with God as creator and traces select instances that illustrate the intention of God, the responses of humankind, and divine intervention.  The intention of biblical writers is hardly to provide a *history* of the world.  Their use of historical events and genealogies is more for tying things together than for describing mundane events.  That history is incomplete, but it is true to its purpose.  We should assume, therefore, that what is written as "history" is necessary to the overall purpose of the Bible.  Therefore, it should not be taken lightly.  Discovering the *significance* of the details of the historical record is the task of interpretation.

While portraying the Bible as a work of theology, it will be helpful to understand that it is written in narrative form and favors the story over systematic doctrinal treatment.  It may contain legal codes, but it does not read like a law book.  Its basic character is that of story, placed in a context of historical occurrences.  This is why we say a major literary form used to unveil God's work is "history."

Historians are beginning to reassess the role of story as a reliable vehicle for communicating past events.  As a genre, history is distinguishable from narrative in that it is a series of accounts with cause-effect sequences and it has national implications.

Apart from Israel and Greece, no civilizations in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world produced significant historiography contemporary with the Old Testament.  Mesopotamians and Egyptians did not compose comprehensive histories to serve as forerunners of the Bible.  If they did, none survived.

The unit consists of three sections.  These are under the following heading: (a) Bible "history," (b) Theological interest of biblical writers, and (c) Guidelines for interpreting historical narrative.

**a. Bible "history."**  In an effort to make the study of the Bible compatible with modern categories, some have referred to certain books of the Bible as "history."  The classification is appropriate if one remembers that it is God's history and not man's.  Accounts may reveal the worst side of man (*e.g.,* the ending of Judges), but one should read such stories for the insight they can gain into conditions of the time, the overall context, and explanations for future events.  Individual stories must be reviewed in relation to the whole composition.

The writing of history makes use of narrative, but narrative is not synonymous with history.  We may describe narrative as a form of writing.  History, on the other hand, suggests that factual accounts of events are being conveyed in the form of a story.  To be sure, the author of historical narrative has a story to tell, has a perspective, interweaves characters with events, and does so with the use of scenes and plots.

Perhaps the defining element of history is its aim to be factual.  Narrative operates in a wider circle and includes fiction as well as factual writing.  What makes biblical history unique is the inclusion of the divine or spiritual realm in its interpretations of events.  The accuracy of biblical history may be assumed on the basis of "inspiration."  However, if it is true, confirmation should be expected from outside sources.  When outside confirmation is not forthcoming due to the absence of complete secular or physical data, biblical history should be accepted at face value.

Some criticize biblical history, charging that it is biased, inaccurate, or dependent upon myth and imagination.  Countless times, modern historians have had to retract statements that denied a biblical account because they knew no secular source to confirm it.  However, we are aware that there remain some disconnects between biblical and secular history.  This usually occurs where there is no specific mention of an event known to both biblical and secular accounts.  Arguments from silence can be misleading.  What is important for you is that you accept biblical records as trustworthy and then proceed to understand them as they stand.

**b. Theological interests of biblical writers.**  The ultimate interest of biblical authors is hardly a preservation of facts for the curious history buff.  As in history writing in general, the facts are deemed necessary to convey a desired result.  The story itself is a composite of details.  Relevant persons, events, and time references are included so the reader can comprehend the circumstances which led to specific actions.  Historical details provide explanation and give information necessary for comprehension.  Unless they have a context, they are worth very little.

In the case of the Bible, the story conveys a peculiar history that is intended to address theological concerns.  Theological ideas can be delivered in the form of propositions, but this was not the choice medium of biblical writers.  Their concern is for God and man within history.  Theology is something to be lived, not just thought and believed.  History writing describes to what extent theology is believed *and* lived.

By means of history writing, the authors demonstrate God's presence within history.  Idols are silent pieces of stone; Yahweh is an active participant in the affairs of the world.  Unlike some religious philosophies that deny God's ability to be an active participant in the affairs of man, Yahweh is personal, approachable, and caring.  Therefore, he is not just *above* history; he is part of it.  If he is part of it, it is not surprising that when men write about him, they describe him in anthropological terms.  He is not a stern God known for his legal mandates; he is a Father figure who performs fatherly duties with his human children.  The story of the Bible is indeed God's story lived out in history.

The content of biblical history is there for the purpose of evoking a certain response from its readers.  This makes biblical history more than a casual recording of by-gone events.  To treat it as such will fail to lead to accurate interpretation and application.

*Activity.*  Examine 2 Samuel 9-20.  Review the historical facts.  Outline the basic facts included.  Why do you think the author wrote this "history"?

**c. Guidelines for interpreting historical narrative.**  "Historical narrative" refers to an accounting of events in story form.  The record may be ordered chronologically or it may be organized around topics

and trends.  The distinguishing characteristic relative to content is that events, places, and personalities are assumed to have belonged to real time.  Hence, *historical narrative* is not to be confused with historical fiction, mythology, or allegory.  Historical fiction may be based on true-to-life events and personalities, but it does not claim to be true in all particulars.  Mythology has less of an historical base, if any at all.  Allegory is an interpretation that does not find meaning in real events but in some symbolic meaning.

Historical narrative is recorded in a particular manner for some particular reason.  The author may not always reveal why he is writing.  The reader may be left to figure out the purpose based on contents and use.

When approaching historical narrative as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, one should expect to find references that cannot be verified by external sources.  This fact says nothing about the authenticity of the biblical record.  Just as there are many events that transpired outside the interest of biblical authors, there were events described in the Bible that did not attract the attention of secular writers.  Additionally, few non-biblical narratives exist from pre-Christian times.  They were simply not preserved.  So, the compositions that comprise biblical scripture must stand on their own merit or rely on the testimony of other biblical writers.

Although belonging to the Bible, historical narrative is not necessarily "theological" in tone or purpose.  The narrative may support a theological purpose, but that does not mean that every word or sentence or paragraph contains a theological idea in and of itself.  The following question may be useful when determining if the narrative contains theological content: "Does the narrative disclose information relative to the person or acts of God?"  The question is posed rather broadly.  Included within the question may be sub-questions such as, "Does the narrative speak of man's expected response to God?"  "Does it include references to evil and divine judgment?"  If the intent of the narrative is to provide a bridge, explanation of some human action, or genealogical table, one would not expect to interpret these portions as "theological."

A common exegetical mistake is to treat a biblical text as prescriptive (an example to follow), when it is merely describing past events.  Another common exegetical error is to search for devotional or doctrinal meanings in details where there is no indication that an author intended such meaning.

Since "history" is open to interpretation, extreme care must be taken to understand biblical history.  Opposing parties frequently give alternative explanations to the same events.  One should expect this to be the case and not be shocked by it.  One should respect the narrative and apprise it on the basis of its authenticity and function.

Remember, every literary genre requires a uniquely appropriate set of hermeneutical guidelines so that its message may be properly understood.  Below are some guidelines for interpreting historical narrative found in the Hebrew Bible.

1.  *Establish boundaries*.  Determine the starting and stopping places of the historical narrative under review.  Mark where the action begins and ends.  Note also other references to the events described elsewhere in both biblical and secular sources that may assist in interpretation.

2.  *Honor the nature of data.*  Historical records *per se* are only factual accounts, which must be interpreted within a context.  Facts means little unless they are connected.  Historical narrative is by definition the joining of facts into a flowing story line.  The facts included are selected by the author to relate the story he wishes to tell his audience.  Facts included are deemed relevant; facts known but excluded were irrelevant to his purpose.  The interpreter may struggle to know some of the excluded data, but in the end his task is to get to the point of the narrative as it stands.

3.  *Identify the author's purpose and objective in writing.*  Search within the narrative for statements or hints as to why the author wrote.  Ask about circumstances in an effort to identify need or crisis.

4.  *Allow particulars in historical narrative to support the story without assuming that every event and conversation had some special independent meaning.*  Certainly words carrying precise meaning, but

most words found within the narrative are essential for getting to the point of the story.

5. *Interpret the text literally unless the text itself suggests otherwise.* It is better to leave a text open to interpretation than to press your own explanation, especially in the absence of evidence.

6. *Recognize principles that may derive from the narrative*. Principles will affect application but may contribute little to interpretation.

7. *Resist looking for a higher spiritual meaning or an alternative meaning.* Allegorizing a passage tends to discount the historicity of the passage. The same may be true if the narrative is interpreted as myth. Interpret narrative as allegory or myth only if the text makes it clear that this is the intended interpretation.

8. *Do not allow devotional interests to override the actual meaning of the text.* Reflection should be related to the passage.

9. *Theological meaning will be governed by the text.* Avoid imposing meaning on a text where no clear indication is exhibited.

# Unit 3. Engagement

The time has come to test your ability to interpret the content of passages previous examined and to identify points that may be applied in a contemporary setting. As you look at individual passages, review the guidelines, then answer the questions pertaining to each.

It may be that many of the details in each historical narrative support the story but are not intended for specific interpretation. They may function much like the details of a parable, where there is usually a single point to be made. Details are for relating the story and for getting to the point. They are the lines that connect the dots in otherwise unrelated points of interest. While details may be important, the more critical aspect of the text is the overall intention of the author. So, avoid becoming distracted from the story line.

Theological conclusions are particularly subject to a desire to "read into the text" ideas that may not be supported by the text itself. For a text to carry a theological message, this should be amply clear from the text or from another biblical reference. Christians are particularly tempted to read back into the Old Testament conclusions that are not there. This is especially true with the subject of the trinity and predictions about Christ.

To be sure, application follows careful exegesis. Be careful in extracting ideas for application in modern contexts, as they may not be intended for replication. Application is justified only if it does not go beyond the intent of the author.

Before proceeding, some observations are in order regarding "application." In this course, we are emphasizing present day application, but in reality application may be made at several junctures. We may identify six circumstances where application is appropriate. First, we should recognize that the original autographs were written for a specific audience--probably for people who were living at the time of the compositions. If so, we should ask about the intent of the writing and ask what that first audience did in response. There are times when the oral form of what was later written achieved its intent, such as calling people to an action. We may have to examine later texts to discover the impact of the written form, but the point is there was an immediate audience summoned to make immediate response (application).

Secondly, we may assume that Old Testament books had a function in the life of the nation of Israel over an extended period of time. This would include hundreds of years and many generations. What application would the nation have been expected to make of the Torah, Writings, and Prophets?

Third, Jesus and New Testament authors apply passages in contemporary contexts. Sometimes, the manner in which a New Testament author handles an Old Testament text is unexpected.

Fourth, The Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) draws heavily on Daniel, Ezekiel, Psalms, and other texts. Exegesis depends on understanding the Old Testament texts; it also requires examining how The Apocalypse extends these texts to show the beginning of their fulfillment. This is a form of application.

Fifth, we may like to ask, How have historic Christians applied biblical texts? Were they justified in the manner of handling and using them? Did they observe the distinction between the Old and New covenants?

Finally, we come to modern applications. There may well be a difference in the way we treat historical narrative, wisdom, Psalms, and prophetic literature.

This unit consists of three application assignments. All are drawn from Genesis. The intention here is not to look at all six circumstances cited above, but to concentrate on historical narrative. We will have opportunity later to examine the other engagement features.

**a. Engagement assignment one.** Engagement suggests hands-on involvement in the exegetical process. We shall begin with a couple of passages from Genesis.

The first order of business is to peer into the narrative to discover what is there. Read Genesis 3 and work with it before moving to chapter 4. Read the chapter a second time, making notes along the way.

It is important that you look at each chapter with open vision, free of pre-conceived thoughts about what you have been told is there or what you assume is there. Under each assignment below you will find two sets of questions. The first set pertains to strict exegesis; the second concerns interpretation. The latter second set of questions is most critical, for the questions are those people often ask of these passages. Do not assume the chapters answer these just because they are asked.

The second set of questions in the exercises is more about theology and application than they are about exegesis. Use this opportunity to determine how these passages may be understood theologically and "applied" to a contemporary situation. Realize that the matter of application may be more implied than specifically stated.

Your initial task is to exegete the chapters. Once you are satisfied you have gleaned what the author was attempting to communicate, then you may inquiry as to what degree he answers the questions posed.

*Activities*

1. Genesis 3

Question set 1

> Is the serpent real or symbolic?
> Does the author identify the serpent? If so, where? If not, how did the serpent become identified as Satan?
> What is there in the narrative that suggests the story is real and not myth?
> What is the real consequence of eating the "forbidden" fruit?

Question set 2

> How am I to understand the nature of life?
> What am I to understand of the nature of God?
> Are there consequences to sin?
> What consequences do all people experience because of the sin of Adam and Eve?
> Does the biblical text suggest that the *guilt* of Adam and Eve's sin or simply the *consequence* of that sin was passed on to future generations?

If I do not bear the guilt of Adam and Eve's sin, whose sin is held against me?
Does the text suggest that one may live a perfectly sinless life?

Keep in mind that not all questions may be answered by a particular text.  Indeed, not all human questions have an answer at all.  If you impose an answer to each question, this could affect your interpretation of the other parts of scripture as well.

2.  Genesis 4

Question set 1

What is the point of chapter 4?
What is the purpose of the mark placed on Cain (4:15)?

Question set 2

What responsibility do I have toward my fellow humans?
How should I behave toward those who do right when I myself have decided to do wrong?
Is there a price to pay for doing right?

**b.  Engagement assignment two.**  The two selections below were used in Unit 1 to illustrate the task of exegesis.  They are included here to allow you to explore theological questions that arise from the texts.

Theological issues should never be imposed on a biblical text, yet biblical texts possess theological interests.  The writer of a composition bears responsibility for introducing theological themes; the reader bears responsibility for discerning the meaning of those themes.

The writer of a passage may introduce a theological idea purposefully or incidentally.  A purposed introduction would be one in which he sets forth an idea that reveals an act of God, as in the Exodus.  An incidental reference could be something like God's question of Satan about the fidelity of Job.  The first reference speaks to a direct action of God in bringing Israel to himself at Sinai to establish with them a covenant.  The second is "incidental" in the sense that it raises questions about God's relationship to Satan, the problem of human suffering, and God's testing of humankind.

The author of a text may either not see a problem or he may choose not to address it.  If he perceived it, he may have offered a solution.  Issues are often raised by modern readers who may be dissatisfied with the author's words, may have misunderstood the author, may be trying to reconcile the present text with another, may be trying to answer a completely different issue from the one at hand, or may be creating a problem out of a text that does not recognize one.  Exegesis aims at discovering precisely what the text reveals.  Theological inquiry follows solid exegesis; it should not draw conclusions the text does not support.  Yet, theology is important and essential to biblical study.  The two activities below will introduce the process.

### *Activities*

1.  Genesis 6.  How do you understand the balance between the love of God and the judgment of God?  What is the relationship between "punishment" and correct human behavior?

When you open Genesis 6, you first meet a problem--the identity of "the sons of God" and the "daughters of men."  Those who seek to resolve the question sometimes roam far and wide to suggest a solution.  You may not be able to come to a satisfactory conclusion in your own mind, but this should not deter you from understanding the direction of the passage.  Where is the emphasis placed?  Is it upon aliens or man's corrupt behavior?  Further, what is the solution to the larger problem of man's corruption?  How is this corruption described?  What action did God take?  Was that action one of judgment only, or did it lead to the salvation of a remnant of humanity?

2.  Genesis 22. What is the relationship between "testing" and "faith"?  Why do difficult times come to people who have faith?

Yes, to the modern mind, it is inconceivable that God would ask a man to offer human sacrifice. But what lies at the base of the command? The story may not be intended to prefigure the crucifixion of the Son of God, but it does teach us much about faith. Review Abraham's previous struggle with God's promise that he and Sarah would have a son. Is this not a supreme demonstration of faith after a long period of struggle?

**c. Engagement assignment three.** In this last section, you have two tasks. The first task is to examine a specific narrative with the view toward application. The second is to press you to state in writing your own guidelines for applying that narrative in a modern situation.

*Activities*

1. Genesis 37, 39-50. Consider how Joseph survived the temptations to forget God in the following situations: (1) When he was sold as a slave by his brothers, (2) when he was accused by Potiphar's wife, (3) when he was forgotten in prison, (4) when he became a ruler in Egypt, (5) when he was reunited with his brothers.

The individual instances mentioned above are a good example of a multiple level narrative. Taken together, the story may have one objective. Separately, you may discover numerous applications. When analyzing the individual units, it is tempting to digress into child rearing principles, such as the ideal of treating all children equally. Or, you may hone in on the brothers' jealousy and lies to their father. You may even wish to extol Joseph as a perfect person without taking into account how he was able to use adverse conditions to claim all the land for the Pharaoh. There may be validity in observing these elements, but if they take away from the intended message of the writer, then the hoped-for impact of the account may be missed. The leading theme is how God was fulfilling a promise to Abraham.

2. We have suggested guidelines for *interpreting* historical narrative (Unit 2c). In the above paragraph, you were asked to examine a section of Genesis with the view toward application. We are assuming you identified a number of points as candidates. At this point, you are being asked to develop guidelines for *applying* historical narrative. For example, a guideline may read:

Do not assume that every text in historical narrative has a legitimate application.

On again,

When making application, inform your audience that the text only illustrates for us the consequences of certain actions.

# MODULE **3** Law

Having completed a module on narrative and history, this module considers the interpretation of material that can be classified as "law." The module is divided into three units: (1) Law and Genre, (2) Covenant and Legislation, and (3) Interpreting Legal Literature.

One who is familiar with the Gospels and Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees is tempted to view legal material in the Old Testament through the eyes of the Pharisees. This is true in spite of the fact that the Pharisees tended to reduce legal matters to a set of dos and do nots. But did the Pharisees have a wholesome view of Old Testament law? They were masters at telling people precisely what they could and could not do. They based their conclusions on the accumulated views of the many legal minds that had preceded them. They tended to be much more restrictive than The Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). They seem to have lacked an appreciation for heart and motive. At least, this is the impression one gets of the Pharisees from the New Testament, although Josephus and Rabbinic literature offer a somewhat different view.

The Pharisees came into being in the period between the testaments. They believed their task was to bring spiritual renewal based on The Torah. As a means of defining the marks of renewal, they developed the concept of an "oral law" or oral torah. The oral law was conjectured as an official interpretation of the written torah. It supposedly derived from Moses and was passed down through the generations along with the Torah that was written. Consequently, the law as viewed by the Pharisees in Jesus' day was a much more complex system of jurisprudence than that presented in the Hebrew Scriptures. Assuming the existence of an oral law or tradition alters the approach to Torah and greatly affects interpretation.

Gaining a proper theological perspective is also bound up with a proper handling of law. How is law to be read? Does it reflect a God who is determined to establish his sovereignty by issuing powerful edicts? Is the object of legislation to force people to "obey," to "submit"? Whose interest does law serve? Is legislation the result of a caring God whose interest is the well-being of the creature? What is the relationship between law and righteousness? Is the consequence of disobedience always punishment? Prophets like Micah clearly indicate that the Law of Moses was never intended to be a list of commands unaccompanied by proper attitudes (Micah 6:6-8).

The interpreter of the Old Testament may be tempted to see law as an Old Testament phenomenon without a New Testament counterpart. In so doing, the function of law within the covenant community may be missed. Or, one may be tempted to read the New Testament as a "new" law. If so, the distinction between the two covenants may be misunderstood. Certainly, the understanding of law in both testaments is tied to an understanding of covenant. There are many similarities between the Old and New covenants, but there are some significant differences. In both instances, law was never an end, again as illustrated in Yahweh's denunciation of empty ritual (Amos 5:21-27). The legal material of the Hebrew Scriptures defined the people of the covenant. It set the standard for human behavior and pointed the way to a righteousness which only God could establish.

## Unit 1.  Law and Genre

The first thing to note here is how *legal genre* differs from *narrative genre*.  Casually, we may think of two general types of literary style--narrative and poetry.  The distinction is real, but this simple division is hardly sufficient when it comes to analyzing specific compositions.  Just as "historical narrative" has characteristics not shared by myth and fiction, so legal genre has its own distinctive characteristics, although it may be written in sentence form.  Narrative in general is related to time, place, and events.  Legal genre is only tangentially concerned with a plot or time.  Its characters and events are hypothetical, even with case law.  Application relates to statute and circumstance.  Its scope of application is inclusive for the whole society.

Since the laws found in the Old Testament are couched in cultural and social settings, genre analysis becomes important to sound interpretation. Genre or literary form may not *control* interpretation, yet it does provide a framework for understanding the purpose and intent of a particular piece of legislation.

In Western thought, legal material is defined as codified prescription. But in the Hebrew Bible, it tends to have a wider context--that of instruction. Consequently, accurate exposition of legal matters will depend upon two aspects: (1) understanding law within the ancient Hebrew milieu and (2) understanding law as positive instruction.

Western Christians have difficulty appreciating Old Testament legal texts because of ill-conceived notions as to their function. Even some Christians and Jews tend to view the Bible as the Muslim understands the Qur'an. That is, God has handed down laws to be followed and expects the recipients to duly submit to them. No reason is given, except God said so. This is hardly an accurate portrayal from either the Old or New testaments. The view one takes of the nature and function of law in the Bible will impact the way one looks at the God in the Old Testament, and it will certainly condition the way one values the Old Testament.

In the three sub-headings in this unit, we shall explore the topic further. First, we shall look at the nature of law. Second, we shall note limitations of law. Third, we shall inquire as to how legal codes are related.

**a. The nature of law.**  Most of us gain an understanding of law from our surrounding environment. One who grows up in a peaceful environment is almost unaware of law. He may live his whole life without encountering enforcement officers, except in a friendly exchange. He may even seek out uniformed officers to thank them for their service. Law, to him, is what it takes to have an orderly, peaceful society; officials are those who keep it that way.

When one does become aware of law, it is usually an uncomfortable circumstance. For example, one becomes aware of law when he is pulled over by the police for exceeding the speed limit. Although the speed limit has been set for good reason, from that point on, it may be viewed as a hindrance, as it impedes one's desire to get to a destination quicker. Besides, the penalty for exceeding the speed limit can be costly and inconvenient. The remedy is either to abide by the speed law or to outsmart the police the next time. In either case, law becomes an adversary. The same person may find income tax law oppressive, even though the benefits he receives by way of services outweigh his personal tax assessment. Most people look for legal means to hold their taxes as low as possible; some cheat for they want to spend their money on other items.

People who live in hostile environments may have a very different view of law. Not only is it an inconvenience, it is an avowed enemy. Police are seen as a threat to one's desired course of life. Enforcement officers are feared, for they are corrupt, brutal, and partial. They are a declared enemy. The law they represent, whether written or implied, is to be resisted. It is held in disdain. One feels totally justified in defying it.

When we bring our own experience into the equation, the views we have toward law are easily transferred to the legal prescriptions found in the Scriptures. Laws pertaining to animal sacrifice, for example, may seem demeaning to animals, excessive, ugly, messy, and useless. In assigning this evaluation, it is hard to see the intent of the laws of sacrifice. As a consequence, I fail to see that sin is a bad thing and must be dealt with in an extra-ordinary way. I cannot dismiss the seriousness of the circumstance simply by finding the remedy repulsive. The task of the interpreter of biblical law is not to judge the law, but to understand it--to look for meaning, not aesthetics.

On another front, reading from the Gospels, one may get the impression that law is exacting and oppressive. Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees offers a true perspective, as he distinguishes between the intent of law and the abuse of law. Here, the laws imposed by men became oppressive, not the laws of God.  Look at Mark 7:6-7. What charge did Jesus make against the teachers and Pharisees?

It is also wise to note that bad attitudes toward the law can bring disastrous results. Read Matthew 23. Why did Jesus pronounce woe upon certain teachers of the law? The Pharisees had taken the legal injunctions in the Hebrew Scriptures to a new level--that of codified regulation along with building traditional interpretation. But this was never the intended use of the legal material in the Old Testament. For example, when, in the Ten Words (Commandments), God said, do not covet, he was expressing more than a prohibition--"Do not do that or I will punish you severely!" No, he was saying, You are not to want something that belongs to another, because I will take care of you. Jesus interpreted the law similarly. He talked about the motive behind the act.

There is no denying that Yahweh issued specific commands aimed at regulating the behavior of his covenant people.  Violation of these commands brought consequences--even national judgment on occasion.  And from a New Testament perspective, it is true that man cannot measure up to the demands of law.  So, what are we to make of the "nature" of law?  Simply stated, the *nature* of law is to regulate.  But for the student of Scripture, the underlying question is, Why did God establish law?  We offer two suggestions: (a) to provide guidance to those who lived under the covenant enacted at Sinai and (b) to pave the way for the work of Christ.

If we view law as guidance (instruction), then we remove any sense of arbitrariness from it.  God did not simply impose oppressive regulations because he was able to do so and cared little about the people.  He gave instructions because he cared for the people and wanted them to know him and to trust him.  Hence, there were prohibitions against idolatry, sodomy, cheating, and other moral or ethical matters.  Because they were sinners, they needed to understand that they could not deal with sin alone,

but that God did provide a means.

Regarding the path to Christ, human experience showed that the Hebrews were unable to keep the law and that the Gentiles refused to follow the law of conscience, which God had placed within each human being. The Hebrew sacrificial system pointed to the need for action initiated by God himself. Unlike the pagan worshiper, who offered sacrifices to appease the gods, the Hebrew worshiper found the sacrifice a means of renewing a strained relationship with God. Christ would make this a reality, not just for Israel but for all people.

**b. The limitations of law.** Law can prescribe correct conduct. It can condemn certain actions. It can lay down regulations and stipulate punishment for offenders. But law has at least three limitations: (1) it cannot undo a person's actions, (2) it cannot keep man from ill-advised action, and (3) it cannot measure a person's true spirit.

If legal prescriptions are to become effective, means of enforcement are required. A person can be arrested, isolated from society, fined, or restricted, but law cannot force a change in a person's attitude or will. Even torture may not change a person's will.

Law can only stipulate what is acceptable conduct. Once a person crosses the line and violates it, there is nothing law can do to reverse a person's acts. It can only provide a path to resolution, such as dismissal of charges, a fine, imprisonment, or death. Even if a person is absolved, the violation still occurred; it cannot be undone.

The only way law can keep a person from mischief is by confinement. It may impede his action for fear of punishment or fear of loss of honor, but if one is intent on a given action, it cannot guarantee a person will not violate the law.

Law cannot measure a person's true spirit, for it is only a standard for outward behavior. It cannot legislate what a person thinks or even control the motivation for why a person keeps the law. A key distinctive of the "law of Christ" is that it is indeed more of a measure of one's spirit. One is asked to imbibe the mind of Christ and behave in a manner that is motivated by a renewal of mind. Or, to put it another way, the essential "commandments" are to love God with all of one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:4-5; Mark 12:28-34). Note that the idea captures the spirit of both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

Paul's discussion of law in relation to salvation touches on a unique aspect of law-keeping. The inadequacy of law for man's salvation is predicated on two principles: (1) the inability of man to live a sinless life and (2) the need to boast in God's, rather than in one's own, actions. Examine these passages and draw your conclusion: Romans 2-4; Hebrews 9.

*Study questions.* What is Old Testament law? How does legal genre reflect the literary, historical, cultural, and ideological conditions surrounding ancient Israel? How would the people of Israel have understood the law? What effect should Old Testament legal material have on the Christian community?

**c. How legal codes are related.** World civilizations and tribal communities are all governed by laws that reflect their own cultural, political, religious, and social customs. Normally, these represent a long process of development, infused with superstitions, taboos, and age-honored traditions. Such was the case with Ancient Near Eastern peoples.

Inasmuch as the people of Israel shared with all other people groups the same characteristics of life, we should expect Israelite law to bear similarity. Law deals with social, physical, political, and spiritual affairs. So, we should expect legal stipulations to be similar. Do not all societies need protection from murderers and thieves? Do not all need security and protection from adverse forces? Do not all require some orderly process to establish legitimate government? Do not all need regulations pertaining to the religious cult? Not only are the needs common to all people groups; in many cases, the solution is the same.

A primary distinguishing characteristic of Israelite life is the source of the governing principle that formed and sustained the people. Yahweh constituted them as his holy people and, in so doing, laid out the

dimensions for their conduct. There are, quite naturally, similarities between Israel and her neighbors with respect to covenant regulations, but her uniqueness rests with the God who called her unto himself.

Comparable collections of laws from other Near Eastern civilizations can assist in understanding biblical laws. This is especially the case where ancient circumstances were addressed.  In the end, however, Old Testament laws need to be studied within their genre and within Old Testament spiritual contexts.

Because of its interest in the real-life situation of Old Testament law, genre analysis pays careful attention to the social conditions that the law assumes and from which it originated. The major concern of genre criticism focuses on the literary character, content, and function of the genre. This is in order when reviewing Old Testament law so long as one does not consign Israelite law to the same evolutionary development as generally assigned to the laws of Israel's neighbors. Israelite law favors contemporary law, but its divine signature cannot be dismissed.


## Unit 2. Covenant and Legislation

Yahweh's bond with Israel was joined by a covenant. The covenant was initiated by Yahweh at Sinai, but was connected to a promise made to their forefather, Abraham, some four centuries earlier.

The Sinai covenant resembled covenants known in the Middle East, especially "suzerain" covenants made by conquering kings. The covenant solidified the relationship between a victorious king and the people he had conquered. As would be expected, the stronger party dictated the terms of the covenant, and both parties were sworn to loyalty.  The conquering king declared loyalty to his vassal by offering protection against encroachment by another power.  The subjected people tended to remain loyal because they depended on the supreme king's protection.  But the conquering king had other motives in mind as well.  He looked to the vassal for taxes and natural resources to feed his hunger for power.  Meanwhile, the subjected people occupied territory that buffered the conqueror from his rivals and allied with the king in times of military crisis.

Although Yahweh's covenant shares some elements with Middle Eastern covenants, it is not made in the same spirit or for the same reason. Perhaps the most common elements are found in the inequality of the parties and in the expectation for loyalty. Yahweh's covenant with Israel was much more comprehensive than other suzerain covenants. It was followed by legislation that defined Israel's behavior as evidence of covenant loyalty. The Torah contains over 600 commandments, given specifically to Israel.

Covenant defines the relationship between two parties. Law provides the specifications for maintaining that relationship. Rules extend to religious institutions and rituals, but these rules are not confined to the spiritual side of the Hebrew people. In Israel, legislation regarding the social, political, economic, and religious interests flowed together to create a harmonious whole. In this unit, we shall be concerned with (a) how covenant functioned in Israel, (b) how Old Testament law applies to Christians, and (c) guidelines for interpreting covenant legislation.

**a. How covenant functioned in Israel.** It should go without saying that covenant sets the stage for the legislation that follows. The covenant defines the character of the laws that flow out of it. So, an investigation of the Israelite law begins with the terms of the covenant Yahweh established with Israel. That covenant is set forth in Exodus 19. The language begins with Yahweh's instruction through Moses: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." Yahweh continues by saying, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (vv. 4-6). Upon Moses' appearance before Israel, he "set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. And the people all responded together, 'We will do everything the LORD has said'" (vv. 7-8). The language is quite simple. Yahweh gathered Israel to himself, constituted them a holy people for a special mission, and the people pledged themselves to be loyal. Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. Following a sacrifice, Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people (Exodus 24).

The extent of the contents of the Book of the Covenant is unclear, except that it contained the essential components of the words that Yahweh directed to Israel. The report of this is given before Moses was directed to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone (the Ten Words or the Ten Commandments), with the laws and commands Yahweh had written for their instruction (Exod. 24:12). It was during the time of Moses' absence that Israel engaged in gross misconduct centered on the golden calf (Exodus 32). The initial tablets were broken when Moses returned to the camp and had to be engraved again.

If we treat the Ten Words (Exod. 20:1-17) as a preamble to detailed legislation, we begin to get a sense of how to approach the legislation in the light of the covenant Yahweh had just established with Israel. Yahweh had constituted Israel as his special people. Now, he will take them into Canaan where they will be surrounded by idolatry. The Ten Words describe how Israel is expected to express faith and bear witness to Yahweh. They instruct on how to behave toward fellow Israelites, who share a covenant relationship with God.

*Study questions.* In light of Yahweh's activity toward Israel, are the legal prescriptions in the Old Testament to be interpreted as sheer commands? Do they reflect the consequences of a relationship with God? Are they arbitrary statutes by a tough God, or do they reflect appropriate behavior for those who have come to enjoy a covenant relationship with God? Is God saying, "Don't!" without explanation? Or, is he saying, You have no need for other gods? And, If you are related to me in covenant, are you not also related to others I have placed in covenant relationship? Do the Ten Words not define the meaning of covenant practice? Do they not define behavior of a people who have just declared they will trust God?

**b. How Old Testament law applies to Christians.** Two issues confront the modern Christian. One pertains to the question of whether Christians are bound to some parts of the Mosaic Law. In other words, Is there a valid distinction between law that is universal and timeless, and civil or ceremonial law that pertained to Israel only? Perhaps the most commonly cited text has to do with the Ten Words. No one has any issue with nine of the stipulations. The one in dispute is the command to keep the Sabbath. The debate does bring to the fore the issue at hand. Are the Ten Words binding on Christians? Even Christians who do not pretend to keep the Sabbath (Saturday), may answer in the affirmative. Why? Because the Ten Words were part of the Law of Moses? Because nine commands are repeated in the New Testament? Or because the Ten Commandments are part of a "universal" law?

First of all, Paul argued that if one felt obliged to keep part of the Law, he was obliged to keep it all (Gal. 5:3). To claim to be under the stipulations of the Old Covenant creates a dilemma, since Christians live under the New Covenant. The Old Covenant has been fulfilled, nailed to the cross (Col. 2:13-15). That leaves little room to claim allegiance to both. In fact, it makes no sense to hold onto the regulations of the Old Covenant.

One can make a case for keeping nine of the commands, as they are repeated in the New Testament. There is nothing about them that would cause any of them to be set aside. Yet, when Paul repeats them, he underscores the idea that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10). It is clear from both Jesus and Paul that Christians are obliged to go beyond the sheer commands. When looking at the question from the New Testament point of view, it seems irrelevant to argue that keeping the Ten Commandments is a spiritual exercise. One can keep the commands yet hate his brother and plot evil in his heart. The distinguishing character of the New Covenant is that it is written on the heart, not on stone (Heb. 8:8-12).

As for universal law, the closest any biblical writer comes to addressing the subject is Paul. He lays out the grounds for God's judgment for both Gentiles and Jews (Rom. 1:18-29). The violations he lists for the Gentiles are quite impressive in a negative way. He is no less complementary for the Jews, who, even when given a divine covenant with attendant stipulations, are equally guilty before God. So, it appears that there is little to be gained by claiming certain parts of the Old Covenant are part of universal law. The "law of Christ" far exceeds all such laws with its emphasis on love. Christ's sacrifice redefines the meaning and place of law for the Christian.

As a postscript, through different parts of the Old Testament, law emphasizes legal concerns in ancient Israel. None of these do so in a way that suggests a clear-cut division into temporary and eternal laws that are applicable today. Jesus brought a righteousness that could not be established on the *basis* of law.

There is a second issue here, and it pertains to *how* the Christian should make use of the Old Testament. First, Christians should study the Old Testament as spiritual children of Abraham so they can appreciate the illustrations of commitment in a covenant relationship with God. The Old Testament gives a more complete portrait of God, a God of concern and a God of his word. It reveals God's long-term patience with humankind.  It lays the foundation for God's sending his Son for our redemption.  Many principles can be derived from Old Testament study. When approached in the right spirit and with the right tools, one finds a genuine treasure in the Hebrew Scriptures.

**c. Guidelines for interpreting covenant legislation.** There is no magical list of do's and don'ts when it comes to biblical interpretation. The interpreter is best advised to consider the context, respect the literary genre, and resist drawing unwarranted conclusions. Nevertheless, in the interest of providing some rather evident guidelines, the following are suggested for what one may call "covenant legislation."

You will find additional guidelines with respect to interpreting "law" in the next unit.  However, when it comes to interpreting the Bible, we need to take serious notice that legislation flowing out of a covenant relationship with Yahweh has a unique character.

Ancient secular conquerors may have entered a suzerain covenant with their subjects, but the imposed stipulations were more for the self-centered benefit of the captors than the subjects.  The stipulations were arbitrary; they lacked the emotional link as one would expect between a parent and a child.  They were almost adversarial.  Yahweh's covenant with Israel, on the other hand, was motivated by love and compassion not only for Israel but for all people.  The relationship Yahweh formed with Israel at Sinai was accompanied by stipulations--"legal legislation" if you will--but not in the fashion of a conquering king.  Yahweh provided what was in Israel's best interest.  He also set forth measures that could evaluate their faith.  Only in later times did the Jews begin to treat the stipulations as "law."  Here are a few observations about reading covenant legislation.

1. The Law of Moses should be interpreted in view of the covenant Yahweh made with Israel.
2. The Ten Words (Commandments) are best understood in view of Yahweh's promise to care
      for Israel.
3. Legal genre may assist in understanding legislation, but it does not control interpretation.
4. Biblical law is not the mere accumulation of traditional mores and customs, but divine revelation.
5. God's offer of a covenant with the modern world is outlined in the New Testament.
6. Old Covenant stipulations found within the New Covenant are given fuller meaning.
7. The Old Testament remains Scripture to be used by Christians, as it provides the story of
      God's past activity, reveals much about the nature of God, and offers resources for
      contemporary worship and life.

### *Activities*

1. Read Deuteronomy 5. Given your understanding of the Book of Deuteronomy from BRS 121 and
      BRS 123, how would you interpret this chapter in relation to the original account in Exodus 19-20?

2. Read Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8. How would you interpret Hebrew 8 in light of Jeremiah 31?

3. Identify three examples of how the Old Testament can provide principles that can
      benefit Christians.

## Unit 3. Interpreting Legal Literature

The Ancient Near East is the setting for the Old Testament.  The legal literature that has emerged out of that part of the world shows many similarities to that embraced by Israel. The major Mesopotamian law collections extant from the Ancient Near East show how the Babylonians preserved law and order as a living and continuing tradition. Parallels between the laws of Hammurabi and biblical law are obvious and important, but they are not exact. Some scholars have tried to show how the Law of Moses was

influenced by the Hammurabi code.  That, of course, cannot be proved.  No doubt an exploration of this material can be helpful in building a larger framework for the study of ancient law and law codes. However, it is not essential for interpreting the Law of Moses.

Two kinds of law are known to us from the Bible and the Ancient Near East: apodictic and casuistic. Apodictic law pertains to specific commands and is best represented in the Bible in the Ten Words (Commandments). Casuistic law deals with cases and is illustrated by the code regarding retention of servants (Deut. 15:12-17). Perhaps Israelite law could have been cast altogether in one form or the other, but it was not. It has come to us in its fullness through both forms. Interestingly, some apodictic laws are found in the New Covenant but none appear there in casuistic form.

Application of law is conditioned on circumstances. Ancient Babylonia law pertained to a people who resided in lower Mesopotamia but was extended through adaptation by neighboring people.  Egyptian law covered only that territory ruled by Egypt.  The Law of Moses had limited application due to the covenant to which it applies.

In this unit, we shall explore briefly (a) Legal literature in the Ancient Near East and (b) Rationale.  Then, we shall add (c) Guidelines for interpreting law.

**a. Legal literature in the Ancient Near East.**  A unique thing about the Bible is that it makes use of contemporary vocabulary and literary forms. Why not? Documents were designed to be read and understood. If the Bible were some mysterious work that demanded a professional diviner to discern or interpret its message, it could not be understood by the average citizen. The average person would be wholly dependent upon the professional's ability and will to make it known. Likewise, the intent of Near Eastern law shared this common element.

Legal genre may be used to inform the reader of the source of a set of laws, the scope and intent of those laws, and the punishment for violation. Kings kept records of their decrees. Codes were chiseled on stone. As other ancients were accustomed to do, so Yahweh's laws and the legal records of kings were kept in similar fashion. After all, it is not the form that differentiates the Israelite legal material from that of other people, but its substance. Even if the way some Israelite laws are stated is comparable to that found among other people, the Bible retains its peculiar character.

Noting parallels between biblical and Ancient Near Eastern legal literature can become valuable, especially when the author of the composition assumes the reader is aware of analogous extra-biblical material. Differences should appear in stating the basis for the covenant, the way Israel was embraced in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, the rationale for the laws, and function of rituals.

International treaties may make use of language that states the nature of a covenant and carries stipulations. In the Old Testament and Ancient Near East, to make a covenant encompassed two basic ideas: oaths and stipulations. Parties making the covenants were not necessarily equal is status or power. Hittite law casts a good backdrop for understanding the purity laws in the Bible.  All treaties and covenants in the Old Testament had stipulations that defined the agreement by laying out the obligations of one or both parties to the covenant.

**b. Rationale.**  The modern reader is tempted to ask why certain laws were given to Israel. Caution should be used in approaching the legislation, for the reason may not be stated or detectable. The laws for debt-slavery are taken as an illustration of legislation that appears strange to modern ears. But when the relational aspect of the covenant is considered, the laws provide time for pause and reflection. We assume there was a reason behind the order and respect it the way it stands. After all, we are not here to sit in judgment of God, but to take notice of his actions.

Further, the Old Testament prohibits the eating of certain foods. Some have tried to explain the prohibition by attributing it to health reasons.  However, in the absence of specific explanation in the text, one should withhold judgment as to cause. Restrictions against eating pork and catfish do not distinguish the New Covenant. But with respect to eating strangled animals and drinking blood, a reason is assigned by the biblical text--life is in the blood.

Some laws given to Israel seem to be without foundation. Prohibitions against cutting the edges of the beard (Lev. 19:27), wearing clothing of different kinds of material (Lev. 19:19), and cooking a goat in its mother's milk (Deut. 14:21) remain a mystery. We may find eventually that these habits indicated attachment to an idolatrous cult, but that is not clear at this point in time. The best thing to do in cases of this sort is to enumerate what others have suggested, but then end with the remark that they are suggestions that have little foundation for certainty. It is always better to state the law without interpretation than to assign a meaning that you cannot substantiate. After all, the primary object of exegesis is to determine what a text is saying. When the cause lying behind the action is unknown, the limits of "interpretation" will have been reached.

**c. Guidelines for interpreting law.** Perhaps you are thinking law should be left to the attorneys. Maybe you think Hebrew law is too complicated for the untrained reader. The task is not as formidable as you may think, for legal prescriptions found in the Bible are more simply stated than modern law. Biblical law is less encumbered with exceptions and "whereas" statements. Even a child should be able to understand. What is more plainly stated than "Do not kill"?

We use this particular law--"Do not kill!"--to show the law's simplicity. We also use it to introduce a more complex situation that will inevitably demand interpretation. For example, when Israel entered the land Yahweh swore to their forefathers to give them, he ordered them to annihilate the inhabitants. How can these two commands be reconciled? Or, do they refer to separate circumstances? Is killing an Israelite strictly forbidden, but killing a non-Israelite commanded? This is hardly a justifiable conclusion. The laws given to Israel stipulated capital punishment for certain crimes. On the other hand, Israelite hospitality was demanded toward the foreigner. Given the full story of humanity to this point, wickedness and idolatry are the trademarks of Canaanite society. Is Yahweh not laying out the expectations for the way his people relate to one another in the Decalogue and yet using Israel as his instrument to punish the wicked Canaanites in later commands? At this juncture, human judgment must be withheld as to the right of Yahweh to exercise judgment on wickedness and the manner in which he determines to execute it.

Following are a few simple guidelines that can assist you in your quest to exegete legal material and reach an understanding of its intent.

1. Context rather than location governs interpretation. No clear distinctions can be made between different types of laws in the Mosaic legislation based on how the laws are grouped within the text. Consequently, legal statements should be interpreted in keeping with their contexts.

2. Biblical laws may be compared with parallels in other Ancient Near Eastern legal codes, but the source and intent of biblical law will set it apart.

3. Look for rationale, not contradiction. Laws may be repeated, but not necessarily verbatim. The audience at Sinai who first heard the Ten Words received them in their barest form. When Moses rehearsed the same laws to a new generation, the Ten Words were extended by explanations.

4. When a prophet declares Yahweh never commanded sacrifices, he is implying that God never commanded the sacrifices that Israel offered. Sometimes sacrifices did not meet the standard. Even when they met the legal standard, sacrifices were often offered without an accompanying spiritual disposition.


*Activity*

How do you explain the differences in the way the Ten Words are cast in Exodus 20:17 and Deut. 5:7-21?

# MODULE 4 Prophetic Announcements

The prophets held a special place in the history of Israel. They rose to the occasion, whether the need was for encouragement or condemnation. They were, in many respects, the conscience of Israel. But their records are not merely sermon outlines or original research papers. They spoke for God.

Prophets shared with the king and priests the responsibility of pointing the people heavenward. The king was expected to lead in righteousness in his general rule and in acting as chief judge of the land. The prophets called the king's hand when he veered off course. The priests too were expected to lead in their priestly functions and in expounding the Torah. But again, when the priests failed in their duty, the prophets addressed them and called them to reformation. When the general populace drifted from a single-minded devotion to Yahweh, the prophets summoned them to repentance as well. They often interpreted God's acts in nature as warnings and spoke of the consequence of ill-advised behavior. Even foreign nations could not escape the word of the prophets. They spoke of accountability to Yahweh, who was not only the God of the Jews, but the God of all peoples.

Not all prophets in Israel were true. Many were employed by the kings to speak what they wanted to hear. Our concern shall not be with these false prophets, but with the ones whose true messages are recorded as sacred scripture. Some of the prophets were statesmen, who counseled the king and prophesied against the nations. Others left their occupations in the countryside to sound alarm throughout Israel and Judah. Their work was never pleasant. Some of them paid dearly for their fidelity.

The prophets' literary works defy simple description. Even so, it is the variety of literary expression as well as the topics which they engage that make the Prophets exciting. This module examines various literary forms that characterized the writings of the prophets. Each literary genre demands attention. But care must be used in the process of interpretation. Even the idea of "prophecy" may not always be what the modern student expects.

Unit one provides a general introduction to the work of the prophets. The next two units deal with oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment, and apocalyptic.

## Unit 1.  The Prophets and the Covenant

The prophets of Israel represent a special breed of servants. They do not appear to be drawn from the royal family, although they are often found at the royal court. They do not represent a priestly class, although some are priests as a course of their birth. They may be drawn from various segments of society--urban and rural, high and low social standing. They may have had training, but this was no prerequisite. What the prophets had in common was a dedication to the call of Yahweh to witness for him. They did not create new legislation, for the needed legislation had been in place for hundreds of years. They did not create new covenants; they called upon the people to honor to one created by Yahweh in Moses' day.

Prophets appear early in Israel's history, but not all recorded their thoughts. These "oral" prophets spoke, and others wrote about them. This is how we know of Nathan's condemnation of King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba.

The term "prophets" takes on an extended meaning when attached to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Calling them "former" prophets suggests the content of these books is somehow "God's prophetic history." In other words, the four are not really about Israel's history, but a record of God's dealing with Israel in history. The expression "Former Prophets" distinguishes the writings from the "Latter Prophets." The latter prophets came later in time. The compositions that belong to this category consist of the accounts of prophetic activity between about 760 and 400 B.C.E.

Our attention is given to the books known as the Latter Prophets, a body of material that stands apart in

the Old Testament canon.  These books embrace a phenomenon called "prophecy."  Understanding the nature of prophecy, the function of prophecy, and the exegetical task become critical to interpretation.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the prophet's task is his call to covenant loyalty.  Prophets did this in a variety of ways.  Public proclamation would sometimes precede written composition.  Not only did the prophets preach with words; they often acted out their messages in some dramatic experience.

**a.  The nature and function of prophecy.**  Critical to understanding the prophets is the nature and function of prophecy.  Remember, you are dealing with concepts found in the Hebrew Scriptures.  The use of the term "prophecy" must be defined in the context of Hebrew vocabulary and usage in the Hebrew Bible.  Modern English or other language meanings must be laid aside if true comprehension is to result.  Herein lies an important principle: words and concepts in the Hebrew Bible must be interpreted in view of their inherent meaning and the meaning within the context in which they occur.

The Christian is often interested in those portions of the prophets' work that predict or foreshadow the coming of Jesus Christ.  This is a noble part of the prophets' work, but it only occupies a small portion of biblical text, perhaps as little as 2 percent.  Prophets foretold future events, but normally they spoke of the more immediate future of Israel, Judah, and their neighbors.  The interpretation of Old Testament prophecies requires an acquaintance of historical contexts and events that came on the heels of the prophets' proclamations.

The "oral" prophets include some well-known personalities like Elijah, Elisha, and Nathan.  Still others are known to us by name or deed only.  The "writing" prophets shared an oral ministry with the oral prophets, they but composed their messages in literary form.  The consequence is a lasting record of their words.  The written compositions were designed for a present public.  We can learn from these compositions, but we must keep in mind that we are not the primary audience.  Consequently, interpretation must take into account the circumstances of those days.

One basic difference between the books of the Former Prophets and the compositions of the Latter Prophets is this: the Former Prophets often reference an *activity* of a prophet, while the Latter Prophets contain the *words* of the prophets.  Another matter to remember is that notations about prophets in the Former Prophets are confined to an occasion.  But in the Latter Prophets, the messages can be stretched out over a long period of time--as much as half a century with Isaiah.  Jeremiah looks more like a loose collection of oracles with references to multiple time periods.

The gap in time since the prophets lived tends to obscure the historical, social, and cultural context.  The circumstances that surrounded the prophets were taken for granted in their compositions but the details of the circumstances are now lost to us.  Archaeology has partially restored some sense of the times, but so much of the historical culture has disappeared that it makes our study more tenuous.

The prophets may have been moved to speak specific messages to specific audiences, but they did so in keeping with promised blessings and curses Yahweh had previously pronounced.  When the Law was given, it contained notation of the result of both faithfulness and unfaithfulness.  See Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28.

The prophets were divinely commissioned mouthpieces of Yahweh.  They did not bring another law.  They did not contradict previous messages from Yahweh.  They reinforced those given in the past and held the people accountable.  They held up the people's behavior to the standard Yahweh had already revealed.

### Stud*y Activities*

1.  With pencil and paper in hand, read the following passages and jot down the leading ideas that emerge from each of them: Hosea 1:1-4:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 7:14-17; Jonah 1:1; 3:1; Micah 1:1; 3:5-12; 4:6-5:5; Zeph. 1:1-3; Haggai; Zech. 1:1, 7, 16; 4:8; 6:9; 7:1; 8:1; Mal. 1:1.

2.  Study these passages with the aim of discovering (1) the person of Yahweh, (2) how Yahweh called the prophet, and (3) what Yahweh was calling the prophet to do: Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1-3.

**b. Exegesis.**  Only time and patient study will reveal to the interpreter a good measure of biblical understanding. Even then, much will remain unexplored.

It seems odd to say the Bible is a book designed for the mature mind, when it is really intended for the common person. Though its basic message is simple, the character of its compositions requires more than casual reading if it is to be appreciated to the fullest.  One reason for this is that the literary forms in which biblical authors wrote are those of ancient languages.  Some of these forms are less used today in modern communication or, when they are, are usually employed for a different purpose.  So, in this module, the first matter at hand is to become familiar with the ancient form of "prophetic announcements."

In previous studies, you became aware of the common division of the Hebrew Scriptures: Torah, Prophets, and Writings.  In the instance of divisions, the "Prophets" embrace historical narrative (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) as well as books commonly associated with prophetic announcements (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Book of the Twelve).  In the present investigation, we are limiting our attention to prophetic announcements that may be present throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, though primarily in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve.  We will reserve detailed discussion of New Testament usage of prophetic material for BRS 126 Exegesis of the Greek Scriptures.

In addition to understanding ancient literary forms, the student of scripture will soon realize that while these common forms are followed closely, the writers of scripture only used them to express ideas that were essential to faith in Yahweh.  This feature is most prominent in the prophetic announcements.  The "prophetic" voice was not simply about forecasting future events but about assessing Israel's relationship to Yahweh and interpreting for them the implications for forsaking the covenant they entered with Yahweh at Sinai.  In this connection, the prophets warned Israel of impending judgment and then announced promises of redemption for all people through a remnant of Israel.

### *Guidelines for interpreting prophetic announcement*

1.  Prophetic announcements are normally written in Hebrew poetic form.  Therefore, the rules of interpreting Hebrew poetry apply.  One major consideration here is the function of parallelism.

As an example, consider Isaiah 1:2-3.  In line 1, the author summons the attention of all: "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!"  "Hear" and "listen" are synonymous; "heavens" and "earth" are inclusive.  The message is not hidden.  The reason why everyone's attention is solicited to hear the forthcoming announcement is expressed in line 2: "For the LORD has spoken."  Lines 1 and 2 are placed in parallel form.  Line 3 begins a rationale for why Yahweh has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up."  Line 4 offers the occasion for Yahweh to speak: "but they have rebelled against me."  The two elements of the statement are also placed in parallel position.  Lines 5 and 6 offers an ironic assessment: "The ox knows his master," and "the donkey his owner's manager."  These lines are also positioned in parallel, although the sentence is not completed until another set of parallel lines (7 and 8) follow: "but Israel does not know" and "my people do not understand."  Here lines 5 and 6 are parallel and 7 and 8 are parallel, but the two sets are also parallel to each other.

2. The prophet's message is set in past time and encompasses real life situations.  Therefore, it should be interpreted in view of the circumstances suggested in the prophetic work.

For an example of context, consider such statements as appear in Obadiah: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says about Edom--" (v. 1).  The primary message is directed to a particular people.  It denotes the audience, identifies Edom's sins, and declares judgment upon a specific people.

3. Seek primary interpretation before looking for further meaning or application.  The example in #2 above illustrates this point.  While the Edomites are condemned for their pride and feeling of invulnerability, the focus of attention is on their contempt for the God of Israel.  Although Obadiah offers several "applications," the primary one is the danger of being contemptuous, especially with reference to God for his acts.

4. Regarding passages where the meaning is unclear, either make the interpretation tentative or leave it open for further exploration.

For example, scholarly debate has not been able to settle the question of whether the locust plague noted in Joel was an infestation of literal locusts or whether "locusts" refer to an invading army.

5. Allow symbolic language to represent a general situation without having to be reduced to literal occurrences.

Joel 2:1 reads, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill."  Is this literal or figurative language?

6. Look to the context to resolve statements that seem contradictory.

Isaiah 7:14 may be a good example, especially in view of Matthew's use of terminology (Matt. 1:23).

7. When considering New Testament citations from the Prophets, consider that the New Testament may be using the passage cited in a unique manner.

Compare Hosea 11:1 with Matt. 2:15.

8. Principles that have lasting application should be consistent with the prophet's message.  Or, to put it another way, one is hardly justified in arbitrarily using a prophetic statement to bolster a particular Christian doctrine unless there is clear evidence that it does apply in a Christian context.

An example of misapplication is to take the condemnation that came with withholding "tithes and offerings" (Mal. 3:8) to justify binding tithing on Christians.  In application, it is proper to say Christians should be careful not to withhold financial offerings, but the New Testament speaks of a more wholesome means for determining individual giving (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-16; 9:6-14).  The same kind of application should be given in other references in Malachi, *e.g.,* references to sacrifices.  To assist in determining how Old Testament passages should be applied, the interpreter should be consistent.  The same logical argument could be made for animal sacrifices as for tithing.

**c. Application.**  Surely, there is much in the Hebrew prophets that can and should have application to modern Christian living. Not only do the prophets enlighten faith by showing how God was preparing the way for the coming Messiah, they enlighten faith by revealing faith's expectations.  Just as Israel's relationship with Yahweh was tied to the Sinai covenant, Christians relate to God through the new covenant established in Jesus Christ.  Principles pertaining to blessing and loyalty remain constant in both covenants.

Application begins with an accurate view of God.  The Old Testament abounds in portraits of a Sovereign God who works in the interest of those to whom he has given life.  He is especially attentive to those he has called to bear witness to his name.  While God's care is abundant, he also holds humans responsible for their behavior.

The prophets show Yahweh to be compassionate and patient.  He is not as the pagan perceive him-- arbitrary, hard to reach, limited in scope of blessing, or needing to be appeased in order to grant human requests.  Beginning with a God of mercy and justice, prophetic pronouncements speak to specific audiences and, by inference, to a universal and timeless audience with respect to the proper human response to God.

Finally, the prophetic witness opens for us insight into God's future plans for human redemption.  In reading the New Testament, the activity of God to which the prophets testified becomes clearer.  Faith is deepened and our love for God is enhanced.

In the units ahead, we will introduce specific forms of prophetic activity. Before advancing, however, we need to check ourselves to make sure the foundation is laid properly.

1. Have you been challenged to re-think who a prophet was and how prophets functioned?
2. Can you visualize in your mind how the principles for interpreting prophetic works may differ from those used to interpret narrative?
3. How do you imagine prophetic writing relates to the writing of history?
4. What criteria would you use to determine if a prophetic utterance refers to the present, the near future, or the distant future?

*Activities*

1. Make a list of the functions you sense that a prophet fulfilled.

2. Write out your own list of principles that will help you understand and interpret books of The Prophets. Do not be surprised if you have a short and simple list. By the time you get to the end of this module, you may need to revise your list to include different genre. It is important that you begin to formulate the list.

# Unit 2. Types of Prophetic Announcements

Since God is sovereign over the entire world, it is natural that he would have something to say about salvation and judgment. Unless he is a total recluse, he will react to human behavior and do so in a responsible manner. Remember, judgment and salvation are twin essentials for a balanced world occupied by humans.

From the Hebrew Scriptures, we gather that God is concerned with all people--all nations. His words are directed to a universal audience. Just as in the days of Noah, he speaks against evil wherever it is found. Hence, ancient empires and smaller groups of people are addressed by the prophets.

The ideas of "salvation" and "judgment" are opposites; both express something of the essential actions of God. "Salvation" suggests deliverance (not necessarily the act of being saved from sin or saved in heaven). In the Hebrew Scriptures, salvation commonly refers to deliverance from an enemy or a crisis. God saved Israel from Egyptian bondage, *i.e.,* he delivered them (Exod. 15:1-2). And so in the prophets, God is "our salvation in time of distress" (Isa. 33:2) and is "the salvation of Israel" (Jer. 3:23). "Judgment" is the opposite of salvation, not in terms of eternal affliction, but in terms of the action God takes against those who are evil. They both have a "this" world application.

In prophetic literature, scholars refer to the direct speech of God as "oracles." Oracles communicate God's intentions toward the faithful with respect to deliverance from a host of unhealthy situations. We conveniently separate the oracles of salvation from the announcements of judgment mainly for analytic purposes. Whether a prophet conceived of this way is questionable.

Specific notices of impending judgment may be called "announcements of judgment" to reflect God's intent to bring evil doers to account. Normally, these pronouncements of salvation and judgment are straight-forward. Sometimes they are cast in the form of apocalyptic, a genre that reflects a relationship between spiritual and physical forces.

The unit addresses three topics. These are (a) Oracles of salvation, (b) Announcements of judgment, and (c) Apocalyptic.

**a. Oracles of salvation.** Derived from the Latin, "oracle" means "to speak." With reference to ancient use, the term was closely connected with the individual who spoke. Normally, this would have been a priest, prophet, or sage thought to have the ability to communicate a message inspired by the gods. Often, this would have been a word foretelling the future. In this course, an *oracle* is defined as a message given a Hebrew prophet by Yahweh. An oracle of *salvation* is a divinely inspired message that addresses the idea of deliverance either in a physical or spiritual sense.

The function of the oracle of salvation as a prophetic genre is threefold: (1) to reassure the faithful that God hears them in their affliction, (2) to affirm that God is committed to his purposes, and (3) to assure the faithful that God is able to execute his will. From a divine perspective, it all revolves around God and his glory. From a human perspective, where there is uncertainty and doubt, mankind sees primarily his own deliverance as a primary objective to life. In the oracle, those who trust in God find reassurance.

In form, the oracle expresses God's words in images. Fulfillment often progresses with time, although an invitation to respond comes in the present. The oracle of salvation is God's word that he is present, that he sees, that he cares, and that he will transform adversity into something good for his people. In the Old Testament context, "salvation" refers to deliverance from a variety of undesirable circumstances. The same oracles should encourage the Christian to persevere in faith, endure in the hope of his calling, and persist in love for God and others.

### *Activity*

Open your Bible to Jeremiah 30.

1.  Read the entire chapter carefully.
2.  On a piece of paper, summarize what you have read.
3.  Note the natural breaks in the passage: vv. 4, 10a, 12, 17a, and 22.
4.  Establish who is talking and to whom.
5.  Identify the reason why the oracle is delivered.
6.  Separate the verses that speak of good and bad times.
7.  Note the time sequences: current circumstance and future.
8.  What is the purpose of the oracle?
9.  Now, summarize the meaning of the chapter.

**b.  Announcements of judgment.** Announcements of judgment are characteristic of the Latter Prophets, especially those prophets who lived before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. The function of the announcement of judgment as a prophetic genre is to proclaim judgment in a way that the people will know it is from God and to induce people to repent and pursue righteousness. The announcements usually include Israel (and/or Judah), but they often target Israel's neighbors as well. The announcements may aim at a select people or they may aim at several nations. Those prophets who concern themselves with a single people are Jonah, Obadiah, and Nahum. Those who include an array of nations include Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

An understanding of the prophets, their task, and their message can be achieved only through an analysis of the prophets' warnings of judgment. The prophetic judgment speech may have represented a prophetic use of the political messenger's speech.

The "woe oracle" in prophetic literature is used to criticize particular actions or attitudes and sometimes to announce punishment upon the people. The "prophetic lawsuit" summons Israel to court to hear God's verdict.

The format for the prophetic lawsuit follows the pattern of trials in the courts of biblical times. It is connected with Israel's covenant with God and is known from international treaties. Because of the covenant aspect, oracles against foreign nations do not share fully structure and genres. Announcements of judgment came in specific historical situations and were based on a specific word from God. Nevertheless, they did not always result in a positive or desired response.

### *Activities*

1.  **Jonah.** The book of Jonah may be properly a book *about* a prophet, but its single line of declaration is one of judgment--"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jonah 3:4). The pronouncement of judgment is clear. Forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed! But was it? If not, why not?

A fundamental question in interpretation is, What is the purpose of the composition? Seek the answer to

that question.  With your Bible opened to Jonah, can you discover the purpose of the composition?  See especially chapter 4.  The act of discovery may lead you through a number of questions, which are scattered throughout the work.  What attitude led Jonah to flee to Tarshish?  Why did he not want God to spare Nineveh?  What kind of people inhabited the city?  Why would God want to destroy Nineveh?  Why did he spare the city?  What does the book of Jonah teach about divine announcements?  While the answer to these questions may not state a clear purpose, they provide the basis for discovery.  Would you think the purpose of Jonah is to declare the end of Nineveh?  Or is its purpose more likely to be found in the distinction between what God did and what Jonah wanted God to do?  Perhaps the intent of the composition is to teach Jonah--and the rest of us--something about God's character.

2.  **Nahum**.  As a follow-up to Jonah, examine Nahum.  Assuming a century has lapsed since Jonah's announcement, what can you conclude about what has happened in Nineveh during the interval?  While you may not have all the tools necessary to interpret Nahum, work through the book.  Make notes on such things as (1) the character of God, (2) how God's wrath is described in physical terms, (3) what benefit a nation may receive from allies when God decides to destroy it, (4) what God will do for Israel, who has been beaten down by Assyria (the empire represented in the text by its capital, Nineveh), (5) how Nineveh is described when it falls, (6) the description of Nineveh's army in its last days, and (7) how Nineveh is rendered insignificant.  There is no reversal of the announcement of judgment this time.  Nineveh's end is near.  As you consider the graphic terms with which Nineveh's destruction is described, can you appreciate the symbols that are used by the prophet?  When studying a book like Nahum, background information on the Assyrian people and their empire seems imperative.

3.  **Amos.**  Amos belonged to the 8th century and before the fall of Israel.  Although he focused on the northern kingdom, Amos' pronouncements did not overlook Israel's neighbors.  But the announcements of judgment upon the nations surrounding Israel appear to be introductory to the prophet's major focus.

Amos singled out Damascus (Syria) (1:3-5), Gaza (Philistia) (1:6-8), Tyre (Phoenicia) (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-14), Moab (2:1-3), and Judah (2:4-5) before centering on Israel.  As you preview the entire work, note first of all, that the work begins with a sense of judgment (1:2).  Then the pronouncements against the nations are composed in a pattern developed in poetic style.  These statements are followed by longer pronouncements aimed at the leaders of Israel.

What are the characteristics of the short announcements against the nations?  How is the work of God in judgment described?

4.  **Isaiah.**  Announcements of judgment in Isaiah are scattered throughout the book.  Notice the contrast in the announcements.  Judgment against the nations is final.  But following judgment against his special people, God will rescue a remnant in order to carry out his purposes in Jesus Christ.

**c.  Apocalyptic.**  Apocalyptic is a literary form found in the later part of the Old Testament.  Apocalyptic is a term used to identify a literary genre that contains visions interpreted for the seer by a heavenly messenger.  The genre is the extension (or replacement) of prophecy by a supra historical presentation starting from contemporary events.  Fully developed apocalyptic in the Old Testament is limited to Daniel 7-12 and Zechariah 12 and 14.

The intent of apocalypse is divine revelation.  God is saying something to humans.  And much of what he speaks relates to the future and the guarantee that he holds its destiny.  But it is the character of divine revelation that gives the apocalypse its unique sense of God's communication.  Actually, the apocalypse is not radical in content; it tends to repeat and underscore in a dramatic way what should be common to the faith of God's saints.  It is the unique matrix for conveying divine revelation that makes it significant.

The apocalyptic vision often concerns the succession of historical events where both the human and supernatural meet.  Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the physical reflects the supernatural realm.  Where the future comes into play, there may be messianic events, ultimate victory for the righteous, resurrection, judgment, and the consummation of the world order (André LaCocque, *Daniel in His Times,* pp. 10, 12).

Apocalyptic presents a view of a prototypical heavenly order in which the author depicts how earthly

realities are about to succumb to God's sovereign rule.  Regardless of their perceived strength, humans will be unable to challenge the divine successfully, for evil cannot prevail.  A primary tenet is that God will act in keeping with his purposes to disenfranchise the forces of evil in the interest of his own lasting rule.  Apocalyptic structure thus includes a revelation by God, given through a mediator, to a seer regarding future events (Barnabas Lindars, "Re-enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man," *New Testament Studies,* 22:1, 52-72; Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic,* pp. 27-75).

Apocalyptic addresses those whose social and political structures are about to collapse.  In view of these events, apocalyptic usually points to a crisis with the intention of (1) offering comfort, hope, consolation, and exhortation to God's faithful people and (2) announcing a threat of judgment to those who oppose God's sovereign reign.  Eschatological pericopes are formed into a pattern of crisis, judgment, and salvation.  Not only is restoration of the Jews implied, but there is a cosmic scope which transcends history and points to judgment and resurrection.

John Collins (*Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature,* pp. 6-10) has identified several *media* of revelation in Daniel.  These include the symbolic dream vision (see Dan. 7-8), an explanation for a future generation (see Dan. 9:24-27), an interpretation, such as a dream or the writing on the wall (Dan. 10-11), appearance of a supernatural being (see Dan. 7:13-14; 10; 12:1), and a revelation brought by an angel.

Daniel is a prophetic text, for it shows, along with the prophets, that history has meaning.  But Daniel goes beyond common prophecy by raising questions pertaining to God's involvement in future historical events, the role of forces of evil, and the way God will culminate the human sphere.

A characteristic that emerges in the prophetic sections is a tendency to divide history into a set of periods of varying duration (Dan. 9:24-27).  Collins observes that the division of history served two purposes: (1) it confirmed a sense "that history was measured out and under control" and (2) "it enabled the reader to locate his own generation" in relation to "the end of the sequence" (Collins, p. 33).  Even when the author does not divide history into a set of periods, he predicts the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms (Dan. 8:23-27; 11).

Perhaps more significant for understanding Daniel is the book's affinity to Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah.  Beginning with Jeremiah's assurance that Israel's exile would last seventy years (Jer. 25:11, 12; 29:10), Daniel projects a redemption for Judah following seventy times seven (Dan. 9:2, 25-26).  His apocalyptic visions reflect Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly chariot (Ezekiel 1), the celestial scroll (Ezek. 3:1-2; Zech. 5:1-4), and the heavenly messenger.  The fact that ultimate matters are still hidden to the seer (12:4, 8-9) suggests that much of God's activity is not revealed.

Daniel casts a long shadow over later apocalyptic writing, with striking interrelatedness to Revelation.  The themes that play out in the array of apocalyptic literature, especially in Revelation, suggest an important function, which apocalyptic performed and continues to perform for modern Christians.

The apocalyptic sections of Daniel helped to prepare God's faithful people for suffering that lay in their future.  In advancing the universalistic sentiments found in the later prophets, the apocalyptic texts pointed to the struggle that characterizes troubling times.  For the thinking church, Daniel will "continue to provide a trustworthy and durable basis for hope and courage to those who find that the trials of life have exhausted their human ability to cope."  The texts can nurture in modern believers a sensitivity toward God and toward dictatorial persons whose love for self and contempt for others transcends all reason (Hanson, pp. 21, 23).

### *Activity*

Turn to the text of Daniel 7-12.  Using the principles laid out above, see if you can interpret the material.  If you find it difficult, do not despair.  We have more work to do with Daniel in Unit 3.

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# Unit 3.  The Book of Daniel

As with any ancient book, the book of Daniel can be a challenge.  If you have read much ancient literature, you know how difficult the reading can be, especially when some of the material is written in apocalyptic and is cast in an unfamiliar setting.  Even good translations cannot do justice to unique forms of writing or bring over the surrounding cultural environment.

Now that you have become acquainted with the content of the Old Testament (BRS 121) and the general theological message of the text (BRS 123), it is time to consider some matters that will help you know more about the Bible as a whole and individual books in particular.  Inasmuch as hundreds of years have passed since the books were penned, many would-be interpreters have arisen.  Varying assumptions have been advanced regarding composition and background information.  New archaeological finds add to our knowledge of ancient times.  As the study of the Bible becomes more personal for you, it will be important to review the evidence on which scholars and commentators base their conclusions.

Rather than having been written in an historical vacuum, the author of Daniel belonged to a particular time.  He wrote in a social, political, and religious environment.  This is not to say that the author merely mirrored his environment or accepted cultural perceptions.  He wrote against prevailing customs and practices.  But he did use standard conventions of language, literary forms, and vocabulary.  He referenced events and ideas that were part of his culture.

The study of Daniel presents some interesting situations.  For example, in reading the account of Daniel, one should read with the knowledge that other stories have been attributed to a "Daniel" character.  One is advised to ask, How do these compare and contrast?  Then, there are the problems related to incomplete information about the identification of certain characters noted in Daniel.  Secular history is silent on the events reported in the composition, so verification by other sources is not possible.  The critic will often cite conflicting dates from the Bible and history.  What underlies this situation?  What validity does it have?  How useful is it in understanding the Bible?  What value is there in knowing these matters? These are a few of the questions that we would consider if the study were more advanced or detailed.  For now, however, we shall be content to deal with a few internal concerns.

Daniel's historicity has been assailed perhaps as no other Old Testament book.  Yet, its discussion of the future kingdom of God and difficult history of Israel is unparalleled.  The purpose of this unit is not to deal with all the issues raised by critics but concentrate, instead, on some matters that pose difficulty to the serious student who wants to make proper use of the book of Daniel in modern contexts.

Two features have allured moderns to the biblical book of Daniel: its dramatic stories and its visions.[1]  For teachers of children, Daniel contains stories which can prove fascinating.  To millennial speculators, the book is a treasure of future events.  Critical scholars, seeing within Daniel's apocalyptic sections evidence of history written after the fact, concentrate on critical analysis.  Meanwhile, Christians in general seem oblivious to the work's existence.

It would appear that many users of Daniel are driven to it by ulterior motives rather than by a desire for personal spiritual growth.  Why must one's peculiar interest determine the interpretation and use of the book of Daniel?  Why should the goal of one's study exercise such control over what one is able to see in the composition?  The varying uses of Daniel pose a significant problem.  The solution is bound up in two questions, (1) What does the Book of Daniel convey?  and (2) What legitimate use can be made of the work today?

The focus here is the question of Daniel's function.  The means to discovery is primarily through a consideration of the Daniel corpus.  Three strata of information which interlace the book shall be considered: (1) the setting, (2) linguistic and literary considerations, and (3) primary themes.  The setting is important, for it provides the particulars necessary to carry the story.  Literary style serves as a vehicle for communication.  Primary themes offer a clue to the impact which the author hopes to make.

In the English Bible, Daniel follows Ezekiel and is reckoned with the Prophets.  This placement follows the Greek Bible (Septuagint, LXX)[2] and coincides with that of the earliest extant manuscripts (fragments)

from the Dead Sea Caves, dating from the 1st or 2nd century B.C.E.  The Dead Sea manuscripts accorded the work the title, "Daniel the prophet," a title reflected in Matt. 24:15[3] and by Josephus.[4]  The Hebrew Bible followed another path, grouping Daniel with the Writings.  Placement between Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah indicated the work was considered historiography.[5]  The Rabbis perpetuated this view and rejected the designation of Daniel as a prophet.[6]

**a.  The setting.**  One external factor that may have a bearing on the purpose of Daniel and its use in the present age is Israel's plight.  During the periods of time proposed as dates of composition, the situation in Israel was tough.  Persecution was not the norm during the post-exilic period, although it did occur on occasion.  At the end of Daniel's life (6th century), Israel may have been on the verge of restoration to the holy land, but her future would be one of hardship and disappointment, as attested by Haggai, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and the apocryphal Maccabees.  The continuing struggles under the dominion of Antiochus IV (2nd century) point to a similar state of affairs.  Specifically, Israel faced an uncertain future as the once favored people of Yahweh.

The author's perceived purpose would be different if he were writing after independence from Antiochus IV and addressing a self-determining nation.  In such a case, one would reason that the era of inde-pendence was indeed the reality to which the book was pointing.  But even proponents of a late date of writing favor positioning the book toward the end of the oppressive rule of Antiochus, when Jews were suffering.  Hence the idea that the overall purpose of writing was to encourage disheartened Jews is not affected by the various theories advanced for the date of composition.[7]

The chronological setting specified for Daniel the man is 605-536 B.C.E.  These dates are stated as "the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim" (Dan. 1:1), "the second year of his [Nebuchadnezzar's] reign" (Dan. 2:1), "the first year of Belshazzar" (Dan. 7:1), "the third year of King Belshazzar" (Dan. 8:1), "the first year of Darius son of Xerxes" (Dan. 9:1), and "the third year of Cyrus" (Dan. 10:1).  In addition, events surrounding historical figures are noted without reference to a particular year of reign, but these all fall within the parameters of 605-536.  The content of Daniel, however, anticipates dates projecting into the Christian era.[8]

The event with which Daniel begins is the subjection of Jehoiakim to Nebuchadnezzar (605 B.C.E.).  Other events described for the reader's benefit are the siege of Jerusalem and the removal of articles from the temple of God in Jerusalem to Babylonia.

Next, the reader is told how some Israelite males from the royal family and nobility were introduced into Nebuchadnezzar's service.  During the course of the narrative, the reader is informed that Daniel and the three Hebrews men chosen for training were given new names.  At the commencement of training, Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.  He was able to convince his overseer to permit the four of them to eat vegetables.  As a consequence, God gave them knowledge and understanding (Dan. 1:17-18).  The four entered Nebuchadnezzar's service and were recognized by the king for their superior wisdom and understanding.  At this point, the author simply states that "Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus" (Dan. 1:21).  However, the settings for the various visions of the book are the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius.  As one may suspect from the introduction, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are depicted later (Daniel 3), but it is Daniel who appears as a prime subject throughout the book.

The setting alone provides limited assistance for getting to the heart of Daniel's purpose.  The author does touch on the benefits of historical remembrance, the rewards of faithfulness, and the advancement of some Jews in exile.  But these could hardly be primary reasons for composition due to the work's distinctive character.

**b.  Linguistic and literary considerations**

*Language and structure.*  Daniel is a composite structure of diverse linguistic and literary elements.[9]  In its earliest extant form, Daniel exists in two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic.  Hebrew was the natural language of the Jews; Aramaic was the common trade language of the Middle East.  Since there is no evidence to the contrary, existing manuscripts are assumed to reflect the linguistic nature of the original.

The reason for the use of two languages is unknown.  Perhaps the author had two audiences in mind.  The Jews, who could understand both languages, would have been the primary audience.  Perhaps the Aramaic section was intended for Gentiles, as it is concerned with matters pertaining principally to the Gentile world.[10]   Those parts in Hebrew deal specifically with Jewish interests and God's future plans for his covenant people.[11]  Loss of the prologue to the wider Aramaic-speaking audience would not prohibit Gentiles from understanding the sovereignty of God.  But the presence of the prologue for the Hebrew audience would have made a fuller statement about Israel's relationship to God.  Uniquely, Israel would understand God's involvement in history, for he had revealed himself to her in a peculiar and enduring manner.[12]  Or, the answer may be simpler: Aramaic sections reflect Aramaic documentation without translation into Hebrew.

Division of the book according to its linguistic pattern suggests the following outline: a prologue in Hebrew (1:1-2:3), an Aramaic section (2:4-7:28), and a Hebrew section (8-12).  Argument in favor of this division is strengthened by the substantive relationship between chapters two and seven.  Although the vision of chapter seven belongs to the apocalyptic section from a literary perspective, the author placed the material in a linguistic order setting.

From a literary point of view, chapters one through six are basically narrative, written in a style akin to midrash--"the expansion of a tradition."  Chapters seven through twelve are apocalyptic.  According to the division based on literary features, chapter seven belongs to the second division.  In arguing for a division based on literary features, the relationship of chapters two and seven is used to show that the two main sections are bound together by apocalyptic dreams depicting four world kingdoms.  Hence, the book shows that "all history is bound together in the purpose of the Lord of history."[13]

Another notable difference between the first six chapters and the second six is that in the first set, the book tells about Daniel and the three Hebrews, while in the second set, the book relates visions seen by Daniel himself.  Consequently, Daniel is referred to in the third person in the first half, but in the first person in the second half.  Further, the first six chapters seem to follow a chronological ordering, while the last six are organized by theme and content.[14]

Regardless of the division favored, linguistic or literary, the entire work presents a conceptual unity, being well attested by the interdependency between its two halves.  The author interrelates dreams, terminology, the role of Daniel, and emphasis on the sovereignty of God.  He unites the two diverse units through recurring motifs, expressions, and apocalyptic.[15]

Much speculation has been made over Daniel's alleged use of other biblical and non-biblical imagery, motifs, and phraseology.  Daniel shows fondness for the three-and-one pattern found in ancient Near Eastern literature and in Job, Proverbs, and Amos.  It has yet to be shown if this is coincidental or is a part of the author's scheme.  Whichever it may be, use of these literary features only accents his composition and drives it along toward its conclusion.  Israel's past and present are linked with the future, as the God of her past assures her that he will lead his faithful people to ultimate triumph.[16]

In the narrative section, the author uses common motifs and imagery to concentrate on human affairs centered around the Babylonian court.[17]  He appears to draw from lists of various types--political, cultic, musical, materials, ethnic.[18]  He makes use of six choice events to set forth the lives of Daniel and his three associates: (1) Daniel's decision not to defile himself with the king's food (Dan. 1), (2) the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the composite image (Dan. 2), (3) the image of God and the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), (4) Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a tree (Dan. 4), (5) the writing on Belshazzar's palace wall (Dan. 5), and (6) Daniel's prayer (Dan. 6).  The second half of Daniel consists of apocalyptic visions that reveal the future to Daniel, leading through periods of difficulty for the Jews and on toward the ultimate victory of God's people.

Organizationally, the two halves of Daniel show intentional parallel structure.  Chapters two and seven are parallel in content.  The intervening chapters picture the power of Gentile nations limited under God (Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, 18-19).  Chapters two and seven, three and six, and four and five are parallel.  Chapter one (the prologue) corresponds to 11:1-12:4 (the conclusion).  The opening chapter ties the past to the present; the last chapter projects the present into the future.  The common ideological and semantic element is wisdom.  Likewise, chapters 8 and 9 correspond as do 10 and 11:1-12:4. [19]

***Primary themes.*** From the outset, the author signals the primary thrust of the book--(1) God's sovereign rule, (2) the need for, and meaning of, faithfulness to God, and (3) God's on-going concern for those bound to him by covenant.[40] Through the use of apocalyptic, the author carries the reader beyond his limited natural environment and shows the conflict between the forces of good and evil. It is none other than God who creates and moves in world history. He alone provides meaning. Even knowledge of the future derives from him as do all future blessings. The theological truth is that God holds human destiny in his grasp.[41] Earthly rulers come and go; God remains. But he does more than merely exist; he acts according to his will.

The theme of human fidelity is illustrated by demonstrating that Daniel's faithfulness led to God's gift of wisdom and understanding. Not only did God give wisdom to Daniel, but Daniel consistently attributed to God those qualities which rightfully belong to him, claiming no license to dream interpretation (Dan. 2:19-23, 27-28). Where he did not disclaim for himself the ability to interpret visions, Daniel attributed to God the action portrayed in the dreams (Dan. 4:24, 26; 5:18, 26; 7:9). There are other instances that give insight into what it means to be faithful, as in the story of the fiery furnace and the lion's den.

In the eyes of the Babylonians, the God of the Jews had been totally discredited. To show that God acts for the sake of his name and for his people, God revealed himself to the Babylonian rulers through a series of dreams. Not only did he disclose his supremacy over the Babylonian potentates, but over all world rulers in the physical and spiritual realms.[42]

Although Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as a superior ruler among the kingdoms of men, the God of heaven declared he would replace all earthly kingdoms with his own (Dan. 2:44-47). In the incident involving an image of God which Nebuchadnezzar set up for worship, the superiority of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was readily acknowledged (Dan. 3:28). Following his restoration to power, Nebuchadnezzar recognized the eternal dominion of the Most High (Dan. 4:34-35). Darius saw in God's deliverance of Daniel from the lion's den evidence that he lives forever, having an indestructible kingdom and a never-ending dominion (Dan. 6:26-27). The interpretation of the dream of the four beasts points toward the sovereignty of the Most High, who holds an everlasting kingdom where all rulers will worship and obey him (Dan. 7:27). The angelic personalities, Gabriel and Michael, attested to authority which lies beyond the temporal realm (Dan. 8:16; 10:13). The confessionary prayer of Daniel on behalf of Israel acknowledged God's greatness, his action with Israel, and his ability to respond to crisis situations (Dan. 9:4-19).

Daniel makes it plain that human efforts at greatness and superiority lead to futility. Only those who are loyal to God are extolled. Indeed, the focus of history is with them. God Most High "can protect those who trust in him, and even if the faithful meet with martyrdom God is able to resurrect them to new life." In this world, God extends his universally acknowledged rule so the faithful can live in hope and expectancy.[43]

The author shows God to be transcendent, offers assistance with the problem of evil, projects a doctrine of resurrection, and postulates the concept of judgment by a righteous God upon unrighteous humans. Since right attitudes toward God are humility and repentance, proud pagan kings are held responsible for their arrogance and disdain for the sacred.[44] God's miraculous intervention on behalf of Daniel and his friends is but one demonstration of God's care for his saints. Other theological emphases in Daniel include the person, scope, and power of prayer, God's over-arching scheme of redemption, and the grace of God.[45] In sum, God's sovereignty is developed in connection with the exile, time, and history. The theme of faithfulness is developed through observations about lifestyle, religious observance, prayer, and worship.[46]

The use of Daniel texts in the New Testament signals that the work held a long-term significance. References to Daniel are made in the Synoptics, 1-2 Thessalonians, and Revelation.[47] Allusions are made to judgment, the Son of Man, the Abomination of Desolation, the Ancient of Days, testing, a sealed scroll, signs, images, and announcements. All of these assist the student of the various New Testament texts which deal with these themes from Daniel. Matthew's introduction of Dan. 11:31 is made in the same way he cites Scripture as fulfilled, although the word "fulfilled" is missing in Matt. 24:15, and the passage does not fit fully the ten quotation formula

passages.[48]

Although Judaism does not treat the "son of man" figure (Dan. 7:13) as a person, it does acknowledge an agent of God in the approaching judgment at the end of history. The identification of Jesus as the Son of Man is basic to New Testament Christology. The original meaning of the "son of man" term is disputed. The question is whether "the one like a son of man" finds identification with the "saints of the Most High" (a corporate entity) or is the figure coming *from* God to vindicate the faithful? "With the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13) specifies the unveiled heavenly residence of God and introduces the scene that follows. God's judgment falls upon the nations, and the Son of Man judges them. "The saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:18, 21-22) probably refers to the faithful of Israel. [49]

*Conclusion.* When searching for Daniel's possible use to the modern church, one is forced to raise important questions. The question of relevancy is bound up in the issues surrounding purpose and canonicity. With canonicity assumed, since it is a part of recognized scripture, albeit Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures, its place before the church is set. Perhaps the placement of Daniel in the "Old" Testament raises a question for some Christians, who see within the idea of fulfillment a sense of uselessness, out datedness, non-relevancy, or diminutive value. One should be reminded, however, that the great themes of Daniel are not archaic. As a matter of fact, they are as acute as any in Scripture. It is these themes that need to be carried forward to the present generation, to both believers and unbelievers. Whatever "lessons" teachers of children may draw from the more familiar stories about Daniel and his associates, these teachers should go on to introduce students to the deeper significance of the book as a whole. Else, one may risk treating Daniel either as a collection of stories of mythical heroes or as a work from which mere moral instruction is derived. There is no reason to shy away from the study of Daniel because it is strange or difficult. Rather, one should seek an understanding of apocalyptic literature and discover the exuberance which the book projects. In this context one can proceed to appreciate the use Jesus made of the text and be able to see in principle other "Desolations of Abominations."

Daniel complements other post-exilic writings. The Chronicler looked backward. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah was concerned with contemporaneous events. Daniel projects the future. It is reasonable to believe that the general audience was the same--God's chosen people. And their circumstances may have been similar--disenchantment. If the Chronicler and the writer of Ezra-Nehemiah were preoccupied with details of Israel's plight and explanations of why it was so, Daniel offers hope. That hope rests, not in a blissful future, but in the assurance of God's ultimate actions in history. There are, of course, insights which the book of Daniel provides which serve as a bridge between earlier Old Testament material and New Testament material. Such subjects include angelology, resurrection, and judgment.

While scholars are driven by a desire to know what, who, when, and where, Daniel is more than a novelty piece. To be sure, scholarly pursuit that leads to insights into background history and literary form is imperative. The main interests of the book are not historical and literary matters *per se*. What matters is what is conveyed through the historical and literary elements. To that point it may be said that Daniel has a two-fold purpose, one "academic" and one "practical." The academic pursuit is to discover the message. In practical terms, the book offers instruction and encouragement to those who are faithful to God.

**c. Sharing your knowledge and insights.** Having considered the academic concerns of prophetic literature, the time has come to hone your skills of communication. We shall approach the task in two stages: preparation and execution of an assignment.

The more familiar you become with The Prophets, the easier it will be to interpret them. With the certainty of interpretation, you will find that sharing your thoughts on The Prophets will become more natural to you. There are three steps in the preparation process: deciding the topic, organizing your thoughts, and preparing your presentations.

In preparing for the sharing activity, you should determine what precisely you intend to share and with whom you wish to share it. The specific topic may be determined by a variety of circumstances. Perhaps it will be influenced most by the opportunity you have. You may already be engaged in some teaching situation that will lend itself to sharing what you have learned. If you must create an opportunity, select an

occasion that is conducive to sharing your knowledge. If neither of these ideas works for you, ask some of your friends to become an audience in which you can execute an assignment given you for a course you are taking with NationsUniversity. Your audience may be one person or many persons.

### *Stage 1: Preparation*

1. Determine your purpose. On the surface, your purpose is to fulfill a school assignment. But beyond that, think seriously about *why* you should share your knowledge and insights with others. What is compelling about the prophetic messages? What stimulates you to speak out?

2. Set your objectives. Answer the question, What do I hope to accomplish when I share my ideas with others? Your objectives are what you hope happens because you spent the time with your audience.

3. Select an occasion or audience. With whom will you be sharing your insights? Your audience may be formal or informal. It can be an audience of many or as few as one person. The smaller your audience, the less structure you will need.

4. Select a set of three topics or passages from any of the Prophets.

5. Organize your thoughts. Organize your thoughts in such a fashion that you will be able to recall your material in a clear, precise, and logical manner. Remember, your audience will not want to know all you know about the subject. You may have to interest them in your subject, so prepare something that will catch and hold their attention.

### *Stage 2: Execution*

Through sharing your insights with others, you have the opportunity to clarify your own understanding. And you have the opportunity to gain a skill.
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1. Make your presentations. Carry out your planned sharing activity. As you do so, keep these questions firmly in mind: What is the purpose of sharing this information? How will it help the person(s) with whom I am sharing it? Am I being clear in my presentation? Am I making it interesting? Am I allowing for the person(s) to raise questions? What insights are new? Am I showing how the information is relevant?

2. Evaluate your presentations. Since you will be doing more than one presentation, you will have opportunity to review how well you have done on the preceding one(s) and make adjustments.
Once you have completed your assignment, ask yourself questions about how your presentations were received. What was the reaction of the audience? What kind of questions were asked to suggest that the hearer(s) was following my thoughts? Are there indications that the hearer(s) benefited from what I had to say? What would I do differently with the next opportunity?

In formal teaching situations, the teacher often gives examinations to the students. If your situation has been formal and you decide to give an examination, this provides a good opportunity to evaluate your teaching. It will also demonstrate if your questions were good questions. If your presentations were informal, you could ask your audience select questions that could give you good feedback.

### Endnotes

1.  John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, a vol. of *Word Biblical Themes*, ed. David A. Hubbard, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 1.

2.  The LXX included the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon, which were accepted by the Roman Catholic Church as canonical.  Protestant Christianity, however, rejected these additions as spurious, relegating them to the Apocrypha.

3.  Raymond Hammer, *The Book of Daniel*, a vol. of *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 1.

4.  Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 10.10.1, 4, 7.

5.  Shemaryahu Talmon, "Daniel," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 345.

6.  Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 93b-94a.

7.  Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, Regency Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 19.

8.  The period the book acknowledges as past is 605-536 B.C.E.  The earliest date of final writing could not have occurred before 536 B.C.E.  The proposed late date breaks off at about 165 B.C.E.

9.  Talmon, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*,343.

10.  Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, 8.

11.  Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," vol. 7 of *The Expositor?s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Regency Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 6.

12.  Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 21 of *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 13.

13.  Arnold Black Rhodes, "The Book of Daniel," *Interpretation*, 6 (October 1952): 442, 448.

14.  R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 1107.

15.  Goldingay detects a chiasm in Dan. 1-6.  See Goldingay, *Daniel*, 4.

16.  Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, 20; Talmon, "Daniel," 344, 346-48.

17.  Talmon, "Daniel," 343.

18.  See Peter W. Coxon, "The 'List' Genre and Narrative Style in the Court Tales of Daniel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 35 (June 1986): 95-121 for a full discussion.

19.  André LaCocque, *Daniel in His Time* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 10, 12.

40.  Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, 23.

41.  Hammer, *The Book of Daniel*, 14.

42.  Archer, "Daniel," 3-4.

43.  Hammer, *The Book of Daniel*, 13-14.

44.  Rhodes, "The Book of Daniel," 448.

45.  Archer, "Daniel," 8-9.

46.  Goldingay, *Daniel*, 11-32.

47.  Archer, "Daniel," 11-12.

48.  Graham Stanton, "Matthew," *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 212.

49.  Barnabas Lindars, "Re-enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man," *New Testament Studies*, 22, no. 1 (October 1975): 54; John Bowker, "The Son of Man," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 28, part 1 (April 1977): 24-25; Maurice Casey, "The Corporate Interpretation of 'One Like a Son of Man' (Dan. VII 13) at the Time of Jesus,"*Novum Testamentum*, 18, fasc. 3 (July 1976): 179; R. B. Y. Scott, "'Behold, He Cometh with Clouds,'" *New Testament Studies*, 5, no. 2 (January 1959): 127-32; V. S. Poythress, "The Holy Ones of the Most High in Daniel VII," *Vetus Testamentum*, 26, no. 2 (April 1976): 213.

# MODULE **5** Lament, Praise, and Wisdom

The last section devotes attention to three very distinct types of writing found in the Old Testament-- Lament, praise, and wisdom.  *Lament* offered the opportunity to express faith in a situation that only God can handle. *Praise* came as a natural response of faithfulness in a variety of situations, including lament.  *Wisdom* provided solid counsel in a myriad of circumstances where divine and practical insight were needed.  These types of writing are all composed primarily in Hebrew poetry and make use of figurative language, where parallel lines are common and acrostics sometimes appear.  Folk sayings can be distinguished from the more artistic wisdom sayings because they are apparently passed down by common people.

The *lament* is a specific form of literature that expresses great emotion.  As such, the language is vibrant.  The author reaches to the depth of his soul and brings out feelings of anguish.  If it were not for his hope and confidence in God, the one lamenting might appear depressed.  But it is the whole scope of activity contained in the lament that creates a wonderful form.  Theologically, a lament offers insight into the expectant relationship between God and man.

*Praise* might be expected in any prayer offered to God, as it lies at the center of worship.  There is a sense in which "praise" literature is specially dedicated to honoring and glorifying God.  Like the lament, praise pieces reveal a great deal about the character and activity of God.  He alone is worthy of receiving it.

The introduction of *wisdom* in the Old Testament should surprise no one.  Wisdom can be found in the writings of the world's civilizations.  However, a unique thing about wisdom found in the Bible is its association with God.  The reader of the Hebrew Scriptures generally concludes that even when wisdom is spoken by man, it is somehow inspired of God.  It is always right in principle.  A book like Job reveals a measure of wisdom that exceeds that of human minds.  God may even turn human wisdom into foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18-25).  Common wisdom, no matter how well attested, cannot expect to match the wisdom of God.

Three units comprise the module: (1) Lament, (2) Praise, and (3) Wisdom.

## Unit 1.  Lament

A lament rises out of grief, frustration, or confusion resulting from an unwelcomed circumstance.  Biblically speaking, it becomes a natural response by a person of faith in the midst of a situation that lies beyond human control.  The situation may have become unbearable without divine intervention.  The solution is either unknown or unattainable.

The lament does not come at the first light of a problem, but after all known methods of dealing with an unwanted circumstance have been expended.  In other words, one's situation has led the individual to the breaking point.  Faced with this crisis, one with weak faith may lash out against God.  In contrast, the person of strong faith will realize that human effort is futile and there is no recourse but to rely upon God.  That is not an easy thing to do considering the physical restraints of our environment.  The prospect of going to God late is not that God has been left out, but that faith drives one into the bosom

of God. The righteous are vexed and realize their salvation does indeed rest with God and with him alone. There is no one on earth who can render assistance. Hence, the wording of the lament looks like a desperate outburst to God.

A lament should not be viewed as coming from one who *lacks* faith, but as a *consequence* of faith. Yet, the language is strong and emotional. It is the language of human desperation. But what begins in human agony climaxes in confidence that God will act in his chosen way. Given the human tendency to think of myself first and believe that it is God's role to give me everything I desire, the lament becomes a witness to the reality that it is God's universe; he is its center and the one to be pleased. The pleasure of God is not that man should suffer, but that man should live in faith. Laments found in the Old Testament express reliance on God in the face of helplessness.

As for the benefits of laments, one may observe that people who comprehend lament and engage in lamenting for the right reason are more likely to find contentment. Those who do not comprehend it and still perceive of God as a pagan god will continue to live in misery.

In this unit, we will analyze a sample of lament literature. We shall take a closer look at (a) identification and guidelines to interpretation, then consider (b) Psalms of lament, and (c) the Book of Lamentations.

**a. Identification and guidelines to interpretation.** A lament takes the form of a prayer. That prayer is identified by its content and mood. Although a lament may contain elements of praise, thanksgiving, and petition, it is more than any of these terms suggest. The one praying is under a tremendous burden. His speech is sharp. His mood is somber. He is in crisis mode. Yet, from the depths of despair, he is confident of God's deliverance and so praises him. Laments belong to a wider audience than ancient Israel, but those found in the Hebrew Scriptures are unique with respect to the faith they advance.

The best known piece in this genre is the Old Testament book of Lamentations. Lamentation consists of five separate "hymns" or "laments." The first four employ acrostic form, where each verse or set of verses begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The lines themselves are written in a meter of longer lines followed by shorter lines, with some variation. Although lines of the fifth lament are not constructed as an acrostic, the lines correspond to the number of letters in the alphabet. The literary form is to be observed, but it has no particular effect on exegesis.

All five hymns of Lamentations were occasioned by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Yahweh by the Babylonians. Since they were penned by Jeremiah, they are better understood against the background of the Book of Jeremiah and the prophet's own personal grief.

Laments are also prominent in Psalms and Jeremiah. In fact, laments constitute the largest genre in the Psalms. The New Testament quotes Old Testament laments and Jesus sometimes employed this form of address. See Matt. 27:46. One may also find a variation of the general lament prayer in Matt. 23:37-39.

*Guidelines for interpreting a lament*

1. Analyze the lament through its literary features.
2. Look for hints regarding the the author and the circumstances that evoked the lament.
3. Observe the conventions of ancient Hebrew poetry.
4. Identify theological insights.
5. Observe how the author displays his emotions.
6. Interpret the lament as a whole, not just individuals pericopes.
7. Interpret the entire lament as a unit and resist taking lines out of context.

**b. Psalms of lament.** Two selections have been chosen to illustrate what may be expected in a lament and how the elements assist in interpretation. Then, one psalm is featured as an activity to allow you an opportunity to try your own hand at exegesis.

*Pslam 13.* Psalm 13 is a brief lament. In simple form, it contains the normal elements typically found in biblical lament. As you analyze the psalm, you will discover these elements: address (v. 1a), complaint (vv. 1b-2), request (vv. 3-4), expression of trust (v. 5), and praise (v. 6). This psalm can serve as a model

for interpreting other laments, although not all laments follow this simple pattern.

**Psalm 22.** The introductory words of Psalm 22 are quoted by Jesus on the cross. Read Psalm 22, using Psalm 13 as a template. See if you can identify the writer and the circumstances that lie behind this lament. When taken as a whole, is the intent of the author to express doubt or despair? Or, is his intent to express faith and confidence?

The manner in which you interpret Psalm 22 will influence the way you interpret Jesus' words on the cross (Matt. 27:46). Is Jesus actually saying that God has forsaken him? Or is he quoting the first words of this Hebrew lament to express his complete faith and confidence in God? Because many modern interpreters have taken Jesus' words out of the original context, a popular idea has been advanced that God actually abandoned Jesus. But, is this concept supported by the biblical text?

*Activity: Psalm 39*

First, read the psalm. Can you describe the psalmist's circumstance? How would you characterize his complaint? What has he tried to do without success? Who seems to get the blame for his bad situation? What is his view of life and who is in control? What is he asking of God?

**c. Lamentations.** Lamentations, a communal lament, brings out the fullest expression of the lament. Set in the time of Judah's exile, Jeremiah expresses anguish over the catastrophe that has hit Jerusalem. But a lament is more than an outburst of anger or sadness. It embraces theological reflection. The crash of Jerusalem just does not make sense, given the identity of Israel as the people of God. It makes sense only in view of Israel's faithlessness. Confidence in God must remain unshaken, for it is he who reigns. It is only he who can restore the fortunes of Israel. Consequently, the prayer for restoration is directed to God, knowing that Israel cannot rise out of the heap of ruin out of her own strength.

The tendency in reading Lamentations is to become overwhelmed with the distress and fail to see the references to confidence and hope. As you do so, remember that Jeremiah knew the captivity would last seventy years and that God would restore a remnant to Jerusalem. But this is a lament, in which the past is the focus. He knows the exile came because of Israel's sins. It is still a tragedy that has afflicted the people of God.

*Activities*

1. With pencil in hand, list on a sheet of paper those references in Lamentations that accent the love and compassion of God, as in Lam. 3:22-23.

2. Make a list of the circumstances which you believe call for one to offer a lament to God. The circumstances may be personal or corporate. They may involve sin in one's life, in the community, or in the nation. They may not even point to sin but to a crisis over which no one seems to have control or influence.

Once you have listed the circumstances that call for lament, specify beside each one the nature of the lament for each occasion. What elements should the various laments contain?

3. Try your hand at composing a lament for a circumstance of your choosing.

# Unit 2. Praise

Praise pertains to adoration. In a religious context, the object of adoration is something or someone recognized as superior to the one offering the praise. From a biblical perspective, the only one worthy of adoration is God--Yahweh.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, praise is offered to Yahweh out of respect for his person, his acts, or both. It follows, then, that some understanding of God's attributes and acts will be necessary for proper praise to

occur.  This is what distinguishes Hebrew worship from that of Israel's neighbors.  Israel's neighbors were more inclined to worship out of want or fear of retaliation.  Israel enjoyed a covenant with Yahweh, which meant they worshiped the creator-redeemer who led them into Canaan and secured the land for them.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, scholars have distinguished between thanksgiving and the hymn.  Thanksgiving is offered for what God has given; the hymn offers God adoration for who he is.  Both may contain praise, but the two aspects are closely related.  Both assume a certain attitude about God's person and his personal encounter with the world.  They both acknowledge a being who is not only sovereign but who acts in the interest of the human creature.

Praise assumes that the one offering the praise holds appreciation for God.  He approaches the act sincerely and with humility and reverence.  Interpretation of a praise piece, therefore, requires the interpreter to do justice to the context in which the praise appears.  Praise may be spontaneous or it may be part of a planned worship activity.  It may come in a moment of thanksgiving or at the end of a lament.  In all events, it represents a genuine feeling of awe, respect, and gratitude.  Praise rises above anger, doubt, and distrust.

The unit is developed in three sub-sections.  These are (a) Categories of praise, (b) Praise in Psalms and Jonah, and (c) Guidelines for interpreting praise.

**a.  Categories of praise.**  Modern scholars have attempted to distinguish individual psalms by type.  The effort is useful as long as we realize that the types are artificial.  The psalms themselves resist typing to some degree, as overlapping elements are shared.  For example, a lament is not devoid of praise.  Nevertheless, it will be useful to recognize that there are two basic kinds of psalms: *praise* and *lament*.  While laments may contain praise, they really represent a separate *kind* of psalm, having a distinctive purpose.

Praise psalms may be analyzed in a number of ways.  About 80 percent of these can be placed in one of three major categories: (1) hymns, (2) songs of thanksgiving, and (3) psalms of trust.  The remaining includes enthronement or royal psalms, songs of Zion, and creation psalms.  By use, the psalms may be observed in two settings: individual and community.  Keep in mind that the categories were created to explain the *use* of the psalms, not the original setting.

*Hymns* hold in common the idea that God is praised for who God is.  The early church made use of "hymns" (Eph. 5:19).  Interestingly, the text distinguishes between psalms and hymns.  Whether Paul had the modern categories in mind is questionable.  The interesting idea is that hymns are not limited to psalms.  Scholars have identified hymns or hymn fragments in the New Testament.  These focus on praise to God or Christ, but they cannot be entirely separated from what God and Christ did.  The key thought, though, is that the hymn represents praise to God for who he is, not for what he has done.

*Songs of thanksgiving* may recognize God's character, but their distinguishing feature is that they focus on a particular gift of God.  Think of it as giving thanks to God for what he has done for you.

*Psalms of trust* emphasize faith.  They leave no doubt but that the author looked only to God for deliverance from all kinds of threatening situations.  Israel was encompassed by evil and idolatrous worship.  The only way the nation could survive was to focus on Yahweh.

*Enthronement* or *royal psalms* are so called for their mention of a king.  The ultimate king is Yahweh, whose rule is symbolized by the human king who sits of the throne in Jerusalem.  Similarly, songs of Zion (Jerusalem) have the rule of Yahweh and his temple in mind.  *Zion* symbolized the hope of Israel, a place where God caused his name to dwell.   Some of the psalms in this category may have been used in times of special ceremonies or in the pilgrimage of the Israelites to Jerusalem for a feast.  *Creation psalms* are those that honor God the creator, often using the created elements as the voices of praise.

Without specifically mentioning all the categories suggested above, let us give an analogy that may further illustrate the full range of the psalms found in the Psalter.  On a given day, the sky is clear, you just landed the job you always wanted, the family is healthy and at peace, and life could be no better.  This is the time of praise: "Oh Lord, how excellent is your name."  On another day, storms have

just destroyed your house, your health has failed, you have lost your job, and a child has run away from home.  This is the time for lament: "Oh Lord, I have nowhere else to turn."  On a third day, peace returns and you are on your feet again.  This is a time of thanksgiving: "Oh Lord, thank you for our daily bread."

Exegesis of scripture should be accompanied by application.  For application of Old Testament praise material into the present, some adaptation may need to take place.  The hymns may be augmented to include God's acts in Jesus Christ.  Enthronement pieces and royal psalms may need to look to the enthronement of Jesus Christ as king, in the place of a king of Judah.  Here, it may be important to analyze the meaning of "crowning" Jesus.  This prerogative is God's and not man's.  Songs of Zion, which focused on physical Jerusalem where the temple existed, may need to incorporate heaven, where Jesus is enthroned.  Praise for creation is timeless but could reflect modern knowledge of the expanse of the universe, which could only be observed with the naked eye in ancient times.

Two observations are in order.  One, exegesis begins before attempting an analysis of a particular psalm's use in later Israel.  Two, psalms represent what people said to God, not what God said to man.  These are recorded for our use.  We will therefore need to use discernment as to how we use them, for they may not be appropriate for every setting.

**b.  Praise in Job, Psalms, and Jonah.**  Praise is the lifting of one's voice to God with the intent of recognizing his worthiness for adoration.  It lends itself quite well to poetic literary form.  The primary source of praise in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Book of Psalms.  But remarkable examples appear outside the Psalms.

*Job.*  The Book of Job is concerned with human faithfulness and how that faithfulness is expressed.  We will look at Job in the next unit with reference to wisdom, but here we shall note that the composition is far more than a book concerned with the suffering of a real or supposedly real ancient man.  A key to the book lies in the prologue.  God says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?  There is none on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (1:8).  Satan responds, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9).  If Satan is right, Job's praise to God was conditional.  But true praise is more properly rooted in God's person, rather than what I have personally received from him.  It is God's character, his being, that evokes praise.  Although Job "complains" about not knowing why he has been severely afflicted, he rejected the counsel of his wife, "Are you still holding on to your integrity?  Curse God and die!" (2:9).  In spite of God's refusal to answer Job's query regarding why he was afflicted, Job acknowledges his inadequacy to stand in the presence of God and repented for his inappropriate thoughts (42:6).  Throughout the ordeal, Job's faith never wavered; his failing was in asking for an explanation.  While familiar terms like "praise" and "glorify" may be absent, the sentiment is there nonetheless.  Job praised God with his commitment.

*Psalm 100.*  We take as an illustration of a praise piece the one hundredth psalm.  First, note how parallelism works in the psalm.  Line one begins, "Shout for joy to the LORD" and continues in the second line with "Serve the LORD with gladness."  Shouting and serving are slightly different aspects of one's calling.  Joy and gladness are synonymous.  And the LORD is constant in both lines.  But that is not all.  Line 3 adds to the list by inviting people to "come before him" (*i.e.,* the LORD) "with joyful songs."  This pattern is seen throughout the psalm.  The psalm states a relationship between God and his people and this relationship says much about God, who is a caring shepherd.  The psalm mixes the idea of thanksgiving (v. 4) and praise for his goodness and love.

*Jonah.*  The book of Jonah consists of narrative broken into a first summons by God to Jonah to go to Nineveh (chap. 1) and a second call (chap. 3).  Between the accounts of the activity that occurred following each summons is the prayer of Jonah, structured as poetry.  Jonah acknowledges his foolishness, but sees redemption as coming from God.  He makes a distinction between the worship of worthless idols and his own God from who deliverance comes.  Jonah's praise stands apart somewhat from his continued wait-and-see attitude.

*Activity.*  Think of ways you may use Psalm 100 and the prayer of Jonah (Jonah 2) in your own personal experience.

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**c. Guidelines for interpreting praise.** Praise is easy to recognize. It is normally set in a context such as the Exodus or other joyous occasion. The psalms that contain much praise are recognized by their address, although a specific occasion that evokes the praise may be lacking. Psalm titles are later than the original compositions and may or may not be entirely accurate. Nonetheless, the tradition they bring to the psalm may indeed have root in an historical occasion.

When interpreting praise, you will, of course, make use of the tools of the trade. But when you interpret it for others who do not understand the literary nature of the Hebrew, some explanation may be needed. Yet, explanation cannot substitute for vibrant oral interpretative reading. Read with passion as though you are the author of the psalm but avoid sounding artificial. There is hardly anything sterile than the reading of a praise piece with the lack of expression. If a lament is to be read with feeling and deep emotion, surely praise should receive the same attention--but for a different reason.

1. The first step in interpreting praise is to observe the literary structure of the text. Biblical texts devoted to praise are normally cast in Hebrew poetic structure. Examine the structure carefully and note how the several lines relate to each other and to the whole text.

2. Note how symbolic language can give body to a praise piece. In exegesis, establish the difference between literal and figurative language. However, the figurative language should not be misinterpreted so that it lies out of harmony with what is firmly established in other texts.

3. Allow references to historical events help you understand the context of praise material.

4. Be aware of the attributes of God mentioned in the praise piece.

5. Establish the reason the piece was composed, if possible, but do not speculate beyond what the evidence supports.

6. Finally, when you exegete a praise piece, put yourself into the shoes of the author and try to grasp the meaning emotionally.


# Unit 3. Wisdom

Wisdom occupies a greater portion of the Old Testament than one might think. The several books devoted to wisdom are quite unique among themselves. The books most generally acknowledged as wisdom are Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs. However, some of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon also belong to the category.

Wisdom is concerned with making right choices. It often represents sound judgment based on experience. It provides solid counsel in a myriad of circumstances where divine and practical insight are needed. In the Bible, wisdom is sometimes personified. Perhaps the reason is because Hebrew uses only masculine and feminine genders.

Wisdom belongs to God's domain, which tends to make it unique among wisdom literature. Mankind is admonished to pay attention to it, for its neglect will bring disappointment and ruin.

Biblical wisdom may be classified by type: proverbial and non-proverbial. While proverbs make up an entire composition (Proverbs) in the Hebrew Bible, they exist in a wide variety of forms and may be found scattered throughout the Bible. Ted Hilderbrandt identifies eleven types of proverbs--instruction, admonition, numerical saying, "better-than" saying, comparative saying, abomination saying, beatitude, paradoxical saying, acrostic, popular/folk saying, and pairs.

Non-proverbial wisdom is the type of literary genre found in Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The Old Testament dispenses non-proverbial wisdom by means of several forms. These include allegory, dialogue, and riddle. Non-proverbial wisdom tends to be contradictory or reflective in nature and prefers indirect communication.

The unit is divided into three sections: (a) Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, (b) Job and the Song of Solomon, and (c) Guidelines for interpreting wisdom.  The uniqueness of each book means that the interpretation of wisdom literature is conditioned on the nature of the wisdom piece.  The guidelines are general in nature, so be aware of the purpose of a particular book.

## a.  Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

*Proverbs.*  The genre of proverb has been defined as "short experiences drawn from long experience."  A proverb is usually a short, poetically-crafted saying.

Proverbs that are long didactic discourse usually take the form of a father addressing a son.  When a proverb assumes the form of *distinction* (*i.e.,* offering a choice between different paths), it offers general advice and warnings about life.  A *comparative* proverb uses a metaphor or simile to heighten the impact of the message.  For understanding proverbial figures of speech, it is essential to note the image used, the point of contact between the image and topic, and the topic being discussed.  A blessing pronounced on an individual by someone in authority is known as a *beatitude*.  *Paradoxical* proverbs are sayings in which two descriptive elements of the proverb appear in conflict.

Keep in mind that proverbs are not promises where God guarantees the desired consequence if people will just believe.  A proverb is a generalization about life, and the truth of the statement depends on the circumstances.

*Ecclesiastes: cynical wisdom.*  Ecclesiastes offers the judgment of a person who has experienced all that life has to offer.  In his pursuits, the author was seeking meaning to life.  He did not find it in a variety of activities.  In the final analysis, the writer finds meaning only in keeping with the true nature of man in God's world.  Meaning can be found only when one enjoys the life God has given and when one lives a life that honors God.  In sum, Ecclesiastes is a collection of personal reflections composed by a Hebrew sage after musing upon the meaning of life, the finality of death, and the transcendence of God.

Younger people tend to find Ecclesiastes depressing.  Older, mature people find it on target and a solemn reminder that what the author has to say is wisdom indeed.

## b.  Job and the Song of Solomon.  The content of Job and the Song of Solomon seem to have nothing in common.  The first is about a man who is trying to find an answer from God as to the reason he is suffering, when by all measures he has been a righteous man.  The Song of Solomon is a love poem that seems to express the illusions of love.

*Wisdom in Job.* The dialogue in the book of Job establishes that what happens to a person does not always come as a consequence of having done good or evil.  The book affirms that man can never understand the workings of God, so he should trust him.  He will do what is right.  Man must be faithful.  The counsel one receives from Job is that man should accept his condition in "faith" and acknowledge that God's ways are correct, even though the reason for them may be unknowable.  The most developed example of dialogue in Hebrew wisdom is found in the book of Job.  Job is a blend or mix of several genres and speech forms, yet it lacks many literary parallels in ancient Near Eastern wisdom.

*Wisdom in the Song of Solomon.* The Song of Solomon has been described as lyric wisdom for the purpose of helping the reader know whom to love and how to love.  You should be aware that many very different interpretations have been offered for the Song of Solomon.  They cannot all be right.  When attempting to interpret the Song of Solomon, pay special attention to the genre, look for the overall ethical content, and read it in the context of the Old Testament.

*Activities*

1.  Identify the premise of the wisdom of Eliphaz (Job 4:7) and compare it with divine wisdom (Job 38:1-42:6).

2. Compare the compliments paid by the lover in Song of Sol. 4:1-7) with what would be acceptable in your culture.

**c. Guidelines for interpreting wisdom.** Hilderbrandt's guidelines for interpreting proverbs include accepting a proverb for what it is, looking for verifying examples, recognizing poetic ways that sages expressed their wisdom, looking for pairs and strings of proverbs, seeking for evidence for the setting, examining the proverb itself, and identifying the specific value the proverb is communicating. A frequent mistake when interpreting proverbial poetry is to seek a difference in meaning between two words that are being used as synonyms.

In interpreting wisdom, one should remember that it does not carry an automatic guarantee that its exercise will always have a predictable ending. For example, there is a general premise in the injunction that if a man will "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Generally, this holds true. But every individual is responsible for his own actions. Children are not robots or pre-programmed people. They may choose not to heed the warnings and instructions of a godly father. Conversely, some children turn out to be godly even under the tutelage of ungodly parents. So, the nature of wisdom is that it points in the right direction for all who will heed it.

A second principle to keep in mind is that wisdom cannot be reduced to a simple saying. It must be read within the context of other expressions of wisdom. When one proverb says, "Answer a fool according to his folly" (Prov. 26:5) and another says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly" (Prov. 26:4), the author is discussing the idea from two points of view. Answering one according to his folly may indicate something of the fool's inability to comprehend sound reasoning. On the other hand, one must not be pulled into a trap of foolishness. Hence, if one is to approximate the complexities of real life, then all the proverbs must be considered as a whole body of wisdom. Wisdom may teach a lesson by analogy from experience of daily life.

# Conclusion

We have come to the end of this study in Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures. The study has been introductory by nature and not exhaustive. But we must have closure at some point. Hopefully, you will continue studying the Hebrew Scriptures in other exegesis courses. That course will allow you to make further use of the principles learned in this course.

Preparing for examinations has a goal of a passing grade. But this is hardly the reason you have been studying. You have chosen to study so you will become more knowledgeable of the biblical text. Gratification of learning is for your personal benefit, but a more rewarding benefit is a closer walk with God.

Walking with God expresses itself in several ways. Before that walk can begin, one must face alienation from God that results from personal sins. Acknowledgment is but one step toward resolution. Faith, repentance, and immersion into Jesus Christ become the means by which one enters a new relationship with the Father. Certainly, the study of scripture serves as a means toward this end, but study is not an end in itself.

As one walks with God, study will continue. But as important as study may be, it can never substitute for the exercise of godliness. One's conduct and attitude toward one's entire environment must be reshaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ if biblical study is to be successful. Setting aside a life that is controlled by selfish desires, the Christian is clothed with righteousness.

As a parting remark, be aware that you will face many challenges in the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Commentators on a particular text and treatises on biblical topics can be helpful, but they are only as definitive as they are faithful in representing the text itself. Keep asking good questions. What evidence is there for a particular rendering of a Hebrew word in translation? Does the passage support the proposed interpretation? What implication does the passage hold for one under the covenant of Christ?

# Exegesis-Interpretation Activity

Develop an exegesis of *three* Old Testament passages.  Each exegesis shall be in formal style and developed in a single Word document.  When the task is completed, submit the document for grading.  Please use your Bible and take as much time as you need.

Each exegesis shall contain an explanation of a passage--not just a summary.  Attempt to answer the following questions in each instance:

1.  Why did the author include the material?
2.  What was the author attempting to communicate to his primary audience?

Other items or questions pertinent to the individual passages are noted below.

### Exegesis 1.  Interpreting Historical Narrative

The first passage is Gen. 22:1-19.  This is a passage that treats God's instruction to Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.  You need not summarize the account.  Instead, deal with the above two questions first.  Then, ask what meaning this passage may have for modern people.  The critic may dismiss the account by saying he cannot worship a God who commands human sacrifice.  But this is to miss the point altogether.

### Exegesis 2.  Interpreting Lament

The second passage is Psalm 22.  Aside from the fact that Jesus quoted the first line of the lament when on the cross, deal with the psalm itself.  Leave the New Testament use by Jesus for another day.  After answering the two questions above, identify the elements of the lament (address, complaint, request, expression of trust, and praise).  Interpret the psalm in view of the psalmist's own circumstance.  Finally, explain how the psalm can be helpful to a modern person.

### Exegesis 3.  Interpreting Prophetic Announcement

The third and final passage is Hab. 1:1-2:5.  Again, begin with the two questions posed above.  Then, answer these questions:

1.  What is the initial problem that caused Habakkuk to complain to God (1:2-4)?
2.  What is God's answer to Habakkuk (1:5-11)?
3.  Now, Habakkuk has another problem.  What is it (1:12-2:1)?
4.  What is God's response (2:2-5)?

Finally, show the meaning of the passage for the modern believer.

### How to Use Sources

1. Differentiate between Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources provide scholars with first-hand accounts of events.  They include letters, laws, speeches, interviews, diaries, and newspaper accounts, among others.  When you quote the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, or an interview transcript, most scholars would say you are quoting from a primary source.  Primary sources can be ancient or recent.

Secondary sources often quote, analyze, or apply primary sources.  Most articles in academic journals or popular magazines, entries in encyclopedias, textbooks, newspaper editorials, and Wikipedia entries are secondary sources.  Sometimes, these sources can be several steps away from the original source.  For example:
* A passage of Scripture (or an interview or photograph) represents an original source.

- A scholar writing an article, may comment about, analyze and interpret the Scripture.
- An encyclopedia, textbook, or Internet source may summarize the thoughts of several scholars and articles.

With the latter sources, it is possible to be two or three or more steps away from the primary source, where someone is referencing someone else who is citing someone else who is citing a primary source. It is not that secondary sources are not useful—they can be *very* useful—but it is important to recognize how far you may be from the original observation or account as you read sources.  Get as close as you can to the primary source and keep the primary source in mind as you read secondary authors.  Avoid heavily citing textbooks, encyclopedias, or Internet sources.

2. Use Authoritative Secondary Sources

At first, it may be difficult to determine whether a source or author is strong or weak or whether the viewpoint of one source fits with another.  Journals and books may sound equally credible and authors may be almost all, unknown.  With time, you will learn to differentiate these based on their argument and scholarship, in their approach and assumptions, and whether you resonate with them.  To get started:
- Note the publisher:  Book publishers publish in different niches.  Some produce academic books.  Some print books for church leaders.  Others publish devotional books.  Some are associated with a particular Christian tradition (*e.g.,* Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan).  Even if these distinctions do not mean much to you, you will begin to notice differences over time.
- Consider the journal:  Serials (*i.e.,* academic journals, practitioner journals, newspapers and magazines) differ in the same ways that book publishers do.  You will begin to detect the niche of the serial as you read the type of articles published and views advocated.  Are they primarily scholarly or practical articles?  Are they intended for a particular Christian audience?  Sometimes the roles and institutions of the authors can give you a sense of the nature of the journal.

Do your best to cite authoritative sources.  Although some articles are excellent, generally avoid relying on Wikipedia, non-scholarly Internet sources and magazines, and sources of questionable reputation.  Unfortunately, Wikipedia tries to avoid original sources in favor of hearsay and opinion.

**Example of Exegesis**

## Psalm 1

### Introduction

The Psalter contains a variety of "praise" material that can be classified into multiple categories.

Whether it occurs as a constituent part of a lament, accompanies thanksgiving, or marks the climax of

historical drama, praise is the centerpiece of biblical scripture.  Praise elements are not limited to the

Psalter, but the Psalter contains the largest collection of praise in the entire Bible.  The Psalter is only

moderately organized, indicating that strict order or classification was never intentional.  The loose

arrangement of the Psalms suggests that they may be best understood as stand-alone compositions.

That has not kept some interpreters from stating that Psalm 1 is deliberately placed at the head of the

Psalter (the biblical collection of individual psalms) as a kind of "introduction."  Placement, however,

appears to have no bearing on either exegesis or application.  The exegesis proposes to draw out the inherent meaning of Psalm 1 in view of making a significant personal impact on the modern reader.

**Body**

**Preliminary to exegesis.**  Psalm 1 is composed in classic Hebrew poetic writing.  Consequently, exegesis is obliged to honor the rules of engagement with this genre.  This is the starting point for exegeting the psalm.

The psalm demonstrates a variety of ways "parallelism" was used in the development of many Old Testament compositions.  For example, the lead statement, "Blessed is the man" is followed by three statements relative to this blessing. He does not walk, stand, or sit among the wicked, sinners, or mockers (1:1).  Verse 1 is found to be parallel to verses 2-3 by way of contrast.  The blessed man does not act in a certain way (v. 1) but acts in different manner (v. 2).  Further, he is likened to a fruitful tree (written in parallel lines) (v. 3).  In contrast to the blessed man, parallel lines are used to describe the wicked (vv. 4-5).  Even this description is presented in parallel expressions.  As the psalm continues, more variety is seen in the use of parallel construction.  The wicked are "like chaff that the wind blows away" (v. 4), making them liable for judgment.  Verse 5 contains two parallel lines.  The term "wicked" is synonymous with "sinners."  They will not be justified when it comes to judgment; neither will they be found in the assembly of the righteous—parallel expressions.  Finally, verse 6 brings the drama to a climax: "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."  Not only does the line contrast the *righteous* with the *wicked,* it contrasts their destiny.  The LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked has no such protection and hence perishes.

**Exegesis.**  In verse 1, the blessed person is introduced as one filled with joy at the thought of fixating on the instruction of God.  Since the blessedness connects with divine concentration, it is doubtful if the author is saying that one is guaranteed earthly pleasure if one will only meditate on scripture for a period of time.  The type of blessedness under consideration is a measure of comfort that comes from a relationship with God—happiness from a divine point of view.  The triple reference to

walk-stand-seat, counsel-way-seat, and wicked-sinners-mockers is for emphasis. Whether the author intended to indicate a progression into evil is speculative. The larger picture focuses on the fact that the blessed person concentrates on righteousness. He delights in the law and he meditates on the law constantly.

"Law" in Hebrew is *torah,* which is best translated into English as "instruction" rather than statutory law. Obviously, *torah* embraces statutes, but the emphasis is not on law-keeping. It is on the blessed life that comes from paying attention to divine instruction. Divine instruction enlightens one on the nature of God and the life that accrues when the human reflects that nature in his/her own life, for this is the intended life of the creature. So, the crucial matter is not blind obedience but transformation of spirit and action. Walking, standing, sitting with the wicked is the antithesis.

To illustrate the life of the blessed, the author of the psalm pulls from nature the example of a tree that is well-watered and healthy. The righteous man is like that tree. Hence, "whatever he does prospers" (v. 3). As with "happiness," the "blessed" will "prosper." But prospering need not necessarily refer to financial gain and success but to spiritual prosperity or maturity. In contrast, the wicked may prosper financially, but eventually all will be lost to him. The righteous man loses nothing of eternal value.

Because the blessed person models his/her life after the nature of his Creator, he/she will be approved or justified. The person who chooses evil conduct (*i.e.,* thoughts and actions that are antagonistic to the intention of God) will face divine condemnation. He/she will perish, cease to enjoy what brought temporary satisfaction. There is no need to read into the psalm anything more about the final judgment, resurrection, heaven, or hell. These are not subjects addressed in the psalm.

**Application.** Exegesis deals with the text as it stands. It has no legitimate reason to extend the meaning unless there is sound reason supported by other texts. Even then, it may be better to concentrate on the passage at hand than to seek justification for an alternate reading or to ignore the implications of the text. One is better served by applying the force of the passage than speculating on

other matters.  So, for application in the modern world, this psalm should be taken as encouragement to righteousness and warning about employing evil means to find fulfillment.

The modern person is well-advised to attend to the basic instruction of Psalm 1.  It sets forth two ways: the way to life and the way to death.  It delineates between real and imagined "blessedness."  It points to the purpose of life as intended by the Creator.

To be blessed is a spiritual state where a person feels liberated from anger, resentment, and all sorts of evil intentions.  The unblessed person is one who seeks personal gain through sinister pursuits.  Resources are to be gotten rather than shared.  Reputation, social status, personal aggrandizement, self-centered ways are preferred over honesty that often lead to false accusations and character assassination.

The psalm also points to the source of blessedness—divine instruction.  If the Scriptures are approached with the mind to know God, blessedness and true prosperity are freely available.  If they are shunned, disrespected, neglected, or misinterpreted, access to blessedness will be lost.

### Conclusion

Psalm 1 stands at the head of the Book of Psalms—the Psalter.  Being one of 150 psalms in the collection, Psalm 1 is well-suited for its position.  It punctuates the ideal present throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: God created man in his own image and provides the means for man to realize the blessedness that accrues from a spiritual relationship with his Creator.  In assuming this ideal, the intent of its author may be several-fold.  First, he appears to state what should have been known by all Israelites.  Under covenant with Yahweh, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would have understood the meaning of taking The Torah seriously.  But they needed constant reminders of the dangers of drifting away from God.  The author made his appeal to righteous living through a simple statement of contrasting destinies.  Although the word "praise" may not be explicit, it is implied.  Man's delight in the law of Yahweh and his meditation on divine instruction bring him into a position of praise.

The acceptance of this "praise" is indicated with the words, "the Lord watches over the way of the righteous."

## Acknowledgements