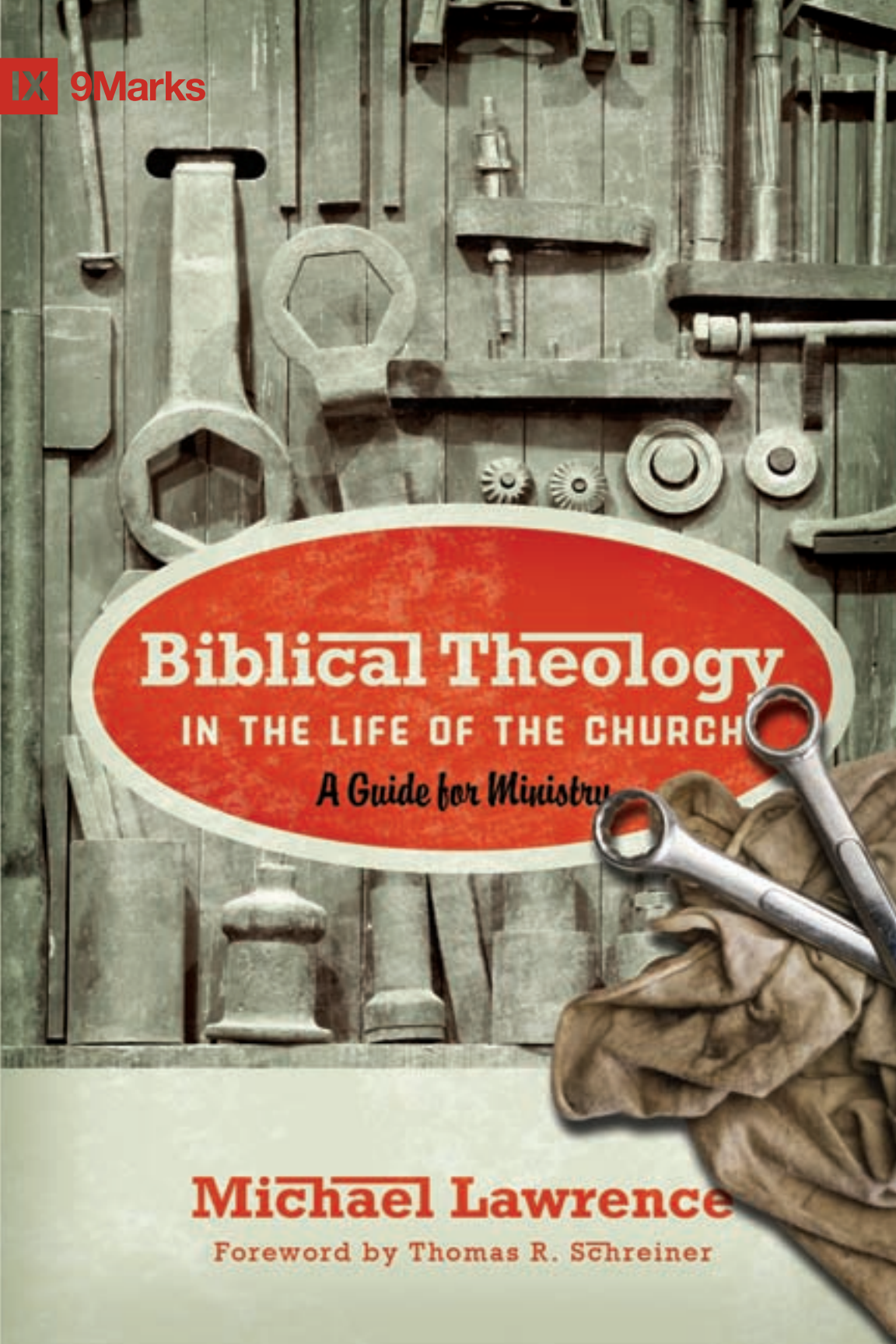
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Biblical Theology
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH
A Guide for Ministry
Michael Lawrence
Foreword by Thomas R. Schreiner

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INTRODUCTION

The Text to Be Examined

As church leaders, you and I are faced with problems and questions every day that require us to turn to the Bible for answers, guidance, and wisdom. Along with prayer, the Bible is the most important and the most fundamental tool we've been given for the work of pastoral ministry. If you've been doing ministry for any length of time, you've probably grown quite familiar with this tool. You know your way around all sixty-six books. You have favorite passages you turn to again and again—the twenty-third Psalm for hospital visits, Romans 8 for the discouraged and hard-pressed Christian, John 3 for evangelistic conversations, Nehemiah for lessons on leadership, Isaiah 6 for the young person considering a call to ministry. You wouldn't dream of walking into a church meeting or a hospital room without a Bible in hand.

But for all your familiarity with the Bible, when was the last time you thought about what this powerful tool is that you're holding in your hand? Sure, it's a collection of sixty-six inspired books. And yes, it records for us the history of ancient Israel, the ministry of Jesus Christ, and the founding of the Christian church. But, taken as a whole rather than in individual parts, how do you answer the question, "What is the Bible?"

The Importance of Definitions

The answer I'm really concerned with isn't the one you learned in seminary or Sunday school, but your working answer. I'm asking how you use the Bible day in and day out in your ministry because that will show you and me what you really think the Bible is.[1]

[1]In putting it this way, I am not meaning to imply that function determines meaning or authority. Postliberals (for one example, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984]) have argued that the Bible *is* Scripture because it *functions* that way in the church. But in contrast to that view, the point of this book is that precisely because the Bible *is* the inspired and inerrant record of God's redemptive activity in history, revealing his purposes and his character, it should *function* for us as both normative and sufficient Scripture. Functionality for ministry therefore arises from and is constrained by ontology, not the other way around.

For example, when I pick up a hammer, I don't think of it in the technical terms of its material construction or component parts. I think of it as something that will help me drive a nail into a wall, and use it accordingly. On the other hand, I have chopsticks scattered all over my house, but I don't always think of them as eating utensils. It turns out they are just the right size to release the locks on bedroom and bathroom doors when one of my younger children has accidently locked himself or herself in. Functionally, those chopsticks have become keys, regardless of their proper definition.

It's no different with the Bible. Regardless of the correct definition, your working definition will determine how you use it. Sometimes that means you'll use it as intended, the way I use a hammer. But sometimes that means you'll misuse it, the way I misuse chopsticks. And while no real harm comes from my misuse of chopsticks, we all know that real harm can result from the misuse—the misapplication—of a tool as powerful as the Bible.

Two Possible Answers

So what is the Bible? My own church's statement of faith provides one possible answer, one that I think many of us tend to use. In our very first article of faith, we affirm that the Bible is "a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction," that "it reveals principles by which God will judge us," and therefore is "the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried."[2] I think every single one of those statements is true, but notice their emphasis. The Bible is a collection of instructions, principles, and standards. To put it in more colloquial terms, the Bible is an "answer book" for life's problems or a compendium of principles by which to live and die. But is this definition adequate for ministry?

Let's take that definition of the Bible and apply it to a question the elders of my church recently faced. A family was considering making a large capital purchase. Yet to provide the required down payment, they would have had to alter their tithe to the church for a short period. They hoped to make it up to the church later, but there was no guarantee they could. They came to us for advice.

If the Bible is fundamentally an answer book, then we'll expect to find a verse or passage that gives this family the counsel they need. But which passage do we turn to? Malachi 3:10—"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse"—seems to provide an answer, but then what do we do with

[2]*The New Hampshire Confession*, Article I, "Of the Scriptures" (rev., 1853), adopted by Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, at its incorporation on February 28, 1878. For the full text of the confession see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 361–367.

2 Corinthians 9:7? "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Consider also the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Does the story mean we should have warned this family, or is it just a story about what happened to two people in Jerusalem in a unique time of the church's life with no normative implications for our lives? As you can see, the "answer book" approach to the Bible raises a host of questions before we even get to the answer we're looking for.

Another possible answer to the question, "What is the Bible?" is that it's a story, a narrative of God's interaction with the world he made. Though there are lots of people in this story, it's fundamentally about what God has done and will do to bring this world to judgment and his people to salvation. According to this working definition, the Bible reveals the plan of salvation and how God has accomplished that plan, first through Israel and finally through Jesus Christ. Is this definition more useful for ministry than the previous one?

Let's apply it to the question we just considered. If the Bible is merely, or mostly, the story of God's saving actions in history, then beyond trusting in Christ for their salvation, rather than in worldly riches, it doesn't have much to say to their question. We might refer them to Luke 16 and the story of Lazarus and the rich man, or to Hebrews 11 and the character of faith which looks forward to "a better country—a heavenly one." But at the end of the day, unless we revert to the answer book approach or to pragmatic wisdom, this definition of the Bible leaves us with very little to say to the family which wants to know if they can delay their tithe in order to purchase property. As you can see, the story of salvation approach to the Bible may be faithful to the main point, but it also seems to contradict 2 Peter 1:3, where we are promised that we have been given "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

A Better Definition

So what should we do? What we need is a better understanding of what the Bible is, one that doesn't reduce it to life's little answer book, but keeps the focus on God, where it belongs. But we also need an understanding that doesn't reduce it to the story of how we get saved and go to heaven, leaving the rest of life up for grabs. We need a working definition of the Bible that allows for systematic answers to almost any question that comes up, but that also provides those answers in the context of the biblical storyline itself. We don't want to rip verses out of their context, and so misapply

them, but neither do we want a story that never touches down into the nitty-gritty of our lives.

Biblical theology helps us establish that better understanding of what the Bible is. When we talk about biblical theology, we mean a theology that not only tries to systematically understand what the Bible teaches, but to do so in the context of the Bible's own progressively revealed and progressively developing storyline. Faithful biblical theology attempts to demonstrate what systematic theology assumes: that the Scriptures are not an eclectic, chaotic, and seemingly contradictory collection of religious writings, but rather a single story, a unified narrative that conveys a coherent and consistent message. Thus biblical theology is concerned not just with the moral of the story, but the telling of the story, and how the very nature of its telling, its unfolding, shapes our understanding of its point.

Now, this doesn't mean that biblical theology is prior to systematic theology, or that it's more important or more faithful to the Bible than systematic theology. In fact, as we're going to see, biblical theology assumes and depends upon a number of things demonstrated by systematic theology: things like the infallibility and inerrancy of revelation as it comes to us in Scripture, the objectivity of the knowledge of God through revelation, and the trustworthiness of inspiration.

Everything that follows is intended to help you construct a faithful and sound biblical theology. Once you have that, you'll have a functional definition of the Bible that allows you to speak powerfully from God's Word into the lives of people like the couple we just considered. In the next few chapters, we'll look at the tools of biblical and systematic theology and how they work together. Then we're going to spend five chapters actually doing biblical theology—telling the whole story of the whole Bible and demonstrating how that story touches down into the details of our lives. Then we'll wrap up with two chapters that explore the use of biblical theology in the life of the church, from preaching, to counseling and discipling, to missions, to our understanding of the relationship between the church and our culture.

The Character of Divine Revelation[3]

That said, there are several features of God's revelation of his truth in the Bible that I want to discuss here. These features determine how we go about studying the Bible and constructing a biblical theology. There are four main characteristics of God's self-revelation as it is recorded in the Bible that we

[3]This section draws heavily from Geerhardus Vos's *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975).

need to understand if we're going to understand the Bible and its teaching correctly, as opposed to misinterpreting and misapplying the text.[4] You'll notice that in this section, I'm speaking of revelation as "divine activity" in history, rather than as the inscripturated record of those divine actions, what we call the Bible.[5] God's self-revealing actions precede his self-explanatory words. This book is all about how to understand and apply those words to life. But to do that we first want to understand the character of how God has acted in history to reveal himself.

First, God's revelation is progressive. Islam understands that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed all at once, miraculously lowered down from heaven. The sacred texts of Buddhism and Confucianism are confined to the lifetime of a single man. But the Bible was not written in a moment, or even in a single lifetime. The Bible was written over two millennia, as God progressively revealed more and more of himself and his story. That's because the Bible, as we've already said, isn't the revelation of a set of principles, but the revelation of Redemption. And God's redemption, his salvation of his people, occurs both in history and over the course of history. Thousands of years separate God's act of creation from his future act of new creation. In between, humanity falls into sin and God acts to save sinners and then to explain those saving acts. We can point to the exodus and conquest of Canaan; the exile and then return of Israel; and ultimately the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible is both the record of God's saving acts and the explanation of them and therefore of necessity has a progressive historical character.

Second, God's revelation is not only progressive, it is fundamentally historical in character. So, for example, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are objective events in history that not only reveal something about God and redemption, but actually accomplish redemption. The Bible therefore is not merely a story told by humans about God's salvation of them; it is a story enacted and then explained by God about God. There is a God-centered focus in all of this as God objectively and concretely invades human history and acts to redeem his people to his own glory. Thus, in biblical theology we speak of redemptive history.

Third, there is an organic nature to this progressive revelation of God and his redemptive plan. It doesn't simply proceed like a construction site, which moves progressively from blueprint to finished building. Rather it unfolds and develops from seed-form to full-grown tree. In seed form,

[4]Ibid., 5–9.
[5]Ibid., 5.

the minimum and beginning of saving revelation is given. By the end, that simple truth has revealed itself as complex and rich, multilayered and profoundly beautiful. It's this character of revelation that's going to help us understand the typological character of Scripture, the dynamic of promise and fulfillment, and the presence of both continuity and discontinuity across redemptive history.

Fourth, God's revelation in history, and therefore biblical theology, is practical. God's intent in revelation is not to stimulate us intellectually, but to lead us into a saving relationship with God. So don't think that biblical theology is just for history and literature buffs. Far from it. If revelation is the story of God's saving acts, a story that begins at the beginning and ends at the end, then it's a story that contains our lives and our age, and therefore is extremely practical.

The Character of the Bible

If this is the character of revelation that is going to shape our approach to biblical theology, what specifically does this mean for the Bible? Just what kind of text are we looking at? I want to highlight five things about the Bible that we're going to come back to again and again. These characteristics of Scripture are going to determine how we study it. They're also going to shape what we expect the outcome of our study to be.

1) Historical/Human

First, the Bible was written by humans who lived in particular times of history. Second Peter 1:19–21 says,

> And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Most of the time people turn to this verse to demonstrate the divine character of Scripture—and we'll do that in a minute. But, quite significantly, it also clearly speaks to the historical and human character of the Bible. It refers to prophets as men who spoke, and by implication wrote, the Bible. When men speak, they use human language. That language both creates and reflects the culture they live in. So Isaiah spoke and wrote in ancient Hebrew, and used images like "soaring on wings like eagles," not "soaring

on wings like jet planes"! What's more, as we've already mentioned, the various human authors of Scripture lived in a variety of cultures over the course of dozens of centuries. They didn't all speak the same language, live in the same place under the same government, or structure their families the same way.

Practically, what this means is that the Bible is an intensely human book. And to understand it, we have to understand the languages and cultures and contexts of the various authors. We can't assume that what we mean by a word or poetic image is what they would have meant. We're going to have to engage in grammatical, literary, and even cultural study if we're going to avoid reading into the Bible our own ideas and culture. We want to do exegesis, not eisegesis. We want to read out of the text, not into the text, and so in the first chapter we're going to look more closely at the exegetical tools of biblical theology.

Don't start worrying that you need several degrees in theology to really understand your Bible. The human and historical character of the Bible doesn't merely imply distance from us as people who live in a different time and place. It also implies continuity with us, because this was written by people, not angels. Sure, they may have spoken different languages and eaten different food. But underneath the real cultural differences, they, like us, are people made in the image of God, with the same fears and hopes and problems and capacities that we have. Across the gulf of time, we can relate to the human authors as people, and they to us. What's more, what God did for them can also apply to us.

2) Divine

Not only is the Bible a human book, it is also a divine book. As 2 Peter 1:19–21 points out, behind the various human authors and prophets stood God, who through his Holy Spirit inspired the prophets to say exactly what he wanted them to say. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16, "all Scripture is God-breathed."

This is the doctrine of inspiration, a doctrine that doesn't mean God blanked out the minds and personalities of the human authors and used them like a keyboard. Rather it is the Scripture's own description of itself, as the product of the Holy Spirit working sovereignly through the human author. This has several implications. To begin with, it means that what the Bible says, God says. So the Scriptures are not simply people's religious musings of what God might be like. Rather, it is God's self-revelation.

Second, it means that the Bible is infallible (trustworthy) and iner-

rant (without error) in all that it affirms and all that it intends to say. No doubt there are many things the Bible doesn't even speak to. No doubt the human authors were sinners just like us. But the text they produced, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has the entirely trustworthy and perfect character of the divine author.

Third, it means that despite the plethora of human authors, behind the text of Scripture stands a single divine author, a single mind and will. Why does this matter? Not only does it mean that we will not find contradiction (though we may find mystery), it means that we should expect to find unity and coherence to the overarching story. The human authors may not have been able to see it at the time of their writing, but the divine author could and did see the whole story, and wrote it so that it all fits together.

Here is the basis for understanding the typological, promise-fulfillment character of Scripture, which we will discuss further in coming chapters. So, for example, it's not that New Testament writers, trying to explain Jesus, noticed certain similarities to David, and exploited them for their own purpose. It's that God created David and sovereignly ordered his life so that he would be a picture and promise of a greater King to come. This is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 10:11: "These things happened to them [providential control of history] as examples [typology] and were written down [inspiration] as warnings for us [application], on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come [progressive redemptive history]."

Far from being an eclectic, rag-tag collection of other people's religious experience, the Bible is God's story of God's actions in history to save sinners for his own glory. It is a single, coherent story, planned and executed and recorded by a single omnipotent, omniscient God.

3) A Narrative

One of the clear implications of what I've just said is that the Bible as a whole is best understood as a narrative. This is not to say that narrative is the only genre in the Bible. Far from it. The Bible is composed not only of historical narrative, but also of various genres such as poetry, law, apocalyptic, letters, and gospels. Having said that, the Bible as a whole is in fact best understood as a single story. A story about a King, a kingdom, and the King's relationship with his subjects. Richard Gaffin put it this way: "[The Bible] is not so much divinely given *gnosis* to provide us with knowledge concerning the nature of God, man and the world as it is divinely inspired

interpretation of God's activity of redeeming men so that they might worship and serve him in the world."[6]

But this narrative of God's activity is not simply a story. It's a story that starts at the beginning of history and ends at the end of history. This means it's not an ancient story from the past, but a once and future story that encompasses us today. Scholars would call it a metanarrative; a story that explains everything and so provides us with a worldview. What we need to understand is that this narrative is intended by God to envelop us and redefine us. It provides us with a way of understanding reality that is different from the narratives that our fallen culture provides. This connection of narrative with reality is important. The narrative of Scripture is not meant to be merely inspiring, so that we can cope with the difficult reality of our lives. No, the narrative of Scripture was inspired in order to let us know what reality really is. Biblical theology, as it arises from Scripture, provides a framework, a fabric of meaning for our lives; it allows us to see with new eyes, and that begins with the way we view ourselves. It's not just that we interpret the Bible. The Bible interprets us, by declaring what the main events of reality are, and then telling us to read ourselves in light of that story.

I said that this story is the story of a King and his kingdom. That means this story doesn't just interpret us, it exercises authority over us. It's not merely a descriptive account of reality. The narrative of Scripture has a normative, or authoritative, function in our lives and over our churches. Now exactly how we determine that normative function requires that we pay attention to where in the narrative we are, and how the part we occupy relates to other parts. It requires us to keep in mind the central themes of the story, and the progressive nature of that story. Yet when we do those things, we discover a story that challenges our tendencies to reduce Christianity to a limited set of doctrinal propositions and instead claims the totality of our lives under the Lordship of the King.

4) Structured by Covenants

The story of any kingdom is in part the story of the relationship between a king and his subjects. In Scripture, this relationship is defined and structured according to covenants. Covenants are not merely contracts or promises. Rather, covenants are relationships under authority, with both obligations and rewards. The terms and benefits of the relationship are

[6]Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Introduction," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), xvii.

spelled out, and so are the consequences if the relationship is broken. But what is perhaps most significant about biblical covenants is that when God enters into a covenant, he must condescend to initiate it, he sets the terms, he provides the benefits, and he executes the judgment when the covenant is broken.

In the ancient Near East, in the second millennium BC, the time of Abraham and Moses, international relations were governed by treaties between great kings and vassal, or lesser, kings. These treaties took the form of covenants, in which the great king promised his protection and blessing in return for the vassal king's loyalty and obedience. So long as the vassal obeyed, he would enjoy the great king's favor. But when the vassal broke the terms of the covenant, the great king would bring a swift and final judgment. What's more, the vassal stood as a mediator or representative for his entire people. So his obedience or disobedience did not merely affect him, but all those who stood under him as their representative.

In the providence of God, Moses was inspired to write the first five books of the Old Testament at a time when this covenantal structure was widely known and recognized. In condescension to human understanding, God used this covenantal structure to reveal his own relationship as the great King to the people he had made in his own image to rule over the earth as vice-regents, vassal kings to the great King of heaven.

We'll look more closely at the various covenants God made and how they help to structure the unfolding story of God's redemptive plan in chapters 2 and 3. Most of the covenants you may already be familiar with: the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, or the Mosaic Covenant and the Davidic covenant. There are even more, and we'll talk about them. But here I want to briefly introduce the distinction between two types of covenant in the Bible: a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.

A covenant of works is exactly what it sounds like. Blessings are offered in return for works performed. Failure to perform the works leads to the covenant curses. This was pretty much the standard covenant of the ancient Near East, and we see this type of covenant clearly displayed with Adam and with Moses. Do this, and you'll live; do that, and you'll die.

But there is another kind of covenant in the Bible. In this covenant, it's not the vassal king that must perform a work in order to receive the great King's blessing. Instead, the great King himself undertakes to secure the blessing for the vassal, and risks the penalties himself should the covenant be broken. This is called a covenant of grace, and it's beautifully pictured

in the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15. It's also the character of the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the gospel.

As we try to interpret and apply the Scriptures, one of the basic questions we'll have to ask is, in what covenantal period—in what epoch of God's redemptive activity—is this particular text found? How does the text function in that covenant? And what is my relationship to that covenant?

5) The Center: God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment[7]

The grace of God in the gospel through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ not only describes the climax of the covenants but the climax of God's redemptive acts in history. It also brings us, finally, to the point and center of gravity of the story. Since this story is the story of redemption, it's quite easy to fall into the habit of thinking that that the point of the story is me, or us: the people being redeemed. But that would be a misreading of the story. Though we benefit immeasurably from this story, the center and point of the story is God and his glory (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).

This does not mean God is some sort of giant, preening, celestial peacock, impressed with himself in narcissistic obsession. In fact, the display of God's glory in Scripture is filled with irony. For though God's glory is seen in his ability to save, that salvation comes only through judgment. And that judgment is borne by himself, in the person of his own Son. It is in the cross that God's glory is seen, in the suffering and sacrifice of him who is most worthy for those who are not worthy at all.

Here is the grace of God, and the glory of God, as he walks through those animals cut in two, as he provides a ram for Abraham's son, Isaac, and as he provides a Passover lamb for the Israelites. All this that he provided for his people was but a picture and foretaste of his ultimate provision: his one and only beloved Son, Jesus, sacrificed on the cross for sinners, bearing the judgment they deserved, that God's glory might be displayed in salvation and mercy, even as he met the demands of justice himself.

Conclusion

What then are the practical "how-tos" from this chapter? Just as a carpenter needs to know what kind of wood he's working on, we have begun by considering the material that we're to use in the work of biblical theology. In the Bible we find a divinely inspired text written by human beings at

[7]I am indebted to Jim Hamilton for the idea of "the glory of God in salvation through judgment" as the center of gravity for biblical theology. He works this idea out in greater scope and detail than I present in this section in James Hamilton, "The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006): 57–84.

different points of history, which, nonetheless, sustains one overarching narrative that's structured by covenants and focuses on the glory of God.

When we come to interpret this text and consider its relevance for pastoral ministry, therefore, we want to keep these things in mind. We should ask where in the storyline any given passage falls. We should ask how it displays God's glory. We should also ask where the person to whom we are ministering falls in the storyline. Finally, we'll ask what relevance it has for him or her.

So let's come back, briefly, to the question I began this chapter with, the couple's question of whether it's okay with God to delay their tithe in order to make a large purchase. We haven't even looked at the tools we'll need to answer this question, but you should already sense that the words about tithing in Malachi 3:10 need to be understood in their Old Testament context and how that relates to our own New Testament context before we apply the verse to the lives of New Testament believers. Yet I hope you can also see that we should expect the Bible to have something to say to believers and their stewardship of the resources that God has given them. We don't have a straightforward answer book. But neither are we left to our own devices, or the worldly advice of a financial planner. God's grand drama of redemption includes the humble stories of our lives as aliens and strangers following Christ to a better country.

CHAPTER ONE

Exegetical Tools: Grammatical-Historical Method

I began this book by promising a "how-to" guide for ministry, one that would result in really useful theology. But so far, what I've mainly given you is definition and foundation. We've said that biblical theology is not merely theology that finds its source in the Bible, but a theology that attempts to make sense of the Bible as a whole. We've also said that the Bible is not just a collection of inspired religious books written by various prophets and apostles, but that it's a single story, a coherent narrative of the redemptive acts of God. This single story has God as its author, its primary actor, and its center, and the climax of this story is the glory of God in salvation through judgment. And yet, it is an emphatically practical story, since it encompasses the humble realities that define each of our lives.

But with this chapter, I mean to begin to make good on my promise of practical help. After all, as soon as we define the Bible as we have, we are confronted with a problem. How can we be sure that we're reading and understanding the story correctly? For that matter, how can we be sure that we're reading and understanding the various *parts* of the story correctly? Let's set aside for a moment the incredible idea that we could understand the mind and purposes and, therefore, the Word of God. How can we be confident that we can accurately understand the words of a Hebrew prophet living and writing three thousand years ago? Aren't words, human words, much less divine words, incredibly slippery and malleable? Isn't the meaning of a text an incredibly subjective idea? I mean, unless an author is present to tell us what he meant, who's to say that one interpretation of a text is better or more accurate or more faithful or more meaningful than another?

I'm going to consider below some of the technical aspects of this problem, but let me start by illustrating this in a context where many of us oper-

ate every week: youth ministry. Every Wednesday morning, I lead the sixth grade boys' devotions at my children's school. We're slowly working our way through the Gospel of Mark. To keep them engaged, as well as to teach them how to study the Bible on their own, I don't teach a lesson. Instead I ask them to read the passage out loud, and then I ask them questions about the text they just read. Almost all of my questions can be answered from the text itself, or the immediate context. They are not always easy questions, but they are always questions that arise from the passage we read.

The boys are bright, motivated, talkative, and happy to be there. They go through similar exercises in their literature class, so they're familiar with the process. But every Wednesday morning, several boys will quickly blurt out answers without even really looking at the text. These quick answers invariably fall into one of several categories. There's the Sunday school answer—whatever the question, the answer must be Jesus, the cross, sin, or some combination of them all. There's the "I heard my pastor/parent/Sunday school teacher say . . ." answer. This really isn't an answer at all, but an appeal to authority so they don't have to personally think about it. But the most common answer by far always begins, "I think it means . . ." When I respond to this answer by asking them to show where their idea came from in the text, as often as not I get a blank stare or a confused mumble, as if I've just asked them something crazy, like which sixth grade girl they like best! By sixth grade, many of them have decidedly, if unconsciously, adopted the attitude that the meaning of religious texts is a profoundly private affair that needs no further justification than their own sincerely held belief. If this is the case in sixth grade morning devotions, it is even more the case in the small group Bible studies populated by the adults of your church and mine.

The Problem of Meaning

If you're at all familiar with current discussions of theories of interpretation, what scholars call "hermeneutics," you'll know that, these days, many are quite skeptical about our ability to know with any precision what an author meant when he wrote something, unless we have direct access to that author. Distance and discontinuity between author and reader in language and culture, historical context and even personal experiences, it is said, effectively cut the reader off from knowing objectively and certainly what the author meant. For some, that's caused a real crisis. For others, it's been cause for celebration. For them, the loss of what we call the "author's original intent" means that finally we can be honest in our reading and

acknowledge that we use texts for our own purposes, to mean what we want them to mean.

Meaning now no longer needs to be cleverly and dishonestly attached to the author's mind, but can simply be the meaning that the reading community finds there. What meaning do they find? They find the meaning that they need, the meaning that they want, the meaning that seems reasonable in light of their own context. In effect, this modern approach to interpretation, based on the supposed inaccessibility of the author's intent, means that there is no such thing as an authoritative text or interpretation, only an authoritative community. For thousands of years, societies have served texts, both sacred and political, usually to the benefit of those in power and to the detriment of minorities and the oppressed. Now, with what is known as the hermeneutical turn, there has been a great liberation. We don't serve texts anymore. The text serves us.[1]

Now, of course, there are some areas where this idea has not caught on. Most parties to written contracts want to insist that the contract has a stable and accessible meaning. But in other areas of law, especially constitutional law, as well as politics more generally, ethics and religion, and especially modern pop culture, this way of thinking, known as postmodernism, has taken hold with a vengeance and breathed a new and dangerous life into old fashioned relativism.

All of this brings me back to the question I posed earlier. If the Bible is a story with God as its author, but a story whose component parts are texts written by people in different languages, cultures, and historical periods, how can we be sure that we're reading the story correctly? Is there even such a thing as a correct reading?

In fact, there is such a thing as a correct meaning of a text, precisely because God, who created this world, our brains, and thus our ability to use language, is himself a speaking God. It was God who created rationality and language so that language could accurately convey meaning from one mind to another mind. And he himself proved this not only by acting in history, but also by condescending to use human language to authoritatively explain and interpret his own actions. We see this again and again on the pages of Scripture—God not only sends the ten plagues against Egypt, he speaks to Moses and Aaron explaining what he is doing. God not only parts

[1]I was first introduced to this idea as an undergraduate studying English literature in the 1980s. While the post-structuralism and anti-foundationalism of Derrida, Foucault, Fish, and others have gone through considerable critique and development since then, the inaccessibility of the author's original intent and its irrelevance as an authoritative source of meaning continues to be a fundamental characteristic of the postmodern experience of interpretation. For an excellent, brief introduction and survey of this movement, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 57–92.

the Red Sea, he speaks and explains what he's about to do and why. God not only makes Israel into a nation, he speaks audibly to the whole nation from Mount Sinai, telling them so.

I could continue to multiply examples, but perhaps most telling is the incarnation of Christ himself. When God decided to definitively reveal himself once and for all, he didn't send angels or miraculous signs and wonders in the sky. He became a man and spoke to us in a language that people could understand. As the author to the Hebrews put it, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). And to make absolutely clear that we should listen to his Son, not once but twice God spoke from heaven, first at Jesus' baptism, and then again at his transfiguration. This is the conclusion Peter drew:

> We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:16–19)

What this means is that words, when placed in sentences and paragraphs, convey meaning. And not just any meaning. They convey the meaning of the author who constructed the sentence and the paragraph, as a reflection of his authorial intent. As readers of words, and particularly as readers of God's Word, our obligation—and privilege—is to read in such a way as to recover and understand the meaning the author wanted to communicate.

Now of course, you read this way all the time, every day of your life. When you pick up a newspaper or magazine article, your goal is not to read your own ideas into the story. You're trying to understand what the person is saying. You may go on to reject it or be inspired by it. You may think it was well-written or poorly written. You might think of all sorts of application for your newfound knowledge that the author hadn't considered at all. But regardless of what you do with what you've read, the first thing you do, quite naturally, is look for the author's original intent. And when you do that, you are engaged in the process of exegesis.

Exegesis is the disciplined attempt to lead out of a text the author's original intent, rather than my own preference or experience or opinion.

Jerome, who knew Greek and Hebrew long after most people had forgotten both and could only read Latin, put it this way in the late fourth century: "The office of a commentator is to set forth not what he himself would prefer, but what his author says."[2]

So all of you, every day, are exegetes of the texts you read, from recipes to instruction manuals, from *Sports Illustrated* to your favorite blog. You're also exegetes of Scripture. Yet while exegeting the newspaper is nearly automatic, since it's written in our own language and culture, exegeting Scripture requires a more conscious approach. It's written in other languages and at other times, and so we must take even greater care not to misread it. What we're going to do in the rest of this chapter, first, is to look at the method of exegesis known as the grammatical-historical method. Second, we'll provide a brief overview of the various literary forms or genres that make up the Bible. And third, we'll examine how we apply our method to those various genres.

Grammatical-Historical Method

The basic method of exegesis that we use to determine an author's original intent has come to be known as the grammatical-historical method. John Owen described it this way:

> There is no other sense in it [Scripture] than what is contained in the words whereof materially it doth consist . . . In the interpretation of the mind of anyone, it is necessary that the words he speaks or writes be rightly understood; and this we cannot do immediately unless we understand the language wherein he speaks . . . the [idiom] of that language, with the common use of and intention of its . . . expressions.[3]

Discerning the meaning of the text in this way immediately plunges us into an exploration and study of the grammar, syntax, and literary and historical context of the words we're reading—thus the phrase: grammatical-historical method.

Now in discovering the author's original intent, we need to avoid what is known as the "intentional fallacy." That's the idea that through the text, we can somehow get beyond the text into the thought world, feelings, and unexpressed intentions of the author. In fact, we don't have access to the author's psyche or motives, unless he explicitly expresses those things through his words. The mind, and therefore the meaning, that we have

[2]Jerome, *Letters,* "To Pammachius" 17.
[3]John Owen, *Works*, IV, 215, quoted in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 101.

access to is the expressed mind, the mind that has revealed itself through the words on the page.[4]

However, in focusing on words, we have to recognize that words, by themselves, don't mean anything in particular. We may know that the word "ball" has a range of possible meanings, but until I put the word "ball" into a sentence, and then that sentence into a paragraph, you can't be certain what I mean by the word. For example, think about at what point the meaning of the word "ball" becomes unambiguous in the following paragraph:

> We had a ball. Everyone came in their fanciest clothes and danced the night away. But since Cinderella didn't attend, we were disappointed.

In fact, it's not until the final word of the last sentence that the precise meaning of "ball" becomes clear. Up until that point, it could have meant a "sphere you bounce" or "a really good time." But with the word "disappointed" you know for certain that ball meant "fancy party." So the basic unit of meaning is not the word, but the sentence. And the unit that determines what sentences mean, and therefore the words in them, is the paragraph.

This means that the primary question that the historical-grammatical method is seeking to answer is not, "What does that word mean?" but "What does that sentence mean?" In answering that question, we quickly realize that context is king.[5] So the first step of exegesis is to read the text, the whole text, over and over again. Interpretation actually begins with the whole, not the part. Then, in the context of the whole, we work backwards through the parts, back to sentences, back all the way down to individual words. What we learn and discover there then takes us back to the whole with a more accurate and perhaps nuanced understanding of meaning.

Grammatical

All of this begins with a basic grammatical and structural analysis of the text.

- First, how does the larger text break up into units? This is a function of genre: for epistles, it's the paragraph; for poetry, it's the stanza; for narrative history, it's the event or story.

[4]For a fuller discussion of many common fallacies, see D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
[5]Many have made this point, but I'm grateful to Scott Hafemann, who first drilled this concept into my brain many years ago as a first-year student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

- What's the general flow of argument in the text you're looking at? Is there an assertion, supported by subordinate clauses? Is a contrast being drawn, a principle being illustrated, a pattern being established, a response being encouraged?
- Looking at a particular sentence, what's the subject, the verb, and the object, and how do they relate? (If you ever diagrammed sentences in school, it comes in handy here!)
- How are the sentences connected? Paying attention to the connections allows you to establish the detailed flow of thought. The goal here is discourse analysis, an attempt to make explicit the logical flow in order to identify the author's main point, and the various ways he supports that point.

Feeling overwhelmed? Be encouraged. For each of these steps, all that's really needed is patient reading and a basic understanding of grammar and logic. No commentaries are required at this point!

Historical

Next, how do the various larger contexts inform your understanding of the meaning of the text?

- How does your text fit within the larger argument of the book or section of Scripture you're reading?
- Does the historical context (author, date, audience, and provenance), if known, throw light on your understanding of words or arguments?
- Is there a cultural context that you need to be aware of? For example, what are Pharisees? What rights did women have in the Roman world? Or, what's the difference between a concubine and a wife in ancient Israel?
- Are there issues of geography, politics, or history that throw light on the meaning? For example, where is Tarshish in relation to Nineveh? What's so special about Caesarea Philippi that Jesus would elicit Peter's confession there?

Now unless you're a full-time Bible scholar, most of these sorts of issues won't be in your category of general knowledge. Here's where commentaries, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and atlases are extremely helpful.

Biblical

Finally, perhaps the most important contextual question is how this text relates to the rest of Scripture. I'm going to spend more time on this in a later chapter, but suffice it to say that if the text quotes, alludes to, or

resembles another part of the Bible, that's significant for our understanding of what the author was intending to communicate.

Importance of Literary Forms

I mentioned earlier that the basic unit of thought would vary depending on the genre, or literary form, that we're dealing with. Yet I didn't stop to explain what I meant by genre.

Genre is simply a word that literary types use to describe the different recognized forms of writing that exist. This is important for us in understanding the Bible for several reasons. First, distinct genres tend to have distinct rules or patterns of communicating. We intuitively recognize this. On the whole, poetry doesn't even look like a newspaper article. That's because poetry and narrative are different genres, with their own unique set of internal rules. These rules and patterns have a real bearing on the meaning of the words and sentences an author writes. What's more, certain word patterns are so closely associated with a genre that their use almost immediately defines what we're looking at and how we interpret it. "Once upon a time . . ." signals fairy tale, not history, while "Dear Joe . . . love, Sally" signals epistle, not a legal brief. If we're going to read a text literally—that is, according to the sense of the words and the author's original intent—we need to identify the text's genre.

The second reason it's important to understand genre is because it doesn't take long to realize that the Bible consists of multiple genres. The entire Bible is true, and it all needs to be read literally, but reading the legal statutes of Exodus literally is going to look different than reading the poetry of Psalm 17 literally. Otherwise, we run the risk of having to say that David in Psalm 17 contradicted the second commandment by describing God as having wings like a mother hen under which he could hide.

Third, it's important to understand genre because it helps us with books or passages that feel culturally foreign and difficult to grasp. Two obvious examples of this are genealogies and apocalyptic literature. Neither are types of text you come across in your daily reading, yet the Bible has quite a few examples of both. Do we just apply the rules of genre from narrative or epistle? That's what some have done, and it produces rather boring genealogies and rather fantastical apocalyptic. But in fact, both of these genres have specific rules and conventions, and if we're going to read them correctly we need to understand those rules.

Interpreting the Diverse Genres of Scripture

So what are the genres of Scripture? There are more than we have time to deal with in one chapter, but let me conclude by laying out the seven major forms, and demonstrate with each how we go about exegeting them using the grammatical-historical method.

1) Narrative

Narrative makes up the largest portion of the Bible—40 percent of the Old Testament and 60 percent of the New Testament. Not only that, narrative provides the overall framework within which we understand all the other genres. How do we exegete narrative?

- First, we pay attention to the story and its details. The main point is in the plot and its development. And biblical narrative, like every other, is going to use all the devices you're used to:
  - chronological development
  - plot and rhetorical devices, such as dialogue, shifting points of view, and climax
  - character development
  - literary devices such as *inclusio* (using repeated words or phrases as bookends) and *chiasm* (a-b-c-b?-a? pattern)
  - scene arrangement, including things like flashbacks and cut-aways
- Second, remember that the narrator has had to be selective in what he records, so the details that are present are significant. How do they contribute to the point of the narrative? How do they connect this narrative to what came before and what comes after?
- Third, context is king. How does this narrative fit into the rest of the book, the rest of the section of Scripture, and the narrative of the Bible as a whole?
- Fourth, what's the point of the narrative in light of the author's purpose in writing the book? Story is not an end in itself, and we (personal application) are not necessarily the point either!
- Example: 1 Samuel 17—the story of David and Goliath. When we pay attention to the details and the context, we see that this is not a morality tale about courage in the face of long odds. We also avoid turning it into an allegory, in which every detail represents a spiritual truth. Rather, this is our introduction to the unlikely king who in single combat defeats the enemy and delivers God's people. In the context of 1 Samuel, this story sets up a contrast with Saul, the obvious and apparent king who turns out to be a fraud. Ultimately the story points us to Christ, who in the most unlikely way defeats the enemies of God's people in single combat on the cross and delivers us to God!

2) Parable

Parable is an important and often misunderstood genre, largely found in the Gospels, but also in the Old Testament prophets. Fundamentally, a parable is a pictorial comparison between something familiar and known and a spiritual truth or reality. The picture is typically fictional, though realistic. They are not generally allegorical, even when various parts of the picture represent various spiritual truths. Many times the details just add vividness to the picture. How do we exegete parables?

- The most important question to ask about a parable is, "What's the main point or points?"
- Pay attention to repetition (which is like putting something in bold), the reversal of expectations, or changes in voice from first to third person. These are all clues to the main emphasis.
- The conclusion or main point is typically at the end, and usually centers on the nature of the kingdom or the King.
- Context is still king, so interpret parables in light of the context of the larger surrounding narrative. Don't rip them out of the context in which the author has placed them, as if they were a random collection of Aesop's Fables.
- Example: Mark 4:30–32—The parable of the mustard seed. The point of this parable is found in the conclusion, and in light of the context. Jesus is illustrating the surprising and unexpected growth of the kingdom from tiny to huge. The application therefore is not to despise it, or grow discouraged by the kingdom's present obscurity. We aren't meant to allegorize the birds in its branches, or be thrown off by the fact that there are smaller seeds and larger garden plants.

3) Poetry

One third of the Old Testament (which is more than the whole New Testament) is poetry! It exists by itself (the Psalms), but is also found throughout other genres such as Wisdom and Prophecy. The key to exegeting Hebrew poetry is to realize that, like English poetry, Hebrew poetry presents extremely compressed and image-rich language. Poetry in any language is intended not only to communicate truth but also to evoke emotion. On the other hand, unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry does not have rhyme and meter that we would recognize. Instead, it uses other devices to provide structure. How do we exegete poetry?

- The most common feature of Hebrew poetic structure is parallelism in three different forms—synonymous (an idea is repeated for emphasis),

synthetic (one idea builds upon another), and antithetical (one idea is contrasted with another).
- Other features include word play, alliteration and alphabetic acrostic, repetition, hyperbole, contrast, metonymy (substitution), and synecdoche (the whole stands for the part or vice versa).
- Like English poetry, it uses metaphor and simile, figurative images, irony, and euphemism.
- Perhaps the most important key to interpreting poetry is to remember that it's a poem. A literal reading of a poem will look different than a literal reading of narrative.
- Example: Psalm 19:7–11. These verses are an extended example of synonymous parallelism. David is not talking about six different things, but one thing—the Word of God. He's treating it like a cut diamond held up to the light. In each phrase he turns the single diamond slightly in order to examine a different facet. The point of the poetic meditation is both to engender in us a high view and value of God's Word and to convince us of his conclusion in verse 11.

4) Wisdom

For many, the wisdom literature of Scripture is both much loved and highly problematic. It's loved because it seems so practical. It's problematic because it is least like the genres we interact with in the modern world. It also seems strangely disconnected from the main point of Scripture, which is redemption in Christ Jesus.

In fact, wisdom literature is very practical precisely because it's so closely connected with the main point of Scripture. Wisdom literature is about living well in God's world and in light of God's character. Wisdom is the fruit of the fear of the Lord, which means being correctly oriented toward God and the creation he's made, including other people. It speaks of what is generally true, but it also addresses what appear to be the exceptions to that general truth. How do we exegete wisdom literature?

- We need to recognize that wisdom literature comes to us in multiple forms, or sub-genres.
  - Drama (Job, Song of Solomon)
  - Sayings (Proverbs 9–31)
  - Autobiographical confession and admonition (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs 1–8).
- Whatever the form, the key in interpretation is to read it in context and according to its stated purpose.
  - Job intends to address the problem of unjust suffering.
  - Ecclesiastes intends to realistically address the point of life.
  - The Proverbs intend to engender the fear of God and then show how that fear (or lack of it) demonstrates itself in all sorts of contexts. It is emphatically not law code.

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