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CHAPTER

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

Key Terms and Concepts

biblical criticism

fundamentalism

dispensationalism

Torah

inspiration in the Bible

truth in the Bible

literal sense

spiritual sense

exegesis

hermeneutics

contextual and

noncontextual approaches

Over the centuries, believing communities and individuals have explored and interpreted the Bible, some seeking a rich array of interpretations, others searching for specific “correct” meanings. Some have assumed that the Bible means exactly and literally what it says, no more and no less. Others think that its significance can be discovered by exploring symbol, metaphor, and story. Some have read the Bible as an allegory, in which every person and event is thought to represent a deeper meaning. Others have applied a typological interpretation, that is, earlier characters and events are seen as foreshadowings, or “types,” of later ones. Some have consulted and interpreted the Bible strictly as instruction for an upright moral life. Others have interpreted it solely in the light of prayerful reading and reflection. Still others have applied multiple scholarly and scientific disciplines to discover its meaning. At times, different persons have attempted to combine various approaches

in order to interpret the Bible, always seeking to answer the basic question, “What does it mean?”

JEWISH STUDY OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is not the sacred book of Christians only; consequently, a properly comprehensive approach to biblical study begins by exploring the Bible with perspectives of the Jewish people, who produced its earliest writings. As seen in chapter 1, all the books of the Hebrew canon appear in any Christian Bible, where they are labeled “Old Testament.” For believing Jews, however, the books of the Tanak comprise the whole of sacred scripture; these writings do not anticipate a second canon. The different arrangement of books in the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament points to these differing perspectives. The Hebrew canon ends with the books of Chronicles, which present religious



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Orthodox Jewish scholars study the Talmud at the Yeshiva Kol Yaakov in Monsey, New York. The Talmud is a compilation of the oral law of Judaism, second in importance to the Torah.

history from Adam to the end of Jewish captivity in Babylon after the destruction of Judah and its political and religious capital, Jerusalem. This last book of the Jewish Bible ends with a call to return to the land and rebuild God's Temple in Jerusalem—in other words, to begin again, to explore once more the biblical story of God's relationship with the people of Israel. For Christians' part, by the time they settled upon their canon, they had for several centuries understood the Jewish prophets as pointing to Jesus as Messiah, so they placed the prophetic books at the end of their Old Testament canon and began a "New Testament," with the Gospels, which frequently quoted Hebrew prophets in order to interpret the significance of Jesus.

The most important defining characteristic of any member of the Jewish faith community, past or present, consists in following God's

teaching, or *Torah* in Hebrew. Today, in the broadest sense, Torah includes the entire body of Jewish teachings and laws, oral and written. The Hebrew Scriptures contain the written Torah, understood as a divine gift of instruction in how to live as God's people, and so all Jews are expected to engage in discovering its meanings. One studies the Tanak to interpret, and so live, the Torah. Judaism has no central, supreme authority that defines a single or limited meaning of the Bible, though particular interpreters of the past and present are recognized as possessing considerable authority. Still, others can and do disagree with such authorities on particular issues. Because the Jewish community involves all members in searching the Bible for meaning, multiple interpretations are expected and welcomed, because in daily life there are many ways to respond to God's teaching.

Traditionally, Jewish study of the Tanak involves discussion and debate with others, including previous interpretations ranging across centuries and millennia. Such discussion takes into account certain characteristics of the Hebrew Scriptures and various ways in which they present God's instruction.

First, it is important to remember that these writings developed over the course of centuries, so some parts of the Tanak reflect ongoing Jewish interpretation. In the Jewish Bible, some texts are placed in conversation with other texts, especially in light of varying life circumstances, yielding new significance. A related characteristic of the Hebrew Scriptures that interpreters bear in mind is the retelling of past events to discover new meanings that might not have been evident in the original event. Such retelling or reinterpretation of past events reflects a concern to make the scriptures relevant in different situations, offering instruction for ever-changing concrete experiences. Third, Jewish interpretation of the Bible recognizes that the text can instruct in various modes, including symbol, metaphor, and story. Because Jewish faith focuses less on abstract statements of belief than on instruction for daily life, stories are often used to demonstrate how to live in accordance with divine teaching. Fourth, Jewish interpretation of the Bible assumes that every word, every aspect of the text, can carry meaning. The earliest written manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible contained only consonants and no punctuation, thus opening the door to variant readings of many passages. Jewish interpreters exploring these early Hebrew texts delight in discovering various meanings they might yield, for each different reading can offer a new insight into how to live God's teaching in daily life.

As centuries of Jewish history unfolded in the pre-Christian era, the people of God continuously reflected upon numerous commands, laws, and statutes that expressed divine teaching.

When new concrete circumstances of time and place presented themselves, the faith community continued to interpret specific commandments of the Torah for particular life situations. Initially transmitted orally, such interpretations gradually formed a collection known as "oral Torah." By the time of Jesus, some Jews recognized teaching authority of both written and oral Torah, while some accepted only the written scriptures. In later chapters more will be said of both oral Torah and particular modes of interpretation. In Judaism today, different movements (e.g., Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) interpret the Hebrew Scriptures in various ways, often referring to different authorities.

CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION AND THE BEGINNINGS OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

For more than the first thousand years of Christianity, reflection on the Bible was the normal starting point for articulating, clarifying, and teaching doctrine and ethical behavior. Scripture was interpreted in several modes, especially typology and allegory, and because literacy was not widespread, most study and explanation of the Bible was carried out by clergy or other church authorities, monks and nuns, and scholars. Imperial Roman decree in the fourth century CE designated Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, and in the following centuries, the Christian religion permeated, and to a large degree shaped, European culture. Under such circumstances, interpretation of the Bible by church authorities became widely accepted by society at large as defining belief, worship, and ethical life.

In the eleventh through sixteenth centuries, several educational and cultural developments in Christian Europe brought new questions to the Bible, opening the way for fresh modes of interpretation. Universities were founded, the riches of other cultures were brought to bear on European

thought, and the rediscovery of ancient philosophies, as well as growth of new ones, influenced both the content of long-accepted ideas and modes of reflecting upon those ideas. Because the church always exists within human culture, it was inevitable that these new winds blowing across Europe's intellectual landscape would find their way into Christian thought. What is commonly called *biblical criticism* grew out of these centuries of change. It is important to be aware that the word *criticism* here does not have a negative connotation; it refers rather to critical thinking that poses the kinds of questions any rational person might ask about these ancient writings, such as: "Was Noah actually six hundred years old at the time of the flood? How could Jonah survive for three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish? Why is the Lord's Prayer not the same in Matthew and Luke?" Biblical criticism as it developed and is used today is a reasoned process of exploring a biblical book or passage in its historical, cultural, literary, and religious contexts in order to discover what the original author meant to communicate to the original audience.

Most biblical scholars date the beginnings of biblical criticism to a French priest, Richard Simon, who produced a lengthy study of the Old Testament ca. 1650. One element of the priest's work that drew particular attention was his view of authorship of the Pentateuch. Simon proposed that Moses was not, as Jews and Christians had assumed for centuries, the single author of these five books. There was a great deal of negative reaction to Simon's ideas, which were considered shocking to many at the time. His work was even placed on the Catholic Index of Forbidden Books in 1682.

Others, however, took up Simon's ideas and continued to ask questions of the Bible that had not been asked before. In the eighteenth century, other European scholars applied language studies and historical investigation to the Bible. Jean d'Astruc, ca. 1750, suggested that two different

names for God (*Elohim* and *Yahweh*) used in Genesis indicated two distinct sources for this first book of the Old Testament. The further work of Hermann Gunkel provided a transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Later called the "father of form criticism," Gunkel identified various distinct oral forms within the biblical books, each with its own particular usage and intended meaning.

In the late 1870s, Julius Wellhausen, historian, linguist, and son of a Protestant pastor, built upon previous scholarship to present a theory that is still frequently referenced today. From his study of the Pentateuch, he concluded that these five books represent a combination of four earlier written sources, code-named J, E, D, and P (further explained in chapter 6). Wellhausen's view, commonly called the Documentary Hypothesis, further called into question the traditional view that Moses was the sole author of the five books of the Pentateuch. Even though some Protestant scholars were uncomfortable with this idea, many others embraced and advanced this "new criticism" of the Bible, which entailed historical, linguistic, and literary analysis. Catholics, however, on the whole felt more threatened than Protestants by Wellhausen and the new criticism. Other long-held teachings and practices were under attack at the time, and so many Catholic scholars tended to repeat and emphasize traditional views. Consequently, in this period most critical biblical study was carried out by Protestants.

INCREASING USE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church's resistance to critical analysis and interpretation of the Bible was reinforced at the highest level of authority—the pope. Some scholars emphasized the human element in the composition of biblical books in such a way as

to preclude divine inspiration. For the pope at that time, such claims offered ample reason for suspicion of the new, modern methods of biblical study. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical (a publicly circulated letter), “On the Study of Holy Scripture” (*Providentissimus Deus*), warning that the new modes of biblical interpretation could easily undermine Catholic faith. In effect, the pope’s letter discouraged Catholic biblical scholars from using the new criticism, and so Catholic scholars produced few critical studies of the Bible in the early twentieth century.

Just fifty years after Pope Leo’s letter, however, Pope Pius XII published the encyclical “On the Most Opportune Way to Promote Biblical Studies” (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*). This 1943 letter pointed out that conditions of biblical studies and the sciences that supported them had changed greatly in fifty years. Using a different approach from that of Leo, Pius XII encouraged study of the biblical languages, historical and cultural background, and the many forms of literature found in the Bible. At this time, however, most people were far more preoccupied with World War II than with the world of biblical scholarship. Catholics did not make a great deal of progress in modern approaches to biblical study for another two decades. For their part, many Protestant scholars in the first half of the twentieth century continued developing and refining tools and methods of biblical criticism.

Catholic scholars were not, however, completely idle. In 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, an international committee of Catholic biblical scholars who serve as consultants on biblical matters to the pope, published the statement “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” This document recognized that the canonical Gospels are not objective history containing only factual

THREE STAGES OF TRADITION IN THE GOSPELS

1. Words and deeds of the historical Jesus, ca. 28–30 CE
2. Apostolic preaching, ca. 30–70 CE
3. Writing of the Gospels, ca. 70–100 CE

—“ON THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE GOSPELS,” PONTIFICAL
BIBLICAL COMMISSION, 1964

events written down exactly as they happened; rather, they represent three distinct stages of time and thought development. The first, earliest stage is that of Jesus himself, who used concepts and language of his own day and his Jewish culture. The second stage is that of the apostles, who after Jesus’ Resurrection began to deepen their understanding of Jesus as divine and so reinterpreted his earthly life in light of this belief. The third stage comes from the Gospel writers (evangelists) who collected and edited oral and written traditions circulating in various Christian communities. Each evangelist selected certain elements from among these earlier sources, interpreting them to fit his particular audience and historical situation. Many Protestant scholars who used biblical criticism shared this understanding of the formation and content of the Gospels.

When “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels” was published, Vatican Council II, an ecumenical (worldwide) council of the Catholic Church, was already in session. In 1965, Vatican II released an important statement on the Bible in Catholic life, the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*), which strongly promoted the use of modern biblical criticism (discussed later in this chapter). Within about seventy years, the Catholic position on biblical criticism had shifted completely, from emphatic rejection of this approach to strong support for its use. As Catholic and Protestant

biblical scholars increasingly shared methods and insights of biblical criticism, they gradually discovered shared meanings of scripture that had not emerged for centuries.

Today, the Eastern Orthodox Church generally employs much of the methodology of biblical criticism to search out the Bible's meanings but places particular emphasis on certain aspects of the process. Like Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians depend upon both scripture and tradition to ground Christian faith. In considering scripture in relation to tradition, however, the Orthodox give particular weight to the insight of certain important figures ("fathers of the church") of the second through eighth centuries CE. A second Eastern Christian emphasis appears in relation to liturgy, the public worship of the church. In the Eastern view, the rituals of the liturgy strongly express and in some ways help to interpret profound mysteries of sacred scripture. The Eastern Orthodox Church further insists that the Bible is most fruitfully interpreted not only by individual scholars but also with and within a community of faith in which past and present members contribute to the search for meaning. In addition, Eastern approaches stress that discovering and articulating the import of any text can never be an end in itself; Christians seek understanding of the Bible in order to live its meaning.

CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE TODAY

As discussed previously, several Catholic teaching documents indicate a major shift within recent times from noncontextual to contextual approaches to the Bible. In recent decades, two significant statements clarify and elaborate Catholic teaching on two important matters: the most suitable modes of interpreting sacred scripture, and the central position of the Bible in

the life of the Church and each of its members. (In referring to these documents, number/letter notations refer to paragraphs or sections.) Today, many Protestant interpreters would agree with numerous approaches and perspectives expressed in the documents.

"Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*), 1965

The first of these documents presents the consensus of all the Catholic bishops of the world who gathered for Vatican Council II in the early 1960s. On November 8, 1965, the council published *Dei Verbum*. Repeatedly, the bishops clarified and promoted a contextual reading of scripture. *Dei Verbum* describes inspiration as God's action in and through the biblical writers, and so it follows that these writings "must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (11). However, the document continues, because God speaks through human beings "in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words" (12).

To discover these intended meanings, interpreters are encouraged to work with the best translations from manuscripts written in the Bible's original languages. Further, readers need to consider the historical and cultural context of the Bible and the literary forms it employs, "For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or other forms of discourse, [and] due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer" (12).

“*The Sacred Synod [of Vatican Council II] earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful . . . to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3, 8). . . . And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture.*”

— *DEI VERBUM*, 25

In its comments on New Testament interpretation, *Dei Verbum* includes several ideas that had been published in 1964 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Both documents recognize three layers of material in the Gospels: that which comes from Jesus himself, oral interpretations of the earliest apostles, and the message that each Gospel writer wished to communicate to his particular audience. “The sacred authors wrote the four gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches, . . . but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus” (19). Finally, interpreters are reminded to seek understanding of a particular biblical text in light of the whole of scripture and the Church’s ongoing, living tradition. Catholics understand tradition as all that helps the community to grow in faith, as it is handed on not only in scripture but in the shared life, worship, and teaching of the Catholic Church.

Following these guidelines for interpretation, the Vatican II document addresses the role

of scripture in the life of the Church. The council repeatedly underscores the importance of God’s guiding presence for accurate understanding, urging that “prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture” (25). Catholics will be aided by reflecting on the Bible in light of their own spiritual experience and the teaching authority of the Church’s bishops, which “is not above the word of God but serves it” (10). All of the Church’s “theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation” (24), and the Bible ought to shape all preaching and catechetical instruction. Therefore, the bishops strongly recommend frequent, prayerful reading of scripture for “all the Christian faithful,” since “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (25), and that “easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all” (22).

“The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” 1993

Decades after Vatican Council II, many Catholic preachers and teachers noticed that much of the council’s teaching that promoted use of biblical criticism to interpret scripture had not reached or affected many Catholics, who seemed unaware of or resistant to this approach. Reconfirming the council’s teaching, in 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” which contains one of the Catholic Church’s strongest rejections of any approach that encourages viewing the Bible as a strictly historical, even journalistic text. In strong language, members of the commission repeated Vatican II’s description of sacred scripture as God’s word in human words, critiquing any reading of the Bible that regards it as no more than a collection of objective, factual accounts. Such a method, they wrote, “injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in

fact its human limitations.” This kind of uncritical approach to the Bible “often historicizes material which from the start never claimed to be historical” and fails to consider any “possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning” (I.F.).

“Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” further describes, analyzes, and evaluates several kinds of biblical criticism in use at the time. On the one hand, the international committee of scholars again emphasizes the value of biblical criticism, often described as the historical-critical method of interpretation. On the other hand, the authors also reiterate that by itself, this approach cannot reach truly theological understanding. In elaborating these points, the commission uses the ancient, traditional terminology of literal and spiritual senses of scripture.

Because these terms have been used in different ways through Christian history, the commission first clarified the literal sense, stressing that it should “not be confused with the ‘literalist’ favored by those who interpret the Bible as God’s own word, unaffected by any human writer.” In other words, the literal sense is not at all the same as a literal reading that takes the words of the Bible at face value, without attention to their original context. Rather, the “literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.” Note that this description again implies a kind of partnership between God and the human authors. As inspired, the literal sense is “intended by God,” but to discover meanings that the human authors communicated, interpreters must analyze texts in their own historical and literary settings. Strongly endorsing use of modern biblical criticism, the commission states that “one must reject as inauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text,” for such interpretation is often carried out in “a wildly subjective” manner (II.B.1).

An example of the last point can be seen in the use of numbers in the Bible. The “beast” of

Revelation 13:11–18, associated with the number 666, has been identified by various persons and groups as the Soviet Union, the United States, Russia, China, the pope, the Catholic Church, Protestantism, and Saddam Hussein, to name a few. To understand the literal sense or “what was directly expressed by the human authors,” one would investigate how numbers were used in the author’s context, ca. 95 CE during a Roman persecution of Christians. First of all, at that time several numbers, especially 7 and 10, commonly symbolized completion or perfection; further, all numbers were represented by letters of the alphabet. Revelation 13:18 says that 666 “stands for a person,” and the one most likely indicated by this number is the Roman Emperor Nero, whose name is a numerical equivalent of 666. A person who, as 666, fell far short of perfection (777), Nero was the first Roman emperor to order the death of Christians, a “bestly” action repeated by some of his successors. With even a little knowledge of context, the literal sense, or what the biblical author expressed by the number 666, emerges, and other interpretations are seen as subjective meanings very different from that of the original writer.

Like Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” insists that biblical criticism can assist readers to arrive at an accurate understanding of the Bible but is insufficient by itself. The literal sense of scripture must be integrated with the spiritual sense, the meaning that results from reading texts “under the influence of the Holy Spirit” and in the context of Christ’s life, death, and Resurrection and “the new life that flows from it.” Christian use of Psalm 2 offers an example of interpretation in the spiritual sense. In Psalm 2:7, God says to the king, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” When the psalm was composed, Israelite kings were thought to be God’s agent; as such, the king was sometimes described as an adopted “son” of God. Christians,

however, also apply this passage to Christ. When used in relation to Jesus Christ, the psalm takes on a deeper level of meaning, referring to him as not only an agent of God but also divine in his own being. As another caution against purely subjective interpretation, however devotional it might be, the document adds that “the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense” (II.B.2).

DIFFERING PROTESTANT RESPONSES TO BIBLICAL CRITICISM

As noted, many Protestant biblical scholars embraced biblical criticism before Catholic interpreters did so. Not all Protestants agreed with such methods of interpreting the foundational writings of Christian faith, however. At the American Biblical Congress of 1895, a group of Protestants from various denominations, dissatisfied with several trends in their churches, defined and claimed for themselves “five points of fundamentalism.” The first point, concerning interpretation of the Bible, insists upon “word-for-word inerrancy of the Bible, including details of historical and ‘scientific’ events.” In other words, Christian fundamentalism took the position that it is unnecessary and irrelevant to inquire about the historical, cultural, literary, or religious context of any part of the Bible in a search for meaning. The Bible means what it says and is totally true, or inerrant, on all counts. A relatively recent development in Christian history, biblical fundamentalism today continues to reject biblical criticism and its conclusions.

The claim of word-for-word inerrancy might suggest that fundamentalists read the Bible absolutely literally, taking every word completely at face value. The fact is that no Christian interprets the Bible that literally; if this were the case, women would never be allowed to pray with uncovered heads, death would be the normal

penalty for adultery, and many Christians would have their right hands cut off (see 1 Cor 11:4–8; Lev 20:10; Matt 5:30). In fact, fundamentalists often read the Bible contextually, not literally, even in regard to matters of science, although they often fail to recognize that they are doing so. For example, very few fundamentalists would claim that the many biblical references to the sun “rising” or “setting” rule out a modern, scientific view of the earth orbiting the sun.

By the early twentieth century, fundamentalists agreed upon five major points, summarized here.

MAJOR POINTS OF FUNDAMENTALISM

1. Scriptures are divinely inspired, with word-for-word inerrancy on all counts.
2. Christ had a virgin birth and was divine.
3. Christ atoned for sin by substituting himself for all sinners in his death on the cross.
4. Christ was resurrected bodily.
5. Christ performed miracles or Christ’s Second Coming is expected. (Lists vary.)

Many fundamentalists have embraced another relatively recent approach to understanding the Bible called *dispensationalism*. This approach originated with John Darby (1800–1882) and was further developed and popularized by his student, Cyrus Scofield, in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909. Though this point of view has several subcategories, in general it envisions human history as a series of seven periods of time, or “dispensations”; each stage is characterized by a particular way in which God rules the world and tests human obedience to the divine will. Each time humans fail the

test, God begins a new dispensation by offering another chance. The first four dispensations are related to the book of Genesis. The three last and most important are called the dispensation of law, spanning the time from Moses to Jesus; the dispensation of grace, from the death of Jesus to the present; and finally the millennium, or “kingdom age,” associated with the Second Coming of Christ.

Because the death of Jesus is understood to end the dispensation of sin and death and begin the present dispensation of grace, biblical material that appears after the Crucifixion accounts is considered most relevant for the present time. For this reason dispensationalists tend to focus on the New Testament letters, especially those of Paul, and the book of Revelation. From this perspective, those parts of the Gospels devoted to the life, teaching, and earthly activity of Jesus are less relevant because they predate the dispensation of grace. Though there are some variations among dispensationalists, they share a fundamental conviction that from the death of Jesus onward, the clock is ticking toward the end of the world, which they expect to arrive soon.

Dispensationalists are subdivided into pre- and postmillennialists, depending on whether they believe the Second Coming of Christ will occur before or after the expected thousand-year reign of faithful Christians on earth. Premillennial dispensationalists envision that the world will end in fire, with Christ returning in full glory to bring the “rapture” of faithful Christians who will reign with him on earth for a thousand years. After the rapture will come a seven-year period of “tribulation,” during which people will have one more chance to accept grace and turn to Christ, which “the antichrist” will try to prevent. “Armageddon,” the final battle between good and evil, will end the current dispensation and begin the millennium (or kingdom age), the final dispensation. Most of these expectations are based on a dispensationalist interpretation

of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. This reading of scripture influences certain political views of those who believe it. For example, most dispensationalists consider the reestablishment of a Jewish state in 1948 as a sign of the nearing end of the world, so they firmly support the statehood of Israel and its military policies. Many also oppose nuclear disarmament, because their interpretation of scripture indicates that the world will end in fire.

For several reasons, dispensationalism dominates Christian fundamentalism in the United States today. One major reason lies in the popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, perhaps the best-selling Protestant version of the Bible published in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1970, Hal Lindsey made dispensationalism widely available to the general public in his book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, a vivid account of the planet’s “last days” that sold tens of millions of copies. More recently, the *Left Behind* series, novels portraying the same worldview and theology, gained similar popularity. Dispensationalist reading of the Bible has gained favor among many Protestant fundamentalists, but is generally repudiated by mainstream Anglican, Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox interpreters.

DIFFERING VIEWS AMONG PROTESTANTS PAST AND PRESENT

Even though some Protestants embraced the new developments in biblical criticism, others struggled in different ways to work out their own approaches to interpreting the Bible. In some cases, this struggle has caused inner turmoil even within certain Protestant denominations. Though these issues are far too complex to be explored in detail here, one example will be described briefly.

Considerable disagreement exists among Lutherans, one of the largest Protestant groups,

about how to interpret the Bible, considered the sole source of their faith; this situation, of course, leads to further differences in belief and practice. Today the largest Lutheran community in North America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), accepts modern biblical criticism, interpreting biblical texts in their original contexts. Some other Lutherans, however, do not.

In the United States, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) in particular reject the approaches of modern biblical criticism. In 1932 the LCMS adopted an official teaching document, "Of the Holy Scriptures." The following quotations from this statement on the Bible and how it is to be interpreted present major guidelines still applied by some segments of the Lutheran Church today:

1. We teach that the Holy Scriptures differ from all other books in the world in that they are the Word of God. They are the Word of God because the holy men of God who wrote the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy [Spirit] communicated to them by inspiration, 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21. We teach also that the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a so-called "theological deduction," but that it is taught by direct statements of the Scriptures, 2 Tim. 3:16, John 10:35, Rom. 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:13. Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35.
2. We furthermore teach regarding the Holy Scriptures that they are given by God to the Christian Church for the foundation of faith, Eph. 2:20. Hence the Holy Scriptures are the sole source from which all doctrines

proclaimed in the Christian Church must be taken and therefore, too, the sole rule and norm by which all teachers and doctrines must be examined and judged. With the Confessions of our Church we teach also that the "rule of faith" . . . according to which the Holy Scriptures are to be understood are the clear passages of the Scriptures themselves which set forth the individual doctrines. . . . The rule of faith is not the man-made so-called "totality of Scripture." . . .

3. We reject the doctrine which under the name of science has gained wide popularity in the Church of our day that Holy Scripture is not in all its parts the Word of God, but in part the Word of God and in part the word of man and hence does, or at least, might contain error. We reject this erroneous doctrine as horrible and blasphemous, since it flatly contradicts Christ and His holy apostles, sets up men as judges over the Word of God, and thus overthrows the foundation of the Christian Church and its faith.

Although differences exist within some Protestant traditions, variant approaches to interpreting the Bible prove to be even more numerous and complex between different Protestant denominations. The subject is too vast to allow for comprehensive treatment here, since there are more than two thousand different Protestant denominations in the world today. However, a few major distinctions can be sketched in very broad strokes.

Some classify Protestant churches as conservative, mainline, and liberal. Others, especially sociologists, employ the terms *fundamentalist*, *evangelical*, and *liberal* to designate major different movements among Protestants. The more liberal churches, also labeled *secular*, *modern*, *progressive*, or *humanistic*, generally embrace and encourage the use of biblical criticism to interpret the Bible. Fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants are

most difficult to understand and define, because these still-emerging movements lack consistent self-description. Neither *fundamentalist* nor *evangelical* designates a specific denomination but rather particular perspectives, attitudes, and emphases within Protestant belief and practice.

At one time, *fundamentalist* described those who accepted the five points of fundamentalism determined at the end of the nineteenth century; in relation to the Bible, this meant accepting its contents as presenting word-for-word inerrancy (see sidebar, “Major Points of Fundamentalism”). With the passage of time, for some within and outside of the Protestant world, *fundamentalist* came to designate ultraconservatives who oppose new translations of the Bible, scholarly study of the scriptures, or virtually anything new. About the middle of the twentieth century, more moderate conservative Protestants began referring to themselves as *evangelical*, thus placing some distance between themselves and fundamentalists. However, there is at present no agreed-upon set of defining characteristics to unite all evangelicals.

Although differences between evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants involve more than views of the Bible, the latter is the focus of this discussion. Like all Protestants, both of these movements agree that sacred scripture forms the single, authoritative bedrock of Christian faith and practice, and they often accentuate this position more firmly than liberal Protestants. Like fundamentalists, evangelicals claim belief in the inerrancy of scripture. At this point, however, the meaning of language becomes fluid, because *inerrancy* does not mean the same thing to all evangelicals. Some evangelical Protestants read the Bible as literally as fundamentalists and would, for example, accept their view that Genesis presents a scientifically and historically accurate narrative of how the world and the human race were created. Other evangelicals, on the other hand, would allow for mythical or

poetic elements of the story and thus agree that it was not intended to be historically or scientifically accurate; they would interpret the story as inerrant or true in how it portrays God and divine intentions in creating human beings, but they would not necessarily accept the Bible’s creation story as an accurate historical or scientific account. In short, for some evangelicals, the claim of inerrancy of the Bible would completely rule out biblical criticism, while others would use some or even many of its tools to discover inerrant religious meaning in this text.

As is evident from the preceding brief survey, there is no single, universal Christian approach to interpreting the Bible. It is also apparent that *how* Christians set about determining what the Bible means has tremendous influence on the outcome of that process. At times an exasperated person seeking “the truth” of scripture might ask, “Why don’t I get the same response when I ask different Christians what a particular passage of the Bible means?” The previous review of various modes of biblical interpretation suggests at least one important answer to that question: although all Christians regard the Bible as the foundation of their faith, different Christians derive meaning from these scriptures in many different ways.

INSPIRATION AND THE TRUTH OF THE BIBLE

The above brief review of biblical criticism and various responses to it, past and present, has indirectly referred to two important, related Christian claims about the Bible: that it is inspired and that it is true. All Christians would claim that the Bible is inspired, that is, that these sacred scriptures were produced by means of God’s guidance. But not all Christians have the same understanding of how God guided this process or what inspiration implies with regard to the nature of the biblical texts.

Some Christians believe that God worked indirectly through the abilities, as well as the limitations, of those who passed on sacred traditions and those who ultimately composed the biblical books. These human authors clearly played a role in producing the final documents, selecting which material to include or exclude and deciding what kind of literature would best communicate intended meanings. Catholic biblical scholars often describe the inspired scriptures as “the word of God in human language.” On the other hand, some Christians understand God’s inspiration as a much more direct divine guidance of the biblical author. Although proponents of this understanding of inspiration usually reject the idea that God dictated the scriptures, what they propose is in practice rather similar, for they insist that God saw to it that none of the human author’s limitations or failings carried over into the written work. The LCMS document quoted previously, for example, describes “verbal inspiration” to authors who “wrote only that which the Holy [Spirit] communicated to them.”

Such contrasting views of inspiration, in turn, lead to different understandings of truth in the Bible. Again, there is agreement up to a point; virtually all Christians claim that the Bible can be relied upon as true, but true about what? Some Christians, primarily those who use the approaches of biblical criticism, believe that the truth of the Bible pertains only to what it reveals about the character of God and God’s dealings with humankind. Those who hold this position recognize that the biblical authors thought and wrote in light of their own time and place and

THE BIBLE AND FACTUAL TRUTH

In July 2011, Gallup polls indicated that among residents of the United States, approximately one-third believe that the Bible is factually true. Among the remaining two-thirds, many regard the Bible as the inspired word of God but do not believe that everything in it ought to be taken literally. About one in five Americans regards the Bible as an “ancient book of stories recorded by man.”¹

In June 2012, Gallup reported that 46 percent of Americans support creationist views, that is, they believe that God created human beings in their present form within the past ten thousand years.

so included notions of history, geography, and the physical universe that are inconsistent with current knowledge. Thus, these scholars emphasize that the Bible is entirely reliable concerning “truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings *for the sake of our salvation*” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 11, emphasis added). Some would argue that even in regard to spiritual truths, certain parts of the Bible convey truth better than others; for example, many would argue that the command to “love your neighbor” conveys divine truth more accurately than the story of God’s ordering the ancient Israelites to invade the land of Canaan and kill its inhabitants.

Other Christians, as seen above, believe that the Bible is true in all cases, on every subject. The LCMS document “Of the Holy Scriptures” explicitly states that God’s direct inspiration ensures that the Bible contains no errors about anything whatsoever, including “historical, geographical, and other secular matters.” Similarly, the first of the “Five Points of Fundamentalism” claims “word-for-word inerrancy of the Bible,

1. Jeffrey M. Jones, “In U.S., 3 in 10 Say They Take the Bible Literally,” *Gallup*, July 8, 2011, gallup.com/poll/148427/say-bible-literally.aspx

including details of historical and ‘scientific’ events.” In this view also, direct divine inspiration guarantees that the Bible is inerrant, literally true and without error, on all topics of every kind.

Just as Christians today interpret the Bible in numerous differing ways, precisely what Christians mean when they say that the Bible is inspired by God varies as well. How they understand inspiration has a direct bearing upon how they interpret the scriptures, and in particular, whether Christians accept or reject modern biblical criticism. The major distinction in approaches lies in the extent to which one is willing to see the Bible as the product of the historical, literary, and theological context in which it was written. Between two contrasting approaches, contextual and noncontextual, a number of middle positions can be found, as noted previously and outlined in the summary chart “Major Differences in Approaches to the Bible.”

CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION

As the name implies, a contextual approach to interpreting the Bible insists that a text must always be interpreted in its context. The context includes all the circumstances surrounding a text that can affect its meaning. Those who interpret the Bible contextually examine historical, literary, and theological aspects of context, which usually overlap and so affect one another. An overview of these major aspects of context follows, with some of the important questions any interpreter of the Bible needs to explore in order to understand the author’s intended meanings for the original audience.

To understand the historical context of any biblical text, one inquires about the time, place, and social or cultural circumstances in which a

book was written, as well as the particular audience to whom the book was originally addressed. If there is a long history of oral and written transmission, the interpreter also examines the historical situation in which particular traditions formed. Events and circumstances of the time in which a book is composed normally influence what content is included or excluded, which ideas and themes receive major emphasis, and so on. For example, in modern times, a book about the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King written within a year of his death could not possibly have the same perspective as a book written today, when the civil rights movement is more advanced and Americans have a much greater understanding of the role that Dr. King played in that movement.

Theological context might involve theological perspectives, questions, or struggles of the time and place of writing, especially issues that affected the originally intended audience. This aspect of context also includes theological points that the author intends to present or perhaps question, or both. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, appears to be addressed to a Christian community of converted Jews who are searching for the connections and disconnections between the Jewish religion they have traditionally followed and their new faith founded on Jesus. As a result, the author strongly emphasizes how Jesus fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures, reassuring his Jewish Christian audience that they are not completely disconnected from their former religious way of life.

By investigating the literary context of any part of the Bible, interpreters recognize that the Bible, though literature of faith, is still literature and therefore uses the types and forms of writing of the times and cultures in which these books were written. Interpretation greatly benefits from knowledge of the literary genre of a biblical book or any particular part of it and of the purpose or intention of that kind of literature. For example,

MAJOR DIFFERENCES IN APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE		
CONTEXTUAL	MIDDLE POSITIONS	NONCONTEXTUAL
<p>Meaning of the Bible requires interpreting any text in its historical, literary, and religious contexts.</p> <p>INSPIRATION: Contextual interpreters who believe the Bible is inspired argue that God's guidance is indirect; God makes use of human abilities and life situations.</p> <p>Therefore, the Bible is the word of God in human language.</p> <p>As such, the Bible is true regarding God and God's dealings with humankind.</p>	<p>Broad range of variations; some elements of context at times viewed as helpful, but in matters of moral behavior, context usually does not affect meaning.</p> <p>INSPIRATION: With some variations across a spectrum, what is said regarding God's character, ethical teaching, and relations with humankind is true, though limitations of the author's context might allow for errors in historical or scientific matters.</p>	<p>Meaning of the Bible is immediately evident, and context is unnecessary for understanding.</p> <p>INSPIRATION: Noncontextual biblical interpretation is based upon a particular understanding of the Bible's inspiration: God's guidance is direct communication to a human author, unaffected by human limitations.</p> <p>Therefore, the Bible is God's own word.</p> <p>As such, the Bible is true in all matters, on all subjects.</p>

a reader who understands that a particular book of the Bible is poetry will not read it like a historical report. One who realizes that a particular text is fiction will search for the intended point or meaning, not verifiable facts. Interpreting a biblical text in its literary context also involves analysis of structure, plot, characters, translation, and the like. In some cases, a biblical text might be compared to other similar literature to better understand the thought and ways of expressing meaning of the time and place in which the book was composed.

The following discussion will employ a contextual approach to the Judeo-Christian Bible, which is the approach most often used in academic study of the Bible. Strictly speaking, this mode of interpretation involves a two-part process to determine what the Bible means for twenty-first-century Christians. First, by placing the text in its context, the reader tries to

discover as accurately as possible what a biblical passage would have expressed to its original audience in its own time and place; the technical name for this kind of analysis is *exegesis*. At this stage, one seeks to understand the historical, literary, and theological contexts of the passage. Such insight can be discovered through careful use of study Bibles and biblical handbooks, dictionaries, and commentaries. In the second step of interpretation, readers reflect upon messages communicated to the original audience, so that the meaning of the word of God can shape and reshape the daily life of today's Christians in their own time and place; this part of the process is called *hermeneutics*. This book will focus primarily on exegesis; readers are encouraged to form thoughtful hermeneutical conclusions within their own faith perspectives and communities. (See "For Further Study" at the end of the book.)

A REDACTOR'S CONCERNS

In the process of interpreting any text in its context, historical, literary, and theological dimensions of context normally overlap and complement one another. In general, interpreters attempt to engage all or most of the following questions regarding a specific biblical book or text:

1. When and where and under what circumstances did any original events described take place? How does the redactor (author/editor) theologially interpret these events?²
2. What can be inferred about the redactor's religious, social, and cultural background, theological and pastoral perspectives, and so on?
3. When and in what circumstances did the redactor compose this document, and what sources were used?
4. What can be known of the people addressed (the audience) in this text: historical events of their time and place, their social, cultural, and religious situation, their theological and pastoral questions and concerns?
5. What are the redactor's major intentions and purposes in writing at this time, for this particular community? What life situations, theological questions, or concerns does the author attempt to address?
6. What is the literary genre of the book as a whole? What literary subgenres or forms are used in the text to be interpreted, and what do these literary forms intend to communicate?
7. What is the overall literary structure of this biblical book, and what purpose does this passage serve within the book as a whole? How does this text further the major intentions of the redactor, addressing the audience members in their particular life situation, with their particular needs and concerns?

A CLOSER LOOK AT BIBLICAL CRITICISM

For those seeking to understand the sacred scriptures by means of exegesis, a wealth of resources can assist in determining historical, literary, and theological contexts of various books of the Bible. The most basic resources include *study Bibles*, which contain introductions to each book, footnotes to the biblical text, and other aids such as maps, charts, and photographs; *biblical*

dictionaries and encyclopedias, which clarify biblical persons, places, and concepts or symbols as they are used in both Old Testament and New Testament; and *biblical commentaries*, which provide section-by-section or verse-by-verse explanation of numerous elements of context to clarify the writer's original meanings.

In examining various kinds of modern biblical criticism, an important point bears repeating: the word *criticism* is not used here in the sense of "finding fault" with the Bible. It refers instead to posing the kinds of questions that a rational,

2. Although sometimes more than one redactor was involved, often we do not know and so we refer to the redactor consistently in the singular. We use masculine pronouns, because the redactor most likely was male.

thoughtful human being might ask in order to understand ancient books that were written two or even three thousand years ago, in languages, cultures, and historical situations very different from those of modern readers. Questions of biblical criticism draw upon various areas of study: archaeology, history, literature, ancient languages, sociology, and others. Biblical criticism, then, is a process of discovering what can be known about the context of any biblical book or passage in order to understand its original meaning. Because context has many different aspects, there are a number of subtypes or subsets of biblical criticism; major ones are described here.

It is important to be aware that no single kind of criticism will provide all elements of context; rather, various modes of exploring a biblical text need to illuminate one another, and in practice they often overlap. To discover the context of any book or passage of the Bible, major types of biblical criticism analyze one or more stages in the development of the Bible: events, oral traditions, written traditions, and canonization. The assumption underlying various branches of biblical criticism is that anyone wishing to interpret the Bible first needs to understand, insofar as possible, what the original author or authors intended to say to their original audiences. In the interest of making that original meaning relevant for today's readers, scholars of the past several decades have developed new kinds of biblical criticism that also attend to the life context of the interpreter. With such layers of knowledge, readers can begin to discover what meaning the sacred scriptures might have for Christian understanding and life today. Because the Bible is a literature of faith, it must be understood and interpreted as such.

MAJOR TYPES OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Major types or branches of biblical criticism are outlined here, along with the key questions each

one explores in seeking to understand a biblical passage. The first seven focus on scriptural texts in their own contexts; the last two emphasize the life setting of the interpreter.

1. Text Criticism

This type of biblical criticism is normally done by specialists skilled in ancient manuscripts and languages, and so most readers must use secondary sources containing the results of their work. These scholars search for the most ancient and most trustworthy manuscripts (handwritten copies, on papyrus or animal skin) of biblical books. Then these manuscripts are compared with one another, to determine the most accurate, complete reading of a biblical passage. In some cases, text critics will discover copyists' errors or glosses (additions or changes) in a manuscript. The work of text criticism is important for translators, who need complete, correct manuscripts in order to produce a translation that is true to the original meanings of a biblical book.

Questions text criticism might ask: What ancient manuscripts exist for a given biblical book? How are the manuscripts related to one another; can they be organized into "families"? Which manuscripts or families of manuscripts tend to be most reliable? Where different manuscripts disagree, which has the correct reading?

2. Source Criticism

Source criticism is so named because it inquires into the written or oral sources used by a biblical author and the life setting and major purposes of each source. The set of Old Testament books called the Pentateuch, for example, most likely was compiled from four earlier written sources, composed by different persons or groups in various life settings during a five-hundred-year span. These four written compositions, in turn, drew from even earlier sources,

both oral and written. A New Testament example can be found in the Gospel of John. Scholars believe that John 1:1–18 makes use of an already-existing hymn that praised Christ as the Word of God.

Questions source criticism might ask: What sources, oral or written, group or individual, were used to construct a biblical book? What was the life setting of each earlier source, and how did its life setting shape material in that source?

3. Form Criticism

Form criticism attempts to identify and analyze parts of biblical writing that began as oral forms of literature. Form criticism tries to uncover the original fixed oral form, the life setting in which it was used, and the actual purpose or intention of each form. Today, as in the ancient past, certain oral forms often intend to communicate something other than their surface meaning. For example, today's question-and-answer oral form, "How are you?"/"Fine," does not usually mean to inquire about someone's health or feelings. Its real purpose, in today's American life setting, is simply to greet someone; it is a common substitute for "Hello."

Questions form criticism might ask: What is the structure of original oral forms used in the written biblical text? What was the original life setting of each oral form? What was the purpose of each oral form?

4. Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism analyzes the editorial work done by biblical authors on earlier (source) material. The evidence of editorial activity (redaction) can provide important clues as to the life situation and specific interests, emphases, and perhaps even prejudices of the redactor. Redaction criticism also seeks to determine what stages of

editing a book might have gone through on its way to a final version. The Gospel of John, for example, shows signs of having undergone several stages of editing before it reached the form in which it now appears.

Questions redaction criticism might ask: What evidence of redaction is there in a particular biblical text? What were the redactor's particular interests, emphases, and purposes? How did they affect content, form, and major emphases of the book?

5. Tradition Criticism

A tradition is a body of material passed on in oral or written form by a particular group or community and later used to compile a book or books of the Bible. A community that gathered and handed on a specific tradition ordinarily emphasized or downplayed certain aspects, according to its life setting. Tradition criticism seeks to understand the origins of a tradition and the community that shaped and passed it on. For example, the Old Testament historical books often refer to the establishment of Israel as a nation ruled by a king. The Bible contains both positive and negative opinions about Israelite kingship, sometimes within the same book. Tradition criticism resolves much of the apparent contradiction: final compilers of the historical books selected portions of several different traditions, without trying to create a single, unified point of view. In this example, tradition criticism would further inquire about the community behind each strand of tradition concerning Israelite kingship and the circumstances that led to each community's understanding and opinion of that tradition.

Questions tradition criticism might ask: What community began or passed on a particular tradition? What was this community's life setting? How did the community's life setting influence the content and viewpoint of this tradition?

6. Literary Criticism

The first task of literary criticism is analyzing the Bible as literature, exploring elements such as structure, style, characters, plot, setting, and so on. For example, the Gospel of Mark uses a structure called *framing*, which sets off a key point with a pair of similar elements just before and after the important content; two stories in which a blind man is healed frame Jesus' three-fold statement that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Awareness of such literary techniques helps readers recognize what the author considers most meaningful. Second, literary criticism also compares a biblical book or passage to other literature of the time, seeking to discover changes, additions, or omissions. Such differences suggest what the biblical author considered most important to communicate about a commonly circulating story. The biblical account of Noah and the flood, for example, has many parallels with ancient Mesopotamian flood stories. But there are a number of differences. The nonbiblical accounts tell of many gods involved in this disaster, while the Bible speaks of only one God, Yahweh. The author wished to emphasize that the Israelites, unlike all their neighbors, believed in one and only one God.

Questions literary criticism might ask: What genre or type of literature is the biblical book as a whole? What are the structure, style, and purpose of the book? What subgenres are used within the book, and what is the structure and intended meaning of each? How does the book or passage compare and contrast with other, nonbiblical literature of the time?

7. Social-Scientific Criticism

This type of biblical criticism is so named because it explores the social and cultural background of the Bible by means of research in the social sciences. Such exploration shows that a

person's actions or sayings can be properly understood only within the context of that person's culture and society. For example, imagine a married woman who discovers that she is unable to have a child. In the modern United States, with its emphasis on gender equality and continually advancing medical science, she would be likely to suggest that both she and her husband undergo fertility tests. In the book of Genesis, Sarai and Abram find themselves childless, despite God's promise that Abram will have many descendants. In the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, Sarai fulfills her expected duty as wife by suggesting to Abram that he should have a child by her maid-servant, thus avoiding the shame of producing no offspring. To discover the meaning of the Bible, then, the interpreter needs to inquire about the social and cultural structures, customs, and values of biblical peoples.

Questions social-scientific criticism might ask:

What can be discovered about the social and cultural organization, customs, beliefs, and values of the people described in a biblical text? What social or cultural factors influenced the redactor and the redactor's sources? How might these factors affect this text?

Although these major kinds of biblical criticism focus on exploring the Bible in its original context, more recent approaches have stressed the interpreter's context, as well. In recent decades, some scholars have developed liberationist and feminist criticism.

8. Liberationist Criticism

Linked to the emergence in the early 1970s of what is commonly called liberation theology, liberationist reading of the Bible grew out of oppressive social, economic, and political circumstances, especially in Latin America. Seeking to discover meanings that support and nourish the hopes and struggles of oppressed peoples,

liberationist criticism searches biblical texts for the word and action of a God who delivers the poor and reverses injustice. This reading insists that the meaning of scripture in its original context must also be heard and interpreted by today's specific communities of the poor and oppressed, leading to concrete liberating action on their behalf. For example, the Bible frequently calls upon God's people to care for the poor and needy. However, what might be considered poverty or true need by those who live in a European palace, a Latin American barrio, or an American Indian reservation? What cultural and social changes would be required to improve the situation of the poor and needy in each circumstance?

Questions liberationist criticism might ask:

Where and how does the text portray God as deliverer of the oppressed? What human attitudes toward the economically, politically, and socially poor are critiqued? What actions on their behalf does the text encourage? How can these insights be enacted in today's situations of poverty, deprivation, and injustice?

9. Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism of the Bible traces its origin to *The Women's Bible*, published in the late nineteenth century by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton and her collaborators believed that, too frequently, the Bible was used to legitimize oppression of women. Feminist scholars of the 1970s took up the cause in the context of renewed Western cultural emphasis on ensuring rights for women equal to those of men. Feminist exegesis of the Bible uses current methods of interpretation but shares certain assumptions and adds criteria for examining and understanding the text. Most feminist interpreters agree that the Bible presents a male-centered worldview, which takes for granted male dominance

and perspectives as the norm. Further, feminist criticism points out that past translations and interpretations often sought to justify or perpetuate such views. For example, in several New Testament texts, *diakonos*, a Greek term meaning "deacon," was translated as such when applied to men, but in describing a woman's role, the same word was rendered *minister* or *helper*. Especially in relation to New Testament texts, many feminist interpreters seek to determine established religious and cultural roles of women in biblical societies and then point out where Jesus or the early Christian community gave women greater significance or roles than the norm.

Questions feminist criticism might ask: In a particular text, are male characters, divine or human, given greater importance than female characters? Does the text express or suggest bias in favor of male perspectives, roles, or actions? Is male abuse or other mistreatment of women excused or legitimized in a biblical passage? Have words or passages been translated or interpreted in a manner that diminishes or negates female characters, roles, or actions?

Today, more types of biblical criticism are developing, including rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, and many others. Because multiple questions of context are to be explored, the best biblical study aids combine the findings of many different kinds of biblical criticism. With the help of such resources, anyone who seeks to interpret the sacred scriptures by exploring the text in context can do so. Biblical criticism offers much help in the process of exegesis. The audience of thousands of years later must do its own work of hermeneutics, applying that ancient meaning to Christian living in a specific twenty-first-century time and place.

EXEGESIS: A BRIEF EXAMPLE

A brief example of exegesis will introduce the process and demonstrate how it uses various kinds of biblical criticism to illuminate the meanings expressed by biblical authors. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus explicitly forbids "the Twelve," his closest followers, to preach and heal among Gentiles and Samaritans. Their first task, says Jesus, is to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:6). The Gospels of Mark and Luke both present Jesus himself entering Gentile territory, healing the sick and casting out demons. According to John's Gospel, Jesus carries on a long conversation with a Samaritan woman and then stays in her town for two days (see Mk 7:24–37; Lk 6:17; Jn 4:4–42). Even without knowing the identity of Gentiles and Samaritans, the reader could easily conclude that Jesus forbids his followers to do something that he repeatedly does himself. What can account for this apparent contradiction?

First of all, exegesis inquires when and where these various passages were written. Such information can help determine who Gentiles and Samaritans were and why Jesus would caution against preaching to them. Though written decades later, the Gospels portray Jesus in his own historical setting, Palestine of ca. 30 CE. At that time many Jews did not believe that either Gentiles or Samaritans could share in God's salvation. Gentiles were, for the most part, pagans. Jews believed that the inhabitants of Samaria were descendants of intermarriage between Jews and foreign pagans. Jews considered both groups to be unbelievers, people who were not included in the community of Yahweh's people. If Jesus, a first-century Jew, shared these views, he would not want to proclaim his saving message to these groups. But why do the other three Gospels show Jesus doing exactly that? Is there, perhaps, another explanation for Jesus' actions in various Gospels?

Further information about historical context provides additional insight into the authors' meaning. Scholars believe that all four Gospels were composed at least forty to sixty-five years after the events of Jesus' life. From their perspective of faith, the Gospel writers were much more concerned with what the risen, glorified Jesus was doing in the present than with his activities during his earthly life. They wanted to show Jesus, now resurrected by God, at work re-creating human lives in the present moment. So their Gospels emphasized what they believed the risen Jesus was doing in the life of their communities of 70, 80, or 95 CE: healing and transforming the lives of all people, Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans alike.

It appears that Matthew wrote his Gospel for a community comprising mostly Christianized Jews. It follows, then, that he would emphasize Jesus' reaching out first to fellow Jews: "Go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." *First* is the key word here; Matthew asserts that after his Resurrection, Jesus sent out his followers to make disciples from "all nations" (Matt 28:19). Mark and Luke, on the other hand, wrote for a Christian community that was increasingly Gentile. Therefore, these two writers included a number of stories that describe Jesus teaching or healing Gentiles, thereby emphasizing continuity between the mission of Jesus before his Resurrection and after, through the church. John, the latest canonical Gospel, addressed a very mixed audience, including Christians of Jewish, Gentile, and possibly Samaritan background, and so John also emphasized Jesus' outreach to all people.

To gain full understanding of these Gospel passages, more detailed exegesis would be required. But even this brief examination gives much insight into texts that at first glance seem problematic and helps readers to understand what various writers intended to communicate to their original audiences.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Imagine that a friend says to you, “I’ve heard my pastor talk about biblical criticism, but I don’t think that Christians should criticize the Bible.” Explain to your friend what biblical criticism is and how it is used.
2. How has Catholic response to biblical criticism changed since the 1890s?
3. Explain several different Protestant responses to modern biblical criticism.
4. Imagine that a coworker tells you, “I’m trying to get ready for the end of this world. I know Armageddon is coming soon, and I don’t want to miss the rapture.” Explain this person’s understanding of the Bible and how this view began.
5. Christians agree that the Bible is *inspired* and that it is *true*. Do all Christians mean the same thing by these terms? Explain.
6. Explain the basic guideline of a contextual approach to interpreting the Bible: always interpret a text in its context. Include three overlapping aspects of context in your answer.
7. How are the terms *exegesis* and *hermeneutics* related to a contextual approach to interpretation of the Bible?
8. Based on important documents of the 1960s and later, describe the current Catholic approach to study and interpretation of the Bible.
9. This chapter describes approaches to interpreting the Bible of Jewish and several different Christian faith communities. Describe commonalities and differences among these approaches.