Christian educators have long emphasized that the Bible must be understood in its historical and literary context. But when teaching the theological content of the Bible, it is more important that biblical texts be presented in their canonical context. The early Jewish exegetes understood the importance of canonical context, and developed hermeneutical methods that placed primacy on the theological significance of each biblical text. While these methods are sometimes accused of “foisting” meanings onto the text, the rabbinic exegetes may help Christians find theological significance in obscure or prosaic biblical passages.

There is a grave danger inherent in embarking on college-level study of the Bible. It is a danger that Christian students must be ever mindful of, ever on guard for, lest they find that while they have preached to others, they themselves have become shipwrecks. The danger is that we can become so familiar with the historical, cultural, and literary contexts of the Bible that we can lose sight of its theological significance. For those students who begin their studies with the conviction that a biblical text can have only one meaning, and that that meaning is precisely what its original author had intended to convey to his reader, the danger is particularly acute.

In my experience, I have seen several such Bible students abandon their faith entirely, and some have become the most dangerous...
enemies of the Church. Their understanding of biblical meaning was so fixed that it could not adapt to the new information that their studies had introduced to them. In one sense, the concerned grandmothers and revivalist preachers who warn zealous young Christians not to attend seminary because it will destroy their faith have a valid concern. But the danger isn’t just the “lies” they teach in the seminaries—rather, the truth that they teach can be just as threatening to a dogmatic Christian’s belief.

I must admit that not too many years ago, I was convinced that the true meaning of a biblical text is precisely what its author intended it to mean. I was certain that a scriptural text, since it is a work of literature, should be interpreted like any other literary text (in the fashion that I then understood that literary texts should be interpreted). A text, I believed, is a medium: a channel of communication, designed to convey ideas from one individual to another. The best channel, of course, is that which is transparent, accurately transmitting the ideas of the sender to the receiver without getting in the way. When I write a letter to my cousin Vinnie telling him that he should begin associating with a better group of people, and Cousin Vinnie replies that he’ll be moving in with me on Tuesday, I feel justified in telling him that he has misunderstood my meaning. The text has failed to communicate the idea that I had intended it to communicate. The true meaning of that letter, I would have argued, is what I, as its author, had intended it to mean. That meaning could only be determined by an examination of the words, their context, the situation in which the letter was written, etc.

PROBLEMS IN THE CONCEPT OF “AUTHORIAL INTENT”

As I proceeded through my collegiate studies, I became increasingly aware of the fact that this approach to hermeneutics has its weaknesses, particularly when we are considering the meaning of biblical texts. On the one hand, there is a theological problem. Every biblical text has two levels of authorship: the human writer who put words to parchment or papyrus, and the divine Author who stands behind those words, giving them a deeper significance than their author may have known. But there’s another problem of a historical nature. As someone trained in the historical criticism of the Old Testament, I am well aware that many levels of redaction, or editing, were involved in the composition of many books of the Bible. Some biblical books, such as 2 Kings 18, incorporate letters written by foreign officials that criticize Israel, and even mock Israel’s God. Does the significance of these letters lie in their original authors’ desires to defy the Lord? Ezra 5 reproduces a libelous letter
written by Persian Empire officials accusing the Jews of plotting rebellion. Does the status of this letter as "Holy Scripture" derive from the people who wrote it, or from the one who incorporated it into the Book of Ezra? And what are we to make of certain of the Psalms that scholars believe were originally Canaanite compositions, adopted by the Israelites and modified for a monotheistic audience (much as some modern Christian musicians might adapt a secular song for more spiritual purposes)? Do these Psalms mean only what they meant to their original Canaanite author? It would seem to follow that, if they do, we engage in a form of paganism whenever we use them in our worship services. Obviously, a slavish adherence to my "original author" hermeneutical principle could lead me to some uncomfortable conclusions. Indeed, a good deal of the Old Testament—and some of the New Testament, as well—could be banished to the realm of irrelevance, having been composed by its authors for circumstances that no longer exist, and an audience that perished millennia ago.

Another problem that gave me pause was my suspicion that some of the biblical writers, when making reference to earlier biblical texts, did not seem to be bound by the original intentions of their authors. This was particularly evident to me in the New Testament, and the way it interprets some Old Testament passages. One of

*President Bridges and Chief Fiscal Officer John Myers treat students to a Thanksgiving feast.*
the most famous examples, no doubt, is Matt 2:18, where Herod's "slaughter of the innocents" is said to fulfill Jer 31:15, "A voice was heard in Ramah . . . Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." When we look up this passage in the Book of Jeremiah, we find that Jeremiah was not talking about King Herod. He was actually writing about the Babylonian's destruction of Judah. Yet another example may be found in Saint Paul's exegesis in Galatians 3:16 of God's promise to Abraham: "He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as if referring to many, but 'And to your seed,' referring to one—Christ." Here, Saint Paul exploits the fact that "seed" in Hebrew, zera, is a collective noun, and therefore a singular form of the noun is used for a plural concept. Paul seems to disregard a cardinal law of inductive Bible study: that the meaning of a text is derived from its historical and literary context. Could it be that the most important meaning of a biblical text might be something other than what its human author originally intended?

Several different methods and hermeneutical approaches have appeared in the last century or so to address this question. One of these is Karl Barth's Neo-orthodoxy, which jettisons the author's intention in favor of emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in transforming the words of the Bible into the Word of God in the reader's heart. This method, which has been very significant in Protestantism at large, has been largely rejected by evangelicals, because it rejects the notion that the Bible is the "Word of God" in an objective sense—it only becomes the Word of God for those whom the Spirit illuminates. A more literary approach to the problem has come from E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch, in reaction to the hyper-subjectivist "New Criticism," argued that the author's intent is the sole meaning of the text, while the same text can have different significance for whoever might read it. His position was embraced by many evangelicals, who were flabbergasted when Hirsch later backed off from the distinction, as he recognized how difficult it could be to maintain. A promising approach to the problem can be found in Brevard Childs' "Canon criticism" method. Childs argues that the theological meaning of a text resides only in its final, canonical form. This method takes seriously the issue of the author behind the author: the Holy Spirit who directs not just the composition of the books, but also their editing and their inclusion in the biblical canon. I have had a little more experience with canonical criticism than the other methods, since I regard myself as more of a biblical scholar than a theologian or literary critic, and I have often found it a helpful way of dealing with problems in the text. But it was not this method alone that shook my confidence in the principle that the
meaning of a text is to be found in the original author’s intention. Rather, it was my work in the field that has become one of my main areas of interest: early Jewish hermeneutical methods.

**ANCIENT JEWISH EXEGESIS**

When I began to read ancient Jewish biblical commentaries, my first reaction was typical of most new students of this literature: “What on earth are these guys doing?” My second reaction was also typical: “Whatever it is that they’re doing, I don’t like it!” Undoubtedly, early Jewish hermeneutics belongs to the same category as Fellini films, Wagnerian operas, and oysters: It’s an acquired taste. But once I had learned to appreciate it, I discovered in this literature a beauty, an internal consistency, and a theological cogency that continues to amaze and edify me. I would not say that I have found in early Jewish exegesis the answer to the problem of theological meaning in the Bible. Rather, I have found that the Jewish exegetes were struggling with the same issues with which modern Bible-believing scholars struggle. Their solutions sometimes anticipate those that Christians have recently adopted, and sometimes differ from them radically. What I will attempt to do in this paper is give you some of the flavor of early Jewish exegesis, and some of the ways that I have found it to be helpful in my own attempts to reconcile the Bible of the scholar with the Bible of the believer.

Early Jewish exegetical methods can be roughly divided into four categories: *peshat*, *pesher*, *midrash halakhah*, and *midrash hagaddah*. These categories represent forms of exegesis that began to come into existence in biblical times, and continued to develop into actual literary genres in later periods. The names are those used by the Jews themselves—words that became essential as their own understanding of the exegetical process became more nuanced.

**PESHAT**

The word *peshat* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to straighten out.” Essentially, *peshat* refers to exegesis designed to ferret out the “plain meaning” of a scriptural text, as opposed to the interpretive methods that allowed for more freedom in the possible meaning of the text. Such exegesis could include studies of word meaning, of literary context, or even of the historical background of a text. It’s the early Jewish equivalent to what we call inductive Bible study. Generally, the word *peshat* is found in later rabbinic texts, where it specifically stands in contrast to the method of *midrash*. For example, one rabbinic commentary records a dispute between the Jewish sages about the meaning of Deut 21:13, which states that when a beautiful woman is taken captive by the Israelites,
she should be allowed a month to mourn her father and mother before anyone could take her as a wife. Rabbi Akiva interpreted the “father and mother” midrashically (in this case, allegorically) to be a reference to her previous idolatry, while Rabbi Eliezer disagreed, stating that the verse should be interpreted according to its peshat: It literally meant “father and mother.”

Even though the term peshat isn’t found in early Jewish literature until well into the so-called “Amoraic” period (that is, after the second century A.D.), it is clear that Jewish exegetes distinguished between peshat and other forms of exegesis much earlier. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish scholar of the early first century A.D. who was heavily influenced by Greek thought and hermeneutical methods, frequently distinguished between “literal” meanings of passages and the “allegorical” interpretations that he preferred. In the later rabbinic age, the rabbis made the distinction starkly, and disagreed vehemently about the nature and importance of peshat in interpretation. In the Talmud (a collection of Jewish traditions dating from the first to fifth centuries A.D.), a statement is attributed to one rabbi that “the meaning of a scriptural text never departs from its peshat,” while another claims, “he who translates a scriptural text according to its literal meaning is a liar.” Obviously, early Judaism was divided on the significance of the peshat of a biblical text. It can be said with certainty, however, that the peshat method received much less attention in early rabbinic Judaism than other methods. Most of the rabbis simply didn’t consider the literal meaning of a text to be very important. It was not until the early Middle Ages, under the influence of reactionary groups like the Jewish Karaites and the Islamic exegetes that the rabbis (particularly such looming figures as Saadia Gaon, Rashi, and Maimonides) rediscovered the importance of peshat. By the twelfth century, the great medieval rabbi David Kimchi argued—in direct contrast to Philo—that it was the peshat of the text, and certainly no allegorical interpretation, that was truly important in biblical interpretation.

**PESHER**

The term pesher (a Hebrew word meaning “interpretation”) identifies an exegetical method generally associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls (documents written ca. 150 B.C.-A.D. 70). It refers to a method specifically designed for the interpretation of prophecy. In the hermeneutical system of the pesharists, each prophetic text contains a secret meaning—a “mystery” (Heb. raz) that may have been unknown even to its original author. This mystery invariably relates to what these interpreters believed was the true purpose of all prophecy: to elucidate events that will take place at the coming of the Messiah, and the signs that will precede his coming. Like
the apocalypses of Daniel and John, these true meanings were “sealed up” until the time that those with “insight” would be able to discern them. Any other meaning that the text may have possessed was secondary to its more important task of enlightening the inspired interpreter about the eschaton.

Frequently, the pesharist would establish a touchstone by finding an event of the recent past “predicted” by a biblical prophecy. He would then extrapolate to events that he expected to occur in the near-future—usually including the coming of the Messiah, the deliverance of Israel, and the destruction of the unrighteous. This passage from the pesher on the book of Nahum is typical:

*Where the lion goes, there is the lioness, the lion cub, [and there is none to disturb them.]* Its interpretation (pesher) concerns Demetrius king of Greece who sought, on the counsel of the seekers of flattery, to enter Jerusalem. [But God did not permit the city to be delivered] into the hands of the kings of Greece, from the time of Antiochus until the coming of the rulers of the Kittim (i.e., the Romans). Then, it shall be trampled under their feet.11

The pesher quotes a verse from the prophet, and then presents its interpretation. The reference to Demetrius is an event from the interpreter’s recent past: the attempt of the Greek king Demetrius III to invade Judaea, at the invitation of the Pharisees (the “seekers of flattery”), in 88 B.C. As the pesher says, Demetrius was unsuccessful in his attempt. From this historical event, the interpreter moves to the more recent invasion of Jerusalem by Rome (63 B.C.). As is often the case in the pesharim, the relationship between the verse and its interpretation is hardly transparent. Like most of these texts, the interpretation skips from event to event, apparently in

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**Quotes from Dr. Norman V. Bridges**

“Faculty and students are the heart and soul of the academic enterprise. Faculty provide the knowledge base, the insight, the modeling. Students provide the inspiration, the questioning, the challenge of learning together. A great teacher and a brilliant student are persons to be treasured.”

—“From the President’s Desk,” *Bethel Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 3, Fall 2000)
almost random order. One verse may talk about the future and the
destruction of the Romans; the next might predict the judgment of
the Pharisees, or the coming of the Messiah. Context, flow of thought,
or even internal consistency, have little role in the pesher.

There has been a running debate among scholars about whether
the pesharim represent inspired exegesis (in which the Holy Spirit
reveals the meaning directly to the interpreter), or if it is conducted
according to certain rules. The answer, I believe, is both: The pe­
sharists believed that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to see the
secrets concealed in the texts. Nonetheless, they often used the same
methods that are used in later midrashim—methods I'll talk about
later in this paper—in order to draw connections between biblical
texts and current events. In spite of their similar methods, however,
I cannot help but believe that it was more frequently an event that
inspired a certain interpretation, rather than an interpretation
preceding an event. A comparison to the biblical interpretation of
some modern "prophecy preachers" will quickly demonstrate how
easily biblical verses can be made to "predict" the recent past.

Although the pesher method may seem foreign to us, it is virtu­
ally certain that the Evangelists occasionally employed a similar
method of interpretation in the Gospels. Like the authors of the
Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gospel writers believed that they were liv­
ing in the age about which all the prophets had written—the age
of the Messiah. Therefore, the historical events of their day had
eschatological significance. So in the verse mentioned earlier, Matt
2:18, the Evangelist sees in Jeremiah's words about the fall of
Babylon a deeper significance: the Christological Slaughter of the
Innocents. Likewise, in 2:15, Matthew sees a deeper significance
in Hos 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son." The verse originally
referred to the Exodus, and the way God had brought Israel from
bondage. (The fact that this verse was not originally about Jesus is
clear from 11:2, which tells how Israel then proceeded to rebel and
worship idols.) Matthew takes the verse from its context and sees
here a prediction of Joseph and Mary's flight into Egypt. Certainly,
Matthew has departed from the prophets' original intention in both
cases. But the hermeneutical method he employed was widely ac­
cepted in the world for which the Evangelists wrote.

MIDRASH HALAKHAH

Midrash is a Hebrew word that is best translated "exposition." The
term is used broadly these days to refer to almost any Jewish
exegesis, and it has become something of a fad to find midrashim all
over the pages of the New Testament. My opinion is that the term
has been used with too much freedom of late, and I would rather
restrict it to methods of Jewish exegesis that developed from about the second century A.D. up through the early Middle Ages.

The earliest form of rabbinic midrash is midrash halakhah ("exposition concerning conduct"). This kind of exegesis is the one that we most often find criticized in popular Christian caricatures of rabbinic Judaism. Basically, it is legal exposition. From the first time that the Law of Moses was established as the normative code of conduct for Israel, people were discovering its many "loopholes" and ambiguities. It was therefore necessary for Ezra, when he presented the Law of Moses to the people of Judaea, to accompany the reading with a verbal explanation of its precepts. Many years later, the Pharisees and other groups that wished to be scrupulous about their observance of the Law were forced to develop a great body of tradition to clarify biblical regulations. Many of these traditions have been gathered in the works called the Mishnah and Tosephta—books of mostly legal materials that were set down to writing in the mid-third century A.D. But the Jews, who were so bound to the idea that the Bible was their main authority for rules of practice, could not simply accept the traditions handed down to them by their sages without any scriptural support. So the sages developed exegetical literature concerned primarily with evincing biblical support for rabbinic legal ordinances. One example of such exegesis is found in the Mekhilita of Rabbi Ishmael. This book of midrash comprises a commentary on certain chapters from the biblical Book of Exodus. In one section, it quotes from Exod 12:2: "This month (Heb. hodesh) shall be for you the first month (i.e., the first month of the year)." But the rabbis interpreted the word hodesh not by its obvious, contextual meaning, but rather by an alternate meaning, "new moon." They argued that the verse could be understood to mean, "The new moon shall be the beginning of your month." By this bit of sleight-of-hand, they found biblical support for the rabbinic tradition that fixed the beginning of a month by the sighting of the new moon. In another case, the passage, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Exod 21: 24) was interpreted not according to its literal meaning, but allegorically. It was thus used to support the rabbinic tradition that required monetary compensation from one who inadvertently inflicted bodily harm on another.

**MIDRASH HAGGADAH**

Midrash halakhah is indeed an interesting topic of study, but in this paper, I'm more interested in its close cousin, midrash haggadah (literally, "exposition of evidence"—but of course, anyone who translates literally is a liar). This form of midrash is less concerned with legal exposition than it is with theological or homiletical
exposition. It is in midrash haggadah that we discover the heart and soul of rabbinic Judaism: the passion for God, the embrace of his humanity, the delight in his grace. In the heat of Judaism’s struggle to survive against an increasingly oppressive Roman Empire, and then against the military and political forces of Islam, it was through haggadic midrash that Judaism hammered out its own unique religious identity.

The most basic assumption underlying midrash haggadah is that a text does not necessarily mean what it says. Rather, any given scriptural text can have several different meanings in addition to its peshat. These meanings are often suggested not by the text itself, but by another biblical passage (called the proem) that the commentator links to the original passage by any of a variety of exegetical means. By interpreting their original passages in tandem with some other scriptural verse, the rabbis could make the most prosaic or obtuse verse of scripture sound with the theological insight of the loftiest of the prophets. Usually these insights are not presented as dry maxims, but in the form of a story. The rabbis would incarnate truth in narrative, more in the manner of the pastor than the theologian.

A couple of examples from midrash haggadah will illustrate this method. The first of these is a popular midrash on a passage from Exodus that is found in various forms in several midrashim. In Exod 24:10, Moses and the elders of Israel ascend Mount Sinai, where they behold the God of Israel. The passage adds the puzzling detail that there was a pavement of brickwork (usually translated “sapphire” in English editions) beneath his feet. The rabbis expounded this passage in light of Isa 63:10: “In all of their affliction, He was afflicted.” They explained that when the children of Israel were taken as slaves in Egypt, God too, in some sense, went into slavery. When the Israelites’ hands were bound behind their backs, God, too, allowed his right hand to be bound. And when Pharaoh forced them to make bricks, God, too, made bricks in heaven. It was these bricks that the elders of Israel beheld beneath his feet on Sinai. In this

Norman and Janice Bridges in the early 1990s.
manner—a bit of exegetical manipulation—the rabbis managed to find in a confusing scripture passage a profound theological truth: that God shares in the pain and burdens of his people.

Another interesting midrash comes from *Lamentations Rabbah*, the commentary on the book of Lamentations. In their exposition of Lam 3:1, the rabbis question whether it is proper for Jeremiah—or, more broadly, God’s people—to charge God with being unfair. They answer with a parable: a certain king became angry at his consort, so he drove her away. She, however, hovered nearby, pressing her face against his door. When the king passed by, he said, “You are acting impudently!” She said, “I am qualified to do so, since no woman has accepted you except me.” He replied, “It was I who rejected the other women!” But she said, “If this is true, why did you go to a certain place on a certain street—wasn’t it because of a certain woman who rejected you?” Likewise, they say, the Lord told Israel, “You are acting impudently!” But Israel replied, “I have a right to do so, since I accepted your Law when others wouldn’t.” God replied, “It was I who rejected them!” But Israel answered, “If this is so, then why did you first take your Law to other nations? For it says in the Scriptures that He first revealed Himself to the sons of Esau: ‘The Lord came from Sinai, and rose from Seir [land of the Edomites, children of Esau] unto them’; but the sons of Esau rejected him. He then offered the Law to the sons of Ishmael, but they too rejected it; as Scripture says, ‘He shined forth from Mount Paran [land of the Arabs, the children of Ishmael].’ Finally he offered it to Israel, who accepted.” The rabbis contended that the Scriptures taught that God had first offered his Word to the Edomites, and then to the Arabs, both of whom rejected it. He then offered it to Israel, who accepted. For this reason, then, Israel had the right to question God—because they had chosen him. Here, the rabbis express a truth that modern Christians are only beginning to learn: that God’s covenant relationship with us can endure our anger and our questions. Not only did he choose us, but we chose him, as well, and he will not be quick to reject us.

**CONTROLS ON EXEGESIS**

This overview of early Jewish exegesis has been necessarily terse, but it still allows us to draw certain contrasts between these methods and those of modern Christian exegetes. First, and most important, is that early Jewish hermeneutics was in no way bound to the concept of authorial intent. Only when the exegetes were attempting to determine the *peshat* of a passage was the author’s intention a consideration. Otherwise, the text was free to mean whatever it might mean to an imaginative interpreter—as long as
he stayed within certain accepted guidelines. It was these limits that prevented early Jewish interpretation from degenerating into a crude form of reader-response.\textsuperscript{18}

The first of these limits was previously-received tradition. We have already seen how important tradition was in legal exposition. The same was true of theological exposition. One of the most frequent phrases to be found among the midrashim is “I received a tradition from the Sages that . . . .” Such a statement could introduce a new interpretation, or it could refute an interpretation being suggested by another rabbi. The Sages—the body of tradition upon which Judaism was based—was both a stable bedrock that prevented interpreters from drifting too far afield from what Judaism had come to accept as normative, and a constantly-evolving standard that could accommodate and assimilate the insights of new teachers. We have already seen how this factor worked in the case of the halakhah on Exodus regarding the new moon. It worked as well with haggadic interpretation. For example, there is a lengthy discussion among several rabbis about where a certain portion of the Song of Solomon had been originally spoken. Various rabbis cited biblical verses to support different possible locations for its origin. The discussion ended, however, when it was stated: “The rabbis declare that all these verses refer to the Temple.”\textsuperscript{19}

Next, there was reason. Frequently, a certain interpretation was suggested on the basis that it made good sense, or rejected because it was senseless. For instance, the rabbis rejected a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 on the basis that it should not require God six days to create the world, and he would certainly not need to rest afterwards.\textsuperscript{20} The verses, they explained, had been given for human benefit, allowing us to better understand the act of creation by comparing it to the procedure of a human workman. In another

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**Quotes from Dr. Norman V. Bridges**

“Spiritual growth and commitment are the hallmarks of life at Bethel College. We are a Christian community of scholars and learners. Our devotion to Christ and His Kingdom enlivens all of our other activities of teaching/learning/serving/and playing. It makes life both sacred and exciting because it gives our lives purpose and meaning.”

—“From the President’s Desk,” *Bethel Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 3 Fall 2000

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case, Rabbi Yohanan argued that Eccl 9:8, "Let your garments always be white," had to be interpreted metaphorically. "Don't the nations of the world have many white garments?" he asked. Thus, he concluded, "white garments" must rather refer to clothing one's self in good works.\(^{21}\) Even the great Rabbi Akiva was strongly reproved when he interpreted the collective noun "frogs" in the story of the plagues on Egypt as a singular "frog." A single frog, his companions argued, wouldn't make much of a plague.\(^{22}\)

Likewise, the rabbis' experience—broadly speaking—could influence the way that they interpreted Scriptures. For the early Jewish exegetes, any experience of life could be an object lesson that could provide insight into the Scriptures. In one case, the rabbis disagreed about the proper time for scriptural studies. Some rabbis cited texts that implied that the Bible is best studied at night. Another, however, countered with the verse that states that "You shall meditate on them day and night" (Josh 8:1). He therefore claimed that one was supposed to study the Bible at all times. The contradiction was reconciled by Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish: "After I have labored over the Torah all day, it often becomes clear to me at night."\(^{23}\) In another case, Rabbi Eleazar was expounding on Proverbs 2:4: "If you seek her as silver and search for her as hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord." He told of how he would be the first teacher at the "House of Exposition" every day, and he was the last to leave at night. But one day, as he was on his way to his studies, he saw the gatherers of manure and straw already hard at work. He exclaimed: "We are told to search out the Torah like silver, and we do not even seek for it with the diligence of those who seek manure!"\(^{24}\)

**THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?**

These different "controls" on biblical interpretation—tradition, reason, and experience—may sound familiar to you. They comprise, along with Scripture itself, the theological model known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The term "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" was first coined by the Methodist historian Albert Outler to describe the way that John Wesley approached theology.\(^{25}\) Scripture for Wesley was primary in formulating theology; but Scripture must be interpreted. The controls that Wesley used in interpreting Scripture included the larger canon of Scripture, the traditions of the Church, the powers of reason, and personal experience. These controls helped shape Wesley's doctrine, and restrained him from reading any biblical texts in literary or historical isolation.

Now I am not trying to say that Wesley was a rabbi; or even less, that the rabbis were Methodists. Rather, I believe that an examination of the early rabbinic writings bears out the fact that
the parameters that we hold as so important in Wesleyan theology have been recognized by students of Scripture since the Bible came into being as we know it today. It was this same quadrilateral that influenced the Old Testament prophets, as well as Saint Paul and the Evangelists in their hermeneutics, as they wrote the letters that have become our Bible. It is this same quadrilateral that consciously or unconsciously guides every modern biblical exegete, be they Catholics or charismatics, Harvard Divinity School or Dallas Theological Seminary trained. By affirming, therefore, our adherence to the Quadrilateral as a model for exegesis, we not only stand in a tradition that stretches back far behind Wesley himself, but that is ubiquitous today—even though many outside the Wesleyan tradition are loathe to admit it.

There is, however, yet another limiting factor—indeed, the major factor—in early Jewish biblical interpretation that has only recently begun to receive attention. This factor was the theological message of the Bible as a whole. This is why the rabbis so frequently quoted Scripture in their interpretations of Bible passages: It was essential that they demonstrate the “canonicity” of their exegesis. It may seem ironic, but the rabbis had no qualms about rejecting the “plain meaning” (peshat) of a text in favor of a more interpretive one, if that interpretation seemed more in accord with the spirit and message of the Bible as a whole. In other words, no scriptural verse could be interpreted outside of or in contradiction to the message of the canon as a whole. In modern exegesis, too, this constraint is essential if our goal is to determine the theological meaning of texts. Methods that concentrate on historical contexts are perfectly suitable, if the questions we are asking of the text are historical. If the questions are literary, we must ask literary questions. But if the questions that we are asking of the text are theological, we must consider the theological context of the text: its place in the canon, where the theological authority of the text is vested.

Modern understandings of the composition of the Bible have made this conclusion inescapable. It is certainly questionable how much theological authority we should vest in the “original forms” of the biblical text. First of all, we don’t possess the “original forms” of the texts—we only possess the forms that were preserved and passed on to us as Holy Scripture. And practically speaking, what relevance could there be for the Christian in the ritual laws of Leviticus and Numbers, if they are not read in light of the New Testament revelation? Each idea about God must be balanced against the message of the Bible as a whole, as that message is understood within the community of believers. Sometimes, the significance of these texts to the community of faith may have been very different from what it meant to its original author. This
idea—an idea being trumpeted by the modern “canon critics” as if they had discovered fire—was recognized by Jewish exegetes many centuries ago.

One way to illustrate the importance of reading a scriptural passage in light of the whole canon is to draw an analogy between the Bible and a library. If someone were to browse through my bookshelves, probably the first book to catch his or her eye would be a large purple volume with bold white lettering reading “Atheism: The Case Against God.” If someone then read this book, they would learn a good deal about what its author thinks about God. They would say “The meaning of this book is that there is no sufficient evidence for postulating the idea of a supreme being; and indeed, there is good evidence against the notion.” But if they thought that reading this book would tell them about my beliefs, as the one who assembled the library, they would be mistaken. If they were to look at all the books on my shelf, they could then understand the meaning of this volume on atheism in light of the collection as a whole. One reader might then say, “This book means that we need not fear those who attack our faith, because its ultimate truth lies beyond the reach of their arguments.” Another could say, “This book means that reason is not limited to those who believe in God.” Yet another might say, “This book means that we should examine our own faith, to see if it can stand scrutiny.” And all would be correct. In the context of my library this book means all these things, and more besides. Each meaning is very different than the intention of its original author. This is, of course, an imperfect analogy: The books of the Bible were not assembled in order to tell us something about the early Christian community, but about God. Still, the point of the analogy is valid. The meaning of a library is greater than the sum of its parts.

Quotes from Dr. Norman V. Bridges

“As we approach the Christmas season . . . we think of the Child of Bethlehem Who left the throne of glory and adoration of innumerable angels, and condescended to be born in a manger, the child of Mary.

“It is to Him that our hearts turn, and it is His life, His person, and His sacrifice, that warm our souls and thrill our beings.”

—“What We Need for Christmas” by Norman V. Bridges, Niles, Michigan, Gospel Banner, v.85, no. 45, Dec. 13, 1962, p.11
An analogous situation actually has occurred in historical studies. When the Nag Hammadi texts were discovered in Egypt, it was believed that the library of an ancient Gnostic heretic had been uncovered. But the texts seemed to represent a diversity of opinions, and scholars had a difficult time reconciling their teachings with one another. They were devising strange theories about the beliefs of early Gnostics, in order to account for these discrepancies. Then, it was discovered that the texts were not the library of a Gnostic, but of a heresiologist—a monk who was studying the texts in order to refute the beliefs contained in them. They did not represent a single Gnostic sect, but many different sects. We can see, then, that the message of a library as a whole can be quite different than the message of any single work in that library. So too with the Bible: It is the canon of Scripture that reveals God, and not any one part of it in isolation. To read the Bible in any other way is to make the error of the five blind Indians groping their way around the elephant.

While a group that depends heavily on certain books of the Bible may believe that God is like a wall, a group that favors other books may be convinced that God is like a tree.

Moving from the realm of analogy to the Bible itself, we can observe the harmful effects of the “author-intent” approach on the interpretation of one of the most beautiful books of the Bible: the Song of Solomon. Modern scholars recognize that this book was originally a secular song, composed as an ode to human love. This view has made its way into most contemporary commentaries—even conservative ones—to the point where students are warned away from any kind of “allegorical” interpretations of the book. This “modern” understanding of the Song was not unknown in antiquity, either. Among the rabbis, arguments continued for some time whether the Song of Solomon should or should not be included in the Bible. It was finally included because the majority of the rabbis believed that the true meaning of the book was a graphic description of the love between God and his people. It was this same interpretation that was held in the early and medieval church, as well: The Song was an allegory of the love of Christ for his bride, the Church. Many beautiful meditations on this book have been lost to modern Christians, because biblical scholars have managed to convince the church that this book can only be interpreted in line with its original meaning: as a purely secular love song. If the early rabbis and church fathers had read the book in this same way, it would never have been included in our Bible. I am not saying that the modern exegetes are wrong; I would only argue that the secular meaning of the text is not its only possible meaning, and certainly not its most important meaning.
CONCLUSIONS

Let me then summarize and clarify a bit of what I’ve been trying to say:

1. The concept of “authorial intent” does not seem to have been a major concern to the biblical writers or to early Judaism (I could add early Christianity as well, but that isn’t my field). It is, in fact, a product of the Enlightenment, the same movement that produced the Historical Critical method. One could even argue that this infatuation with the original authors’ intent is merely another form of historical criticism, and it could force the Bible into the same sterile irrelevancy that the text was banished to by source criticism, when it is used as the sole tool for understanding the text.

2. Of the different methods used in early Judaism for interpreting biblical texts, the concept of peshat most closely approximates what we think of as the “original meaning” of the text. It involved the philological, literary, and historical investigations of the text. But the determination of peshat was considered to be less important than either pesher (prophetic interpretation) or midrash (legal, homiletical and theological commentary on the text).

3. In pesharim, prophecies were interpreted as predictions of events in the immediate past or near future. This method is found mainly in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but also seems to underlie the New Testament’s use of Old Testament prophecy.

4. In midrash, the biblical text was interpreted in light of those same factors that stand together with Scripture in the Wesleyan quadrilateral: tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture, however, was always held as the primary authority, and a legal ruling or theological statement based on tradition or reason would usually be given a biblical proof-text, as well.

5. The interpretation of any given biblical text was always subject to the message of the canon as a whole, as that meaning was understood by the community of faith that assembled the canon. It seems reasonable to me, however, that community should not be understood only as something that once existed, and was once led to understand the Bible in a certain way. In other words, we should not feel slavishly bound to the biblical interpretations accepted in generations past. While tradition is important, it isn’t inerrant. We must recognize that the Spirit is still speaking to the Church; that “God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word,” as Pastor John Robinson stated on the deck of the Mayflower. The Bible isn’t a “relic”; it’s a nuclear reactor!

The way the rabbis read the Bible might be unsettling to some of us. Bible teachers might be especially troubled: After trying so hard to teach our students to read the text contextually, should we
now tell them it can mean whatever they can make it mean? Some might well suggest that if we allow the meaning of a text to range away from its historical, contextual meaning—its *peshat*—we might open the door to anarchy. The Bible could become nothing more than a collection of proof texts for those who would use it to support whatever dogmatic ideas the interpreters choose to proffer. And indeed, it *could* happen, but not because there's something inherently wrong in the method. We have the parameters established by the canon of Scripture, by tradition, by reason, and by experience to constrain those who would become too "creative" in their exegesis. We have the community of faith, correcting and supporting each other, just as the rabbis kept each other "honest" in their interpretations. But most important of all, we have the faithful guidance of the Holy Spirit, the voice that tells us, if we venture to the right or left, "This is the way, walk ye in it!" (Isa 30:21). If we choose to ignore the voice of the Holy Spirit, it will do us little good to try and order our lives by the "original intentions" of the Scriptures. As Paul warned us, the letter (of the Law) kills, but it is the Spirit and the Spirit alone that gives life (2 Cor 3:6).

NOTES

1 This position is commonly held by many evangelicals who don’t appreciate all its ramifications. See, e.g., the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp 881-887: “Article XV: We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed.”


6 SifreDeuteronomy 213.

7 Literal=h*retos*; allegorical=allegoria.

8 Talmud Shab. 63a.

9 Talmud Kid. 49a.

10 *Pesharim* have been found on the books of Isaiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, Micah, and Zephaniah; there are also collections that jump from book to book. It is especially interesting that a pesher also exists on the Book of Psalms, indicating that the Psalms were believed in those days to be prophetic.
Compare this to the use of the Psalms in the Gospels, and especially to Acts 2:30.

11 Pesher *Nahum* 2.1-3. The portions in square brackets have been reconstructed.

12 Neh 8:8. The text has also been interpreted to mean not an interpretation, but a translation of the Hebrew into the Aramaic commonly spoken in that day.

13 *Mekhilta* Pischa 2.1.

14 *Talmud* Baba Kama 84a.

15 These methods are called *middot*. The first list of *middot* is associated with the venerable rabbi Hillel, who purportedly adduced seven different means by which “true meanings” could be drawn from scriptural passages. They include such devices as anagrams (where the first letters of a word string in a verse suggests a key word in another verse), *gematria* (assigning numerical values to words—as the Book of Revelation does with the number “666”), *kal wa-homer* (extrapolating a general rule from a single case), and allegories. Later rabbis added to the list, until the latest list of *middot* (found in the Talmud) contained thirty-two different rules for exegesis.

16 E.g. *Mekhilta* Pischa 2.

17 Lamentations *Rabbah* III.1.i.

18 A hermeneutical method based on the idea that a text has no meaning implicit in itself. Rather, the meaning of a text is what it says to its reader. Thus, any text will have as many meanings as it has readers.

19 Song of Songs *Rabbah* I.2.i.


21 Ecclesiastes *Rabbah* IX.8.i.


23 Song of Songs *Rabbah* V.11.i.

24 Song of Songs *Rabbah* I.1.ix.
