

Exegetical Fallacies

Common Mistakes Every Student of the Bible Must Avoid

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Introduction

Over twenty years ago, D. A. Carson published his superb volume entitled *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 1984). In it he covers the areas of word-study fallacies, grammatical fallacies, logical fallacies, and presuppositional and historical fallacies. Personally, I think it should be required reading for every seminary student without exception. Since Carson did such a wonderful job of covering the issues, what areas should I cover in this seminar? Repetition is instructive, but it can also be boring, unless there are some new twists to the presentation. Therefore, it is my aim to focus on the subtitle for this session: "Common Mistakes Every Student of the Bible Must Avoid." Forty-two years of preaching, thirty-eight years of teaching, and over twenty years of Bible translation ministries provide an abundance of personal examples. Lest this session become a litany of *mea culpas*, however, I will not reveal how many of the following mistakes have been my own at one time or another.

The Evidential Fallacy

In the evidential system of American and British jurisprudence the concept of *prima facie* (literally, "at first view") evidence is very important. *Prima facie* evidence is evidence that is sufficient to raise a presumption of fact or to establish the fact in question, unless evidence of equal veracity is presented in rebuttal. Included in this evidential system is the presumption of innocence until proven guilty and that witnesses must present facts, not opinions. In the area of biblical studies this evidential methodology stands in opposition to the hermeneutics of doubt (or, the Troelschian principle of skeptical criticism).¹ As Robert Dick Wilson observed, "our text of the Old Testament is presumptively correct, ... its meaning is on the whole clear and trustworthy."² Whether we are discussing the Old Testament's historical narratives or the Gospel narratives, evangelicals should approach the biblical text with a presumption of factuality.

One of the greatest fallacies students of Scripture can commit is to fail to adequately recognize the *prima facie* nature of biblical evidence. It is fallacious to condition acceptance of the biblical text upon corroboration by external evidence. When the student comes upon interpretive problems in the biblical text, he must allow the text to speak and must accept the testimony of the text with a presumption of accuracy. Therefore, reading about the Chaldeans in Genesis 11:28-31, for example, should not cause us to doubt the veracity of the text because the extrabiblical Assyrian records do not mention Chaldeans until the 9th century B.C. The Assyrian evidence is not contemporary with Moses (the author of Genesis 11) nor with Babel (the historical setting of Genesis 11). Acceptance of the Assyrian evidence over the biblical evidence denigrates the biblical record and treats it with skepticism rather than as *prima facie* evidence. As Kenneth Kitchen points out, inconsistency dominates the appeal to Assyrian historical texts, since

¹ See V. Philips Long, "Historiography of the Old Testament," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. by David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 154, 169.

² Robert Dick Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*, rev. by Edward J. Young (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 9.

the Egyptian pharaohs of the period from the patriarchs to Moses also do not appear anywhere in the Assyrian records.³

In other words, we err when we automatically assume that every major interpretive problem is due to an inaccuracy within the text itself. As we deal with problems in the biblical text, we must assume that it is accurate until proven otherwise by equally accurate, equally authentic, and equally ancient evidence. For example, when we read in the superscription to Psalm 60 that Joab slew 12,000 Edomites, we ought to accept that as *prima facie* evidence. Of equal standing are the records in 2 Samuel 8:13 and 1 Chronicles 18:12. The former reveals that David slew 18,000 Arameans; the latter declares that Abishai slew 18,000 Edomites. Are these three contradictory accounts, or three complementary accounts? Perhaps the differences in the individuals involved reflect the chain of command. David, as king, was commander-in-chief. Joab, being next in command as the chief of the armies, was the field commander and Abishai, a subordinate officer to Joab, was over one contingent of the field army participating in this particular action. Variation in the numbers of enemy casualties might reflect different methods of calculating the casualties at separate levels of the chain of command or different times for certain counts prior to a settled statistic. Possibly, the different casualty counts indicate different engagements within the greater battle or even a series of battles. As for the difference between Edom and Aram, we should keep in mind that both Edomites and Arameans participated in the campaign against David's forces (see 2 Sam 8:5; cp. 1 Kgs 11:17 [the Aramean Hadad with Edomites]). The target area was Edom, but Arameans were present and had also created a diversion in Aramea (Syria) where David had gone to quell the uprising.

Another example from the OT might help illustrate the difference between what current archaeologists and historians are saying about the text as compared to a proper understanding of the text itself. Consider the exodus from Egypt. Grant Osborne mentions the lack of primary physical evidence for the exodus.⁴ He then observes that "there is a fair amount of secondary evidence for such a migration and *sufficient data to accept the historicity of the events*."⁵ That kind of thinking is antithetical to the concept of a *priori* evidence and demeans the authority and accuracy of Scripture. The Scripture is itself sufficient evidence to accept the historicity of the events. We ought not to wait for "sufficient data to accept" any declaration of Scripture.

The Superior Knowledge Fallacy

Exegetical problems most often arise due to our own ignorance rather than any fault in the text itself. It has become customary among evangelical scholars to resort to textual emendation in order to explain some difficult texts. For example, Alfred Hoerth resorts to scribal glosses for the mention of "Chaldeans" in Genesis 11:28⁶ and a later "editorial touch" in his treatment of the phrase "in the land of Rameses" in Genesis 47:11.⁷ His preference for later textual revision as an explanation makes his accusation against critical scholars ("To accept the biblical account is now said to be naïve"⁸) ring hollow. It also contradicts his own principle that it

³ "If Assyrian mentions are the sine qua non (the absolute criterion) for a king's existence, then Egypt and her kings could not have existed before the specific naming of (U)shilkanni, Shapataka, and Ta(ha)rqa in 716-679!" (K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003], 12).

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/4 (Dec 2005): 685.

⁵ *Ibid.*; emphasis mine.

⁶ Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 156 n. 14, 166 n. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

is not a sound practice to emend “the biblical text to make the identification fit.”⁹ Scholars too often pursue many such textual emendations merely because the interpreter has insufficient knowledge to make sense of the text as it stands. Ignorance should never be an excuse to emend the text in order to make it understandable to the modern western mind. Above all else, the evangelical exegete/expositor must accept the biblical text as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. Adhering consistently to this declaration of faith will require an equal admission of one's own ignorance and inability to resolve every problem. Our ignorance, however, should never become the excuse for compromising the integrity of the Scriptures. Our first assumption should be that we are in error, rather than applying the hermeneutics of doubt to the text.

According to Francis Andersen, “The notorious difficulties of the book of Job have been largely blamed on a corrupt text; but it is more likely, in my opinion, that much of the incoherence is due to the artistic representation of the turbulent outbursts and hysterical cries of rage and grief.”¹⁰ Due to his work with David Noel Freedman for the *Micah* volume in the Anchor Bible series, they decided that the unusual and sometimes “crazy” character of the text “was exactly that. It is an effective rendition of the sobs and screams of a person who has lost all self-control in paroxysms of rage and grief.”¹¹ In other words, the classical Hebrew authors of both Job and Micah really did know the language better than modern Hebraists.

The Word Study Fallacy

Word studies are popular, easily obtained from available resources, and an easy way to procure sermon content. However, word studies are also subject to radical extrapolations and erroneous applications.¹² It is not always possible to strike exegetical gold by extracting a word from the text for close examination. Word studies alone will not suffice. Indeed, over-occupation with word studies is a sign of laziness and ignorance involved in much of what passes for biblical exposition in our times. Nigel Turner, an eminent New Testament Greek scholar, correctly summarized the issue as follows:

Just as a sentence is more revealing than a single word, so the examination of a writer's syntax and style is that much more important to a biblical commentator. It is not surprising that fewer books have been written on this subject than on vocabulary, because whereas students of vocabulary can quickly look up lists of words in concordances and indices, in the field of syntax the study is more circuitous. There is no help except in a few selective grammars and monographs, so that the worker really must work his way through all the texts in Greek.¹³

While we might decry over-emphasis on philology or etymology, we must recognize that the choice of individual words was significant to the writers of Scripture. It is legitimate for the

⁹ Ibid., 225.

¹⁰ Francis I. Andersen, “Linguistic Coherence in Prophetic Discourse,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman*, edited by Astrid B. Beck, et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 147. Cp. John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 3: “The many rare words and textual disturbances make the Hebrew text of Job one of the most obscure in the OT. The ancient versions testify to the fact that many passages were unintelligible even to the earliest translators.”

¹¹ Ibid., 148. Cp. Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 10: “But in the more corrupt passages of the book—and Micah is often placed among the worst books in the canon in this respect—so many conjectures have been proposed that it would be impossible to list them all even if it made any sense to do so.”

¹² See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 25-66 (“Word-Study Fallacies”) for a fuller discussion.

¹³ Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965), 2-3.

exegete to ask, "Why did the writer choose this term as opposed to one of its synonyms?" Robert Renehan offers the following explanation:

Whether Euripides wrote δεῖ ["ought"] or χρῆ ["must"] in a given passage is hardly of metaphysical import. But we must assume that he made a choice between them. This is sufficient justification for concerning ourselves with the problem. It made a difference to the poet; it should make a difference to us. This planet, I do not doubt, shall never want for people to despise such problems and those who try to resolve them. Such contempt is founded upon the remarkable premise that one who manifests a concern for minutiae must of necessity be both indifferent to and unequal to profound problems. The Greeks, on the contrary, in their simplicity had contrived a word to express this reverence before even the smallest truth; and that word is φιλαλήθεια ["love of truth"].¹⁴

Study of the words alone will not present us with a consistent interpretation or theology. This is one of the misleading aspects of theological dictionaries/wordbooks. We learn far more about obedience/disobedience or sacrifice and sin from the full statement of a passage like 1 Samuel 15:22-23 than we will from word studies of key terms like "sacrifice," "obey," or "sin" in the text. As a matter of fact, as Moisés Silva reminds us, "We learn much more about the doctrine of sin by John's statement, 'Sin is the transgression of the law,' than by a word-study of ἀμαρτία; similarly, tracing the history of the word ἄγιος is relatively unimportant for the doctrine of sanctification once we have examined Romans 6-8 and related passages."¹⁵

John Sanders, in *A God Who Risks*, interprets παραδίωμι with one meaning ("hand over") in every use of the word in John's Gospel.¹⁶ He uses this argumentation to claim that Jesus merely said that Judas would "hand him over," not "betray him." God has only present and past knowledge, therefore Jesus could not have known what Judas was really going to do. In other words, God cannot know the future. In addition, by applying the meaning "strengthen" to all three Hebrew words employed to describe God's "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart (*ḥāzaq*, *kābēd*, and *qāśāh*), Sanders has glossed over the clear contextual meaning of these words in their individual occurrences to purge any deterministic sense from the wording of the text.¹⁷ In this way he proposes that "God strengthened Pharaoh's heart in his rebellion in the hopes that it would help him come to his senses and repent."¹⁸ Sander's problem is that he depends too heavily upon word studies, which he skewed to his presuppositions rather than listening to Scripture as a whole or to the individual statements in context. In order to pursue proper word studies, the student must emphasize current usage in a given context (*usus loquendi*). Any linguistic aids are virtually useless apart from the author's context.

The Fallacy of Reading Between the Lines

As I grow older and (hopefully) wiser, I have less and less interest about the white spaces in the Word. We have enough to occupy us in understanding and applying what the Word says. What the Bible student must do is to focus on what the Scriptures say, not on what he thinks the Scriptures imply. One example of this fallacy is the trinitarian interpretation of the four living

¹⁴ Robert Renehan, *Greek Textual Criticism: A Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 134.

¹⁵ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 28.

¹⁶ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121. See, also, A. B. Caneday, "Putting God at Risk: A Critique of John Sander's View of Providence," *Trinity Journal* 20/2 (Fall 1999): 156.

creatures' crying out "Holy, holy, holy" in Revelation 4:8.¹⁹ The multiple adjectival declaration is actually an emphatic Semitic triplet. Other such triplets include "a ruin, a ruin, a ruin" (Ezek 21:27) or "land, land, land" (Jer 22:29). What kind of threefold existence might the creative interpreter dream up for these occurrences?

This fallacy falls into the category of logical fallacies that Carson discusses in *Exegetical Fallacies*.²⁰ The unwarranted associative fallacy "occurs when a word or phrase triggers off an associated idea, concept, or experience that bears no close relation to the text at hand, yet is used to interpret the text."²¹ Seminarians applying Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Him who strengthens me") to taking an exam in New Testament Introduction are stretching the text. In the context Paul speaks of contentment in the midst of poverty, hunger, and suffering. Someone who appeals to Paul's statement in the expectation of turning water to wine, healing a sick person, or smuggling Bibles into China are doing more than stretching the application—they are abusing the text.

The Hebrew Verb Fallacy

One of the most misunderstood and debated areas of biblical (or, classical) Hebrew grammar involves the Hebrew verb system. "Perfect" and "imperfect" are unfortunate names for the two major Hebrew verb forms. Therefore, many Hebraists prefer to employ the transliterations *qatal* and *yiqtol* or the names "suffix conjugation" and "prefix conjugation." Deciding what to call these two categories of verbs, however, is but a small matter compared to defining their distinctive usages or meanings. How one defines the distinctions has a great deal to do with how these verbs affect one's translation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible's text.

Gary A. Long, in *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew*, comments that the "perfective aspect" (= the suffix conjugation or *qatal*) "views a situation from the outside, as whole and complete."²² Furthermore he describes the perfective by explaining that it expresses the *totality* of the situation, without dividing up its internal temporal structure. The *whole* situation is presented as an undivided whole. The beginning, middle, and end are rolled up into one. ... it makes no attempt to divide the situation into various phases.²³

For the "imperfective aspect" (= the prefix conjugation or *yiqtol*) Long observes that the "imperfective aspect ... views a situation from the inside. It considers the internal temporal structure of a situation."²⁴ Examples of what imperfectivity might involve in any given context include such things as repeated or habitual actions, actions in progress, and completed actions without a view to result.²⁵ In other words, in contrast to the suffix conjugation, the prefix

¹⁹ E.g., Edward Hindson, *Approaching Armageddon* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 88.

²⁰ Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 117 (perhaps an "unwarranted associative jump").

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Gary A. Long, *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Hebrew: Learning Biblical Hebrew Grammatical Concepts through English Grammar* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 92 (emphasis is Long's own).

²³ *Ibid.*, 93 (emphasis is Long's). Waltke and O'Connor emphasize that "the perfective does not emphasize the completedness of a situation. Earlier researchers commonly erred in characterizing the suffix conjugation as indicating completed action, instead of indicating a *complete* situation" — Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §30.1d (emphasis is theirs). It behooves the careful exegete to be equally distinct and accurate when it comes to the terms "completed" and "complete." They are not identical in meaning when discussing the grammar of Hebrew verbs.

²⁴ Long, *Grammatical Concepts 101*, 94 (emphasis is Long's).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

conjugation does attempt to divide a situation into various phases (beginning, middle, or end), rather than looking at it as a totality.

Long's distinctions are in general agreement with the more technical discussions of Joüon and Muraoka. They indicate that one of the primary characteristics of the suffix conjugation is that its aspect refers to action that is "unique or instantaneous."²⁶ In fact, they remind us that "The *unity* of the action can, and sometimes must, be emphasised in our languages."²⁷ It is instructive to consider some of their examples:

Judges 19:30 — "Nothing like this has *ever* happened [perfect/*qatal*]" (NAU) =
"such a thing has *never* (*not even once*) been done"

Isaiah 66:8 — "Who has heard [perfect/*qatal*] such a thing?" = "who has *ever* heard?"

One must be aware, however, that Joüon and Muraoka point out a number of exceptions to this simplified view of the suffix conjugation.²⁸ As with any element of biblical Hebrew grammar, there is the potential for exceptions.

For the *yiqtol* (prefix conjugation) Joüon and Muraoka state that the aspect may be "unique or repeated, instantaneous or durative."²⁹ It is in their discussion of stative verbs, however, that they come closest to the kind of values attributed to *qatal* and *yiqtol* that were observed by Long. The suffix conjugation stative verb appears to merit a translation employing a form of the verb *be* while Joüon and Muraoka present the prefix conjugation overwhelmingly with a translation employing a form of the verb *become*.³⁰ In other words, a stative verb represents a state of *being* in the suffix conjugation, but a state of *becoming* in the prefix conjugation. This grammatical observation is significant for the interpretation of Genesis 1:2 (the verb is the suffix conjugation: "was"—not "became"). Recognizing this distinction provides a major argument against the so-called Gap Theory (which proposes that the condition of the earth *became* chaotic as the result of God's judgment of Satan prior to the six days of creation).

Obviously, context is the 500-pound gorilla in exegeting the Hebrew text. Context will consistently be the defining and refining factor when the exegete works for as objective an interpretation as possible. In each situation the exegete must first identify the grammar and then ask, "So what? What is the exegetical significance of this form in this passage?" The task of exegesis can easily fall victim to either the extreme of over-simplification or the extreme of over-complexification, but the exercise must be pursued nonetheless.

How does all of this affect exegesis? Take Genesis 1:5 as an example: "God called [*wayyiqtol* = consecutive imperfect] the light day, and the darkness He called [perfect/*qatal*] night" (NAU). What is the difference between the *wayyiqtol* (which is still an imperfect, note the *yiqtol* in its name) and the perfect? The *wayyiqtol* views the act of naming as that which is either initiated, progressing, completed (without a view to the result), or some other factor internal to the action—and, even more importantly, as one event in a sequence of events. "Then God named the light 'Day'" is an accurate translation. Interpretively, however, the exegete must be aware of the fact that Moses was not making an overall descriptive statement representing the totality of the situation. However, the latter verb, being a perfect, does look at the totality of the situation without regard to any internal progress of action.

What does this mean? How does it affect the exegete? Moses employed the perfect in order to distinguish the action from the sequential narrative framework of *wayyiqtol* verbs. So

²⁶ Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica 14/I-II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996), §112*d*.

²⁷ *Ibid.* (emphasis is Joüon and Muraoka's).

²⁸ Joüon and Muraoka tend to categorize *qatal* as a past tense and *yiqtol* as a future tense (§§112*f*, *h*, 113*a*). This tense definition of the Hebrew verb forms is unconvincing and weak.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §113*b*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §113*p*.

that he might interrupt the chain smoothly, Moses placed the object (“the darkness”) first (a non-emphatic use since it is merely interrupting the chain). By looking at the totality of the situation, the second act of naming the darkness is not a separate sequential act following the naming of the light. It is a common Hebrew way of making certain that the reader does not think that there were two sequential acts. It does not matter which was named first or even if the two were named separately. Therefore, any expositor attempting to make some preaching point of the order of the naming here is in direct conflict with the actual grammar of the text.

One more example (from Psalm 1:1-2) should help to make these points more lucid:

“How blessed is the man who does not walk [perfect] in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand [perfect] in the path of sinners,
Nor sit [perfect] in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates [imperfect] day and night.”

Why did the psalmist choose to employ the perfect for the three negated verbs in verse 1 while employing the imperfect for the verb in verse 2? The psalmist intended the perfects of verse 1 to direct the reader to view the situation as a totality without regard to any phases. On the other hand, the imperfect in verse 2 draws the reader's attention to the internal nature of the action rather than looking at it from the outside as a whole. Confirmation comes in the adverbs that follow and modify “meditates.” This action is viewed as either habitual, repetitive, or continual: the godly individual will “habitually (*or* repeatedly *or* continually) meditate day and night.” Note how the context supports the verb usage. Biblical Hebrew writers and speakers selected their verb forms on the basis of the context in which each verb form was employed. To do otherwise would create a dissonance for the reader or hearer. In some cases, biblical authors utilized such dissonance to indicate emphasis or some other literary effect.

A final illustration might help to clarify the basic differences between the two Hebrew verb forms. In Judges 5:26 we read, “She reached out [imperfect] her hand for the tent peg, And her right hand for the workmen's hammer. Then she struck [perfect] Sisera, she smashed [perfect] his head; And she shattered [perfect] and pierced [perfect] his temple” (NASB). Film makers have two options when it comes to depicting such violence. They might employ close-up shots of the peg and skull as blood splatters and brain tissue is exposed (as in CBS's “CSI” special effects) or they might show only Jael's hands and the hammer (allowing the viewer's imagination to take over when they hear the peg sink into the skull). Hollywood's preference for the overly explicit and gory does not match the Scripture's treatment. Filming with a view to the Hebrew verbs opens the scene with a close-up shot showing Jael's left hand reaching for the tent peg. Next, the camera zooms in on her right hand grasping the hammer. The camera stays on the hammer as it arcs and descends, then strikes the head of the peg. The biblical writer uses the imperfect verb to represent these actions in progress. As the sounds of the blow and the cracking skull are heard, the camera moves to Jael's grim face or to the death throws of Sisera's feet—the camera never shows the striking of Sisera directly nor the smashing of his head or piercing of his temple. The Hebrew writer uses the perfect to simply state the fact of their occurrence, without focusing on their actual process.

The Fallacy of Ignoring Particles

No word is too small or lacking in significance. Turning our attention to the New Testament for a change, let's take a close look at Acts 13:2. In this text the Holy Spirit's command appears as “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (NASB; cf. KJV, NKJV, ESV, NRSV, NIV). All of these translations ignore the little word *δή* that follows the imperative “set apart” in the Greek text. Translators have often treated that word as though it were nothing more than a marker of “relatively weak emphasis—‘then, indeed’

or frequently not translated but possibly reflected in the word order."³¹ Nida and Louw suggest the translation, "set apart for me, then, Barnabas and Saul to do the work for which I have called them."³² However, A. T. Robertson, the venerable Greek scholar, indicated that, although this Greek particle was difficult to translate, it is strongly emphatic.³³ Combined with an imperative (as in Acts 13:2), it has a "note of urgency."³⁴ The nature of the particle is such that it should not be omitted from the translation of the verse.³⁵ Expositors need to represent the Holy Spirit's command so that they convey the concept of urgency ("do it immediately").³⁶

Unfortunately, there will be some texts like Acts 13:2 which virtually all available English translations translate poorly.³⁷ No Bible interpreter or translator has the right to select certain elements of biblical propositions for preservation and to excise the remainder from the text. An accurate translation must be full and complete, not selective and partial. Omission of any portion of the text hinders full understanding or, at its worse, creates misunderstanding.

The Fallacy of Reduction

A repetitive text like Numbers 7:12-83 provides an extreme example of reduction of the biblical text. The passage describes each tribe's offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle. Tribal leaders presented those offerings on each of twelve consecutive days, one tribe per day. The Good News Bible³⁸ (also known as Today's English Version) abridges the text instead of providing the full wording of the Hebrew text. Why refuse to abbreviate such a repetitive text? First, there are minor variations in the Hebrew wording—all the verses are not exact repetitions. Second, the wordiness is unusual for this kind of text—it has a purpose. "The repetition of the description of the offerings ... may serve to denote the special regard which God has to the offerings of His people."³⁹ Ronald Allen asks, "Is it not possible that in this daily listing we catch a glimpse of the magnificent pomp and ceremony attending these gifts?"⁴⁰ He goes on to state, "This chapter has a stately charm, a leisurely pace, and a studied sense of magnificence as each

³¹ J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 811 (§91.6).

³² Ibid.

³³ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1934), 1149. Cf., also, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 673.

³⁴ Robertson, *Grammar*, 1149.

³⁵ "It ought to be preserved in the translation"—Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1930), 3:178.

³⁶ When an imperative indicates that something is "to be carried into effect at once" the particle "ὅτι strengthens the injunction" (George Benedict Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, 7th ed., rev. by Gottlieb Lünemann (Andover, Mass.: Warren F. Draper, 1870), 313.

³⁷ The matter of this particle should not be taken as a claim that all particles should be translated. As Carson points out, "precisely because particles are subtle things, one can always find instances where any particular translation has it wrong"—D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—and Other Limits, Too," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World*, ed. by Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 73.

³⁸ *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1976).

³⁹ Charles John Ellicott, *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, 5 vols. (London: Cassell & Co., 1897), 1:503. Cf., also, Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-varsity Press, 1981), 93.

⁴⁰ Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan, 1990), 2:762.

tribe in its turn was able to make gifts to God that he received with pleasure.”⁴¹ Dennis Olson in the less than evangelical *Harper's Bible Commentary* writes, “The careful repetition underscores the unanimous and strong support for the tabernacle and its priesthood. Every tribe has an equal and strong commitment to the worship of God.”⁴² Reducing the text would be the equivalent of asking a class of graduating seminarians to stand en masse as the dean intones, “Ladies and gentlemen, the graduating class of 2006 is hereby awarded sixty Master of Divinity degrees and five Master of Theology degrees”—without reading each person's name, without having them walk across the platform, without hooding them, and without placing the diploma in their hands. It makes for a brief and perhaps comfortable ceremony, but is empty of celebration and individual recognition.⁴³ We should preserve the entire text of Numbers 7:12-83 without abridgement—and, the class of 2006 will receive their due individual recognition at graduation.

New Testament Exclusion Fallacy

The final fallacy I wish to mention in this session is the Bible student's failure to allow the New Testament to have a say in how an Old Testament passage is interpreted. Too often we are being excessively exclusionary in dealing with Old Testament texts only within their immediate contexts—sometimes even to the extreme of disallowing later intertextual evidence within the Old Testament itself. At issue in this section of the discussion of exegetical fallacies is the role of the New Testament in interpreting the Old. First and foremost, the issue is one of scriptural unity. Scriptural unity is predicated upon a belief in divine authorship. Indeed, as Bromiley reminds us, “to achieve good interpretation that is true to the reality itself, the principle of biblical unity has to be practiced in spite of variation in outworking.”⁴⁴ Even more emphatically, Bromiley writes, “Christian hermeneutics . . . finds the true object in the one Bible of OT and NT, so that any breach of scriptural unity on any ground necessarily entails misinterpretation.”⁴⁵

True, the Old Testament appears to be quite different from the New Testament. Sometimes it seems as though the New Testament writers, in citing the Old, are saying something quite different than the Old Testament writer. Recognizing this situation, Broyles offers both an explanation and a solution:

When books were recognized as canonical, they were included “as is.” By and large, they were not edited to produce “harmonized” or “homogenized” Scriptures told from a single perspective. Discrepancies or “rough edges” were not smoothed out. It does not follow that a synthesis is not possible; it simply means that God's perspective must be perceived through the variety of human perspectives (“for now

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dennis T. Olson, “Numbers,” in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. by James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 187-88.

⁴³ Allen suggested this analogy (“Numbers,” 2:762-63).

⁴⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin, 1:78.

⁴⁵ Ibid. It is possible to take this principle to an extreme. As Kaiser warns, we must not unload a later text on an earlier passage “simply because both or all the passages involved share the same canon” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981], 82). I would, however, question his statement that “canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis” (83). In fact, Kaiser himself indicates that the interpreter cannot properly understand Gen 3:15 (as one example) without understanding how later Scripture speaks of the “seed”: “The continuity of terms, identities, and meanings throughout both testaments is more than a mere accident. It is a remarkable evidence of a single-planned program and a unified single people of God” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books/Zondervan Publishing House, 1978], 103).

we see in a mirror dimly," 1 Cor. 13:12). Thus, to get the Bible's position on a matter, we cannot simply quote chapter and verse but must consider "the whole counsel [*boulēn*] of God" (Acts 20:27 my translation).⁴⁶

What about the New Testament writer's seeming neglect of context when extracting an Old Testament text to make a point? As Silva points out, what "at first blush looks like a violent use of the text . . . further reflection suggests otherwise."⁴⁷ His example involves Paul's employment of Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:27. First, Isaiah's words remind one of the description of Sarah's barren condition (Gen 11:30). Second, Isaiah 51:1-3 refers to the righteous in Zion as the offspring of Sarah. Third, between Isaiah 51 and 54 is the primary messianic Servant passage to which Paul alludes in Galatians 3:1-2. Therefore, we may conclude that

Paul is in fact exploiting important associations already *present in the OT itself*. Yet one does not hear complaints that the OT prophets are guilty of using allegorical exegesis; nor is it common to argue that, in their view, Scripture contained a *sensus plenior* ("fuller meaning"). We simply recognize that the prophets knew how to exploit their literary tradition.⁴⁸

Expositors are nearly unanimous in citing Hosea 11:1/Matthew 2:15 as the supreme *crux interpretum* for this type of discussion. Rather than deal with it in detail here and now, allow me to refer you to the best treatments of the problem (in my opinion)⁴⁹ and to summarize the solution as follows:

- (1) The reference to "son" in Hosea 11:1 is the Hebrew text rather than the Septuagint Greek text ("children")—indicating Matthew chose it purposefully for that specific connection. In the context of Hosea 11:1 the switch to "son" from Israel as mother and children is sudden. The emphasis in Matthew is on "my son," not on "out of Egypt."⁵⁰
- (2) As the ultimate "son" and the descendant of David, Jesus was Israel's representative. As the nation's representative, He recapitulates their calling and deliverance as evidence of that office. Matthew's entire Gospel is organized in such a fashion as to employ the recapitulation as a major motif.
- (3) Hosea himself was using the Exodus as a motif for the coming Assyrian captivity (cf. 9:3, 6; 11:5) and for Israel's future restoration (11:11; 12:9). The primary intent in both Hosea and Matthew, however, is the preserving love of God for His "son."
- (4) "Fulfill" has a broader reference in much New Testament usage than to be limited to one-to-one prediction. In Matthew 2:15 the concept of culmination or completion may be intended.

Ultimately, it all goes back again to our humble approach to Scripture as authoritative and divine revelation. Silva, speaking of the apostle's use of the Old Testament, summarizes it best: "our

⁴⁶ Craig C. Broyles, "Interpreting the Old Testament," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, ed. by Craig C. Broyles (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 46.

⁴⁷ Moisés Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 163.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 163-64.

⁴⁹ In order of their excellence, with the best first: Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (reprint; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 43-53; David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 189-90; Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Hosea," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3 vols., ed. by Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 1:184; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein, 8:91-93; Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary 19A (n.p.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 220-22;

⁵⁰ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 35.

inability to identify all the logical steps that might have led Paul to use an OT text for a particular purpose may reflect nothing more than our ignorance."⁵¹ It is far better to admit to our ignorance than to accuse the apostles of abusing the Old Testament.

Another classic example of what some like to present as Old Testament vs. New Testament is Isaiah 7:14 as compared to Matthew 1:23. The clarity of Matthew's citation is indisputable. Matthew 1:23 is God's own commentary on Isaiah 7:14. If we claim to accept all the Scriptures as the Word of God, we cannot exclude later revelation from the proper interpretation of earlier revelation. Since the Holy Spirit is the one superintending Matthew in order to produce a God-breathed text, God is the ultimate Author. By direct citation of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 God made His intended meaning explicit. There is nothing inherently wrong and everything right in attempting first to establish a text's meaning within its own context and setting. However, when the New Testament makes *explicit reference* to an Old Testament text and presents a *clear interpretation*, that interpretation has precedence over any other.

Conclusion

Every student of the Bible must attempt to interpret the text as objectively as possible. In order to maintain accuracy, the student must avoid taking shortcuts that result in committing the fallacies described in this session. Correct interpretation is the result of careful attention to details, to context, and to what the text says. Above all, the attitude of the interpreter is extremely important. We must not approach the text with academic swagger, a feeling of superiority to the ancient writers, or an unteachable spirit. Hubris can have no home in the heart of the hermeneut. We dare not make the Word "lordless" (ἀκυρω) by our human understanding (Matt 15:6).

⁵¹ Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method*, 164. In an attempt to be consistent with this dictum, I recommend avoiding typology or *sensus plenior* as solutions to the problem of Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15. Neither one is the result of objective revelation in the written text. As such, both approaches are an appeal to a secret or mystical interpretation.