

A Short History of the Reading and Interpretation of the Bible
—As Story, Book and Byte—
With Some Implications for Bible Reading and Interpretation
in the 21st Century

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Setting the Stage

Today we are on the cusp of a revolution in Bible reading and interpretation not unlike the last revolution regarding the Bible that occurred during the Reformation. Note carefully that this new revolution has little to do with the many and varied alternatives that have arisen over the past thirty years to the tried and true historical-critical approach to the Bible. These alternatives—some good and some not so good—have tended to distract evangelical scholars into debates on the merits of one approach over another, all the while causing us to miss out on the beginnings of the revolutionary shift from one dominant Bible reading and interpretation paradigm to another totally different paradigm. Indeed, this new revolution concerns the very way that the Bible itself is perceived, or will be perceived, by the generations of the twenty-first century for whom the concept of a book as a textual document will become increasingly obsolete.

Bob Hodgson, in a recent seminal internet article (c.1999:2-3), raises a series of questions that get to the heart of this revolutionary paradigm shift in Bible reading and interpretation:

- Is the Bible identical with its ancient handwritten or modern printed text? Or can the Bible also be “present” in other forms?
- How, for example, is the Bible present when its writings are digitized and exist as electrons and pixels that make up audio and text files that can be played through a personal computer—electronic files that can be manipulated and changed?
- Is the Bible also present orally, for example when we tell a Bible story from memory, or even paraphrase it? Is the Bible present aurally when we listen to it read from a pulpit?
- In what sense is the Bible present visually in early Christian artistic depictions of, say, the story of Daniel in the Lion’s Den, or in a modern comic book publication of the story of Moses? In what sense is the Bible present sonically when we listen to a musical composition based on a Bible story, such as Handel’s Messiah?
- In short, where is our Bible today? And where will our Bible be in the twenty-first century?

Indeed, where will our Bible be in the twenty-first century and how will we read and interpret it? These questions must be addressed by evangelical scholars today if we hope to be relevant for the generations of the 21st century.

These questions are particularly relevant in light of the startling reality that most people in this post-modern twenty-first century world are under the age of 25 and consider the Bible irrelevant to their lives, if they consider it at all. Unfortunately, this reality does not just concern non-Christians and the Bible; of course they will not look to the Bible for relevancy. Rather this reality applies directly to the Christian world: for most post-modern Christian young people, this ancient document may look good on one's bookshelf but it rarely gets opened and read. The very idea of reading this relic from the past just doesn't compare with the immediacy of CNN, MTV, and the Internet. Though many of the older silent generation and baby boomer Christians still sit down and read this book that we call the Bible, the vast majority of the busters, generation Xers and millennial Christians do not. And, increasingly, they will not.

There are many reasons for Christians not to read Scripture: a lack of discipline; an improper training in the church which downplayed the need to read the Bible; or just plain sin and rebellion against reading God's Word, to name but a few. Yet still another reason—a reason that is seldom considered—is that we are today in the midst of one of the greatest technological changes in the world's history. It is akin to Gutenberg's invention of the type mold back in the mid-1400s. His invention allowed for the making of uniformly cast letters on metal bodies that he subsequently incorporated as moveable type on his revolutionary printing press. Gutenberg's invention allowed for the relatively inexpensive mass-production of exactly the same document. And the world, at a variety of different levels, was never the same. Likewise, over the past 20 years technology has undergone yet another revolution that mirrors that of Gutenberg's time. Today the sameness of the final printed document is now being replaced by the sameness of the electronic digit: data as a succession of the 1s and 0s of binary math. As it was after Gutenberg, so it is for us today: the world, at a variety of different levels, is being radically changed. It is therefore crucial for us to recognize the incredible technological shift that is even now occurring all around us and its implications for our future approaches not only to the Bible and how it is read but to its very interpretation. Christians today—especially those Christians under the age of 25—do not read the Bible because print media is increasingly irrelevant and, for many, not to be trusted. They believe what they see on a screen: computer, TV, or movie theater.

In light of this latest technological revolution, what is the Church to do? Here is where history can help us. The people of God—throughout history—have always read and interpreted the Bible using the methodologies, thought processes and technologies that were available to them and that fit their cultural situation. Reading styles and interpretation methodologies throughout the centuries have changed and adapted based on the situation of the people who were claiming the Bible as their ultimate source for their faith and practice. Therefore I believe that as we examine how they read and interpreted the Word of God in their own contexts we will be guided in how to read and interpret God's Word in the midst of the latest technological changes that we face. Because of space and time considerations what follows will necessarily be brief and incomplete. The development of the different reading styles and hermeneutical methodologies of the past four thousand years is an immense subject area.¹ It cannot possibly be adequately explained in a few paragraphs. I am here painting a picture in very broad strokes indeed, and choosing from the plentiful palate only a few of the choicest colors. As a result, I will arbitrarily divide the history

1. For a more detailed examination of the history of Bible interpretation to today see Farrar (1886/1961); Kümmel (1970); Krentz (1975); Grant and Tracy (1984); Bray (1996); and McKim (1998), to mention only a few of the more prominent recent works.

of the reading and interpretation of the Bible into two broad periods that I am calling the “People of the Story” (how the Bible was read and interpreted from the Old Testament times to the Reformation) and the “People of the Book” (how the Bible has been read and interpreted from the Reformation to today). After painting this broad picture I will conclude with some implications for today and the future as we proactively adjust our approach to reading and interpreting the Bible in order to make it relevant to coming generations of the twenty-first century and beyond, to the “People of the Byte.”

People of the Story

From the time period of Abraham to Moses, the Hebrew people had no Bible, no written document to guide them in their faith or practice. For the most part, the vast majority of them did not read anyway, so the lack of a written document was no problem. Instead, they were people of the story, where the traditions about the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph—were handed down in oral form from one generation to another. Memorization was the primary technique used by these nomadic peoples and there was little need for interpretation. The traditions spoke for themselves. The patriarchs lived, were faithful to God, and died. As the fathers instructed their families in remembering the patriarchs they also helped them readily apply these examples of faithfulness to their own lives.

The oral stories continued during the 400 years of Egyptian captivity. With Moses, however, came not only a new freedom but also the use of a new technology. The Egyptians had perfected the art of alphabet writing on papyrus sheets and Moses, highly educated and steeped in Egyptian ways, became not only the liberator of his people but also the writer of their history. It was he who wrote down the stories of the patriarchs as well as the law code that God provided on Mt. Sinai. The resulting first five books of the Old Testament—the Law or the Torah—subsequently became the new standard by which the Hebrew people believed and measured their lives. The priests and the Levites became the keepers of that new standard. Now the old stories and new laws were passed on orally not only from father to son but from priest to people. The educated priests were aided in this task by the newer technology of hand-copied scrolls that allowed the law to be read in the wilderness tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple. But note that even though it was now written down, the truths of the Torah were still communicated orally to the people. There was no private, silent reading and of the Torah. The patriarchal stories continued to be recited out loud at family meals; the law was listened to in tribal community. Thus, the Hebrews—later Jews—during this time period remained essentially people of the story. There was little need for interpretation since the living situations of the people were still very similar to those recited in the older stories and talked about in the law. Any interpretation that was needed was done in the context of the community of the faithful who listened to the Torah in family and tribal units.

The Captivity in Babylon (587 to 538 B.C.) dramatically changed things. Because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the only thread of religious commonality in the lives of the Jewish people became the words of Scripture. As a result, a whole new way of handling Scripture began at this time: writing down the various oral traditions that were not yet written down, collecting the various traditions, beginning the complicated canonization process, and so

on. From Moses to the time of the Captivity, the events of the historical books had been duly recorded, as well as many of the oral words of the poets, hymn writers and pre-exilic prophets. But during and after the Captivity this recording of the data was much more seriously undertaken. Going hand in hand with all of this writing, gathering and compiling was the placing of more emphasis upon the “correct” interpretation of the Scripture they already had, now for a new generation of exiled and dispersed Jews (perhaps as high as several million people). Many of these diaspora Jews had little understanding of official Jewish religion that had previously been understood primarily in relationship to the Temple and Jerusalem. Moreover, the role of the religious professional—one who could best offer the “correct” interpretation—subsequently took on increasing importance. One individual who represented this new religious role was Ezra.

Ezra was “a teacher [*sofer*] well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6; cf. 7:11) who “had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Once back in Jerusalem he and his Levite associates . . . “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Neh. 8:7-8; cf. 8:1-18). By making the Scripture clear and giving it meaning, Ezra and the Levites were, in effect, forerunners of an entire new way of approaching Scripture: one person interpreting it for others so that these others could make sense of it for their own lives.²

What Ezra and the Levites did in Jerusalem reflected what was being done to the Old Testament in other locations where multitudes of diaspora Jews lived: Scripture was being read and interpreted so that hearers could better understand what was being read in the context of the realities of their new living situations. It became a widespread practice. Eventually the oral handling of Scripture in this way led to the development of two different written collections of these oral interpretations: *halakah* and *haggadah* (*halakah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the Old Testament legal material while *haggadah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the non-legal material). Over the course of the centuries following the Captivity, collections of various *halakah* and *haggadah* sayings were made, collated, and eventually incorporated and expanded into the midrashic commentaries, the Mishnah.

Thus, by the first century A.D., looking for the “correct” interpretation of the Old Testament had become a crucial element of Jewish religious life. As with the change after the exodus, whereby the priests became the primary protectors of the tradition and experts on legal matters replacing the heads of the households who had been doing this, so now there was another change. These priests, in their role as tradition protectors and legal experts, were largely replaced, according to Donald Juel, by “scholarly interpreters of written tradition” who had “developed an elaborate hermeneutical mechanism with which to make sense of sacred texts, to fit them into a harmonious whole, and to apply them to the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world” (1988:32). These scholarly interpreters became the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law that were so maligned by Jesus. In the words of Herbert V. Klem, they soon “demanded that the

2. Some would argue that this “making it clear and giving the meaning” refers merely to translating the text from Aramaic to the local dialect, not in actually interpreting the text for the people (cf. Vermes 1970:201). The entire context of this passage, however, along with the several times it appears that indeed some interpretation was given— “making it clear,” “giving the meaning,” “so that the people could understand”—seems to imply more than mere translation.

people come to their institutions, learn their special language, memorize a large corpus of material, and learn the cantillation style of the teacher all as prerequisites for learning their ‘important’ teachings. They required that the people be extracted from their popular modes of expression and learn the skills of a special mode of communication before this new information could be come available” (1982:83). It is no wonder that Jesus had problems with them!

These scholarly interpreters—the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law—tended to interpret the Old Testament text more literally. But even with these various collections of *halakah* and *haggadah* interpretations the Jewish people remained people of the story since the primary means of instruction and debate continued to be oral. Although the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law in Jesus’ day had a growing access to texts and scrolls—and despite their sometimes rigorous religious training systems—most Bible interpretation was still filtered through the common oral communication systems of the day to the common people. Even Jesus himself, when quoting from the law, says, “you have heard that it was said...but I say to you...” (cf. Mt. chapter 5). As far as we know, Jesus never wrote any of his material down. His was an oral ministry and he was a master of the oral form, filling his messages with parables, proverbs, pithy sayings and the like.³ His words were easy for the people to understand and apply to their lives.⁴ The early gospels that were compilations of Jesus’ sayings were also passed on orally for some thirty to forty years until they were gradually written down, collected and put in their final form as the four gospels that we have today. Correspondingly, the early followers of Jesus in the book of Acts were people of the story; with Acts itself being a gripping account of the progression of the Gospel as commanded by Jesus in Acts 1:8.

The Apostle Paul, through his letter writing, made use of the technological superiority of the Roman road system of his day to carry on a ready correspondence with the young churches he had planted along those same roads. His various audiences of Hellenistic Jews, Roman God-fearers and pagans—scattered throughout the Roman world—were familiar with the more cosmopolitan systematic rhetorical style that Paul so oftentimes followed in his letters. Irregardless of the particular style used by Paul, the early church remained people of the story. The majority of Paul’s letters were not studied alone by individual readers, they were read and listened to by entire congregations. So, for example, when the Corinthians read Paul’s letters to them out loud in their congregations they decided together what Paul meant; they interpreted his letter to them as a group.

The culturally-accepted genre of the written letter was used by Paul as the means to an end: communicating orally the truths of the Gospel to his various congregations spread far and wide. He continued using the systematic rhetorical style of argument in which he had been schooled. What had changed was that now for Paul everything in the Old Testament had to be interpreted in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; a Christo-centric hermeneutical methodology that made the Jesus story central to the faith of the early church throughout the next few centuries. The book of Revelation shows best the marriage between letter and story that predominated the Bible interpretation of the early church during latter part of the first century: end-times story (apocalyptic) enclosed within specific messages for the seven churches.

3. See Robert H. Stein (1978) for a complete overview of the various oral teaching methods that Jesus used.

4. Jesus was also competent in the hermeneutical methods of the Jewish religious leaders of his day and used them with great skill on occasion. For some examples see Caldwell 1990:183-192.

That the Christians in the early and middle ages were also people of the story is readily seen in the dominant use of allegory. As the early Christian church became increasingly Gentile it is not surprising that one of the leading pagan literary and philosophical forms—allegory—should become so popular. Philo had first popularized allegory among his Jewish compatriots in Alexandria during the time of Jesus; his influence extended to many of the early church fathers. And while there were many other hermeneutical methods that were used during this time period, allegory became the queen of them all. Allegory today has become much-maligned since the onslaught of historical criticism. This is unfortunate, for allegory, then and now, not only entertains, it educates. One of the best ways to demonstrate this is to look at the example of Origen, the early church father (185-253/4)—the most influential Bible interpreter in the first three centuries—and his allegorical interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan (cf. Stein 1981:45):

The man going down to Jericho = Adam
 Jerusalem from which he was going = Paradise
 Jericho = The world
 Robbers = Hostile influences and enemies of man
 Wounds = Disobedience or sins
 Priest = Law
 Levite = Prophets
 Good Samaritan = Christ
 Beast = Body of Christ
 Inn = Church
 Two denarii = Knowledge of the Father and the Son
 Innkeeper = Angels in charge of the church
 Return of the Good Samaritan = Second coming of Christ

A quick perusal of Origen's allegorical interpretation shows that it contains much Gospel truth and good theology. The fact that this particular allegory of Origen's is found in the context of one of his sermons underscores the didactic qualities that allegory had for the masses. The mostly non-reading⁵ people of the story needed good theology that they could easily remember, something generously provided by the genre of allegory. As a result, for non-reading audiences allegory became the Bible's most powerful educational tool. The Catholic hierarchy capitalized on this with its extensive three-level, and later four-level, approaches to allegorization that eventually became the dominant approaches for Bible interpretation by the educated Catholic clergy for hundreds of years. The fact that allegory was later abused by the Catholic hierarchy, and used to help support unbiblical church dogmas by the time of the Reformation, should in no way interfere with the positive roll that allegory could and did play in the life of the Church throughout the middle ages.

5. I prefer to use the phrase, "non-reading," rather than the more commonly used word, "illiterate." The word "illiterate" connotes a lack of intelligence or the inability to think well enough to be able to read, while the phrase "non-reading" points only to the fact that the people do not read. It does not imply that they do not have the mental capacity to read, in fact many non-reading people, both then and now, are indeed highly intelligent, they have just not been given the opportunity to learn how to read.

People of the Book

Gutenberg's invention in the mid-1400s changed everything. It affected at least three different but overlapping areas in the history of Bible reading and interpretation: 1) the very individuals who actually had access to reading and interpreting the Bible; 2) how the Bible was actually read; and 3) how the Bible was interpreted. As a result, the printing press was the foundation upon which the people of the story became the people of the book. Let's examine each of these three areas in more detail.

First, concerning the change of access. Before Gutenberg, Bible reading was confined to the rich and/or religious elite who—either through wealth and/or through religious training—had access to the laboriously handwritten, and thereby very costly, scrolls—and later books—that were the Bible. Gutenberg's new technology changed all of this by taking Bible making out of the *scriptoria* and into the printing press houses. The reading of the Bible subsequently moved out of the exclusive domain of the elite and into the hands of the masses when the less expensive mechanically printed books eventually became available to everyone. This change of access was also one reason for the demise of the story approach to the interpretation of the Bible. No longer was the Bible interpreted mainly through the storytelling of the Catholic priests/storytellers (again, primarily through allegory). Indeed, allegory had flourished because it leant itself so readily to the limitations of hand-written manuscripts as well as the social situation of the non-reading masses. Now with the printing press came the possibility, for the very first time, that any person could read and interpret the story for his or her self. A priest was no longer needed to read the Bible nor to interpret it. This was a revolutionary development. It is not surprising, then, that one of the very first things that the reforming Luther did was to translate the Bible into German. Significantly, his translation was not into the high German of the elite but rather into the low German of the common people. Why? Because now the new technology of printing allowed everyone the opportunity to read the Bible for themselves and thereby to grasp the reality of theological concepts like *sola scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer. Thus, in a very real sense, the new technology available to the Reformers made the Reformation possible. For example, Luther's insistence on the priesthood of the believer—theologically possible since Paul's writings—was technologically possible only with the advent of Gutenberg's invention.

Second, concerning how the Bible was actually read. Gutenberg's new technology ushered in one of the greatest changes in learning: not just mass-produced books, but books that were read silently. The hand-written books of the middle ages were read out loud by those few privileged individuals who had obtained both literacy and copies. Now the increasing availability of printed texts brought with it a strange silence and a solitary learning. Thomas E. Boomershine notes: "The sounds of the Scriptures continued to be read aloud but increasingly in a normal voice without intonation. The availability of texts made it possible for private reading of the texts to be a normal context for study and interpretation. The accreditation of interpreters shifted from an oral disputation to the oral defense of a written thesis" (1993:213). No longer were Bible reading and interpretation done primarily in the public oral context of a community of interpreters. Instead, Bible reading and interpretation was increasingly done by private readers in the silence of his or her own mind.

Third, concerning how the Bible was interpreted. Gutenberg's technological breakthrough of moveable type and printing press also allowed the Church as a whole to read the Bible as a printed document, as a book. And this reading was significant in light of the fact that the Bible was now a mass-produced printed document that could be read by different people in different locations who, all the while, were reading the very same document made up of individual pages that were exactly alike. No longer were Bible readers at the mercy of a copyist's handwritten mistakes; textual variants became a thing of the past to be replaced by corrected inserts and later editions. Because of this new textual consistency of the reading source, the methods used to interpret the Bible also underwent rapid change. The older "Bible as story" hermeneutical methods (dominated by allegory's three and four-fold senses of Scripture) were replaced by the "Bible as book" hermeneutical methods as more and more people had access to their own private copies of the biblical text and were now educated enough to read it. Protestants, especially, became the people who read the Book, while the Catholic church—in its continuing emphasis upon interpretation through the lens of church tradition—adapted the new hermeneutical methods much more slowly. For Protestants, the new hermeneutical methods were tailor-made to the new Bible as book understanding.

Those monumental individuals of the Reformation—like Martin Luther and John Calvin—took advantage of all three of the above-mentioned changes in their reading and interpretation of the Bible. As they stood against the dogma of the Roman Catholic church they were, in reality, standing for a new way to interpret Scripture, a new way made possible by the new technology. Their subsequent cries of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer, were cries for hermeneutical methodologies dependent upon other criteria besides the dominant methodology then in current use, one based upon the traditions of the Roman Catholic church. In the minds of the Reformers, the Bible could no longer be interpreted solely by church dogma. And as we have seen, the primary hermeneutical tool of the Roman Catholic church at that time was allegory. Luther, once an allegorization expert, chose a new hermeneutical tool after his break with Catholicism: the "historical" understanding. Robert M. Grant and David Tracy comment upon the reformed Luther:

After 1517, when Luther definitely broke with the Roman church, he ceased to make use of allegorization, and insisted on the necessity of 'one simple solid sense' for the arming of theologians against Satan. He admits the existence of allegories in scripture, but they are to be found only where the various authors intended them. Therefore a historical understanding of the author and of his times is essential to the exegete. The historical understanding, as he points out in the preface to his commentary on Isaiah, gives us the primary meaning of the text. It is clearly associated with knowledge of the scriptures as a whole, by means of which the ordinary expressions and idioms of scripture can be grasped (1984:94).

It was this attempt to ascertain the historical understanding of the biblical author and his times that freed Luther, and other Reformers, from a reliance based solely upon the opinions of the church fathers. This new interpretive tool—historical understanding—formed the backbone for all subsequent Protestant hermeneutical methodologies. Luther's emphasis on the historical understanding of the Bible, however, was not done merely to break with Catholic church tradition. On the contrary, for Luther, the historical understanding was the means by which

Christ was best understood; for Luther, Christ was found in every book of the Bible. While other Reformers, such as Calvin, Zwingli, and Illyricus,⁶ did not totally follow Luther's new approach to the Bible—especially in regards to his Christological emphasis—they too emphasized the importance of the literal sense of the biblical text as first conveyed to the original audience. Thus, they also placed a heavy emphasis upon an historical interpretation of the Bible.

This emphasis of the Reformers on the historical interpretation eventually turned into what we know today as historical criticism and the tools of the historical critical approach.⁷ This approach stresses that a biblical passage must be understood in light of at least three factors: 1) the syntax of the words used; 2) the context in which the words are found; and 3) and the underlying historical setting behind the words. Historical criticism is a book-driven—or better, document-driven—method of Bible interpretation that assumes everyone is reading similar texts as they do their study. It relies on the document of the Bible itself as well as the supporting documents outside of the Bible: Bible dictionaries, grammars, concordances, commentaries, etc. Without the sameness of the mass-produced printed Bible and its supporting documents, the ability to do good historical criticism is severely limited. Thus, historical criticism—as well as most of the other more modern “criticisms”—owes itself theologically and philosophically to the Reformation and Enlightenment, but technologically to Gutenberg and his invention.

The Reformer's desire to seek the historicity of the biblical text was rooted in a strong belief in the authoritativeness of the Word of God that they were studying. They in no way intended to undermine the Bible's authority through their emphasis upon an historical interpretation of the Bible. For them it was still the universal authority in all fields of knowledge. Unfortunately, this understanding of the authority of the Bible was not held by everyone by the end of the Post-Reformation seventeenth century, a century that once again marked a turning point in the Western world's understanding of the Bible.⁸ For the rationalists of the seventeenth century, and beyond, it was neither Scripture nor the church traditions that reigned supreme. Now it was rational thought in all areas of scientific, historical, and philosophical inquiry that was the sole authority. Individuals like Johannes Kepler, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and John Locke challenged not only the hermeneutical methodologies of the day but also the very authority of the Bible as well.

The implications of this turnaround for Bible interpretation were profound. As a result, from the seventeenth century onward the die was cast in the Western world for a “proper” hermeneutical methodological approach to Scripture divorced from the very authoritativeness of that Scripture. From now on any valid hermeneutical approach to Scripture needed to entail the use of the scholarly historical-critical tools currently in vogue at the time in order to investigate the truth claims of the Bible in light of reason. Whether it was the text-critical and source-critical tools of the eighteenth century, the philological and historical-critical tools of the nineteenth century, or the demythologizing existential tools of the twentieth century, the overarching hermeneutical

6. Illyricus is especially significant since his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* (1567) was the first hermeneutics text that, according to Robert Kolb, “shaped the science of textual exposition for centuries to come. New editions appeared until the second quarter of the eighteenth century” (1998:191).

7. Historical criticism is also known as the grammatico-historical method. Both phrases—historical-critical and grammatico-historical—fall under the rubric of biblical criticism: “the study which attempts to determine the true meaning of the Bible by using techniques applied to other written documents” (Erickson 1986:21).

8. See especially Klaus Scholder (1990).

methodology that underlay them all was based upon historical criticism: humankind's rational investigation of the biblical text. So much so, that in years immediately after the Second World War historical criticism reigned supreme.

That historical criticism reigned supreme following World War Two is not hyperbole. It not only dominated the Western world; it was subsequently carried throughout the non-Western world by the huge onslaught of Western missionaries sent out following the War, as well as by the thousands of non-Westerners who came to the West to study. The popularity of historical criticism was not limited to the more "liberal" Protestant denominations, despite historical underpinnings that questioned the very authority of the Bible itself. For example, though American fundamentalists in the early twentieth century refused to use the historical-critical tools, (and a few groups still refuse to do so), the majority of mainline evangelicals became increasingly open to the use of historical criticism, but without its inherent anti-God bias. Today studying the various historical-critical tools is an integral part of the normal course work of most evangelical seminaries throughout the world.

But not all has been well in the historical-critical kingdom since the end of the Second World War. Cries against historical criticism have arisen from time to time. Several Western theologians began to call for either a return to a hermeneutical methodology based upon a major refinement of historical criticism as currently practiced, or for the abandonment of historical criticism in its entirety.⁹ At the same time, from World War Two onwards there has developed in the Western world new alternative hermeneutical methodologies that are only very loosely based upon historical criticism, such as structural, sociological and philosophical hermeneutics.¹⁰

Many of the attacks leveled at historical criticism over the past thirty years or so have come about because of the changing worldviews, philosophies and epistemologies of Bible scholars striving to make the Bible more relevant in our post-modern world. I, myself, have argued elsewhere against the appropriateness of historical criticism on this basis.¹¹ However, while I still believe that historical criticism should not be given as prominent of a place in the curricula of our evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries, I am seeing now that the reason for my—and other's—hesitations concerning historical criticism should not be rooted solely in the fact of our changing worldviews, philosophies and epistemologies, although they are indeed major factors. For I now believe that neither the above-mentioned calls for the abandonment of the method, nor the making of alternative methodologies, are as significant to the demise of historical criticism as is the on-going digital revolution. What we all must come to see, therefore, is that the rapidly changing technology of the digital world is a key factor in the demise of the prominence of historical criticism in today's world. We must see that the post-Reformation document-driven traditional mode of approaching the Bible is no longer a viable option for the younger generations caught up in our rapidly changing digital age. We must see that these younger generations will no longer be people of the book, but rather they will be people of the byte.

9. Three theologians in particular warrant closer scrutiny: Peter Stuhlmacher (1977), Gerhard Maier (1977) and Eta Linnemann (1990). The views of each of these scholars gets progressively more radical in relationship to historical criticism. Stuhlmacher advocates a readjustment of historical-critical inquiry while Maier advocates a new methodology, but one still based on the historical tools. Linnemann zealously calls for the abandonment of the historical-critical method in its entirety. For a more in depth discussion of these three see Caldwell 1990:41-54.

10. For further analysis of these three hermeneutical approaches see Caldwell 1990:54-63.

11. See, for example, Caldwell 1999 and 2000.

People of the Byte

We must not underestimate the significance of the technological changes that the digital revolution has for not only Bible interpretation, but for how we even look at the Bible in the first place. Boomershine succinctly summarizes the situation we face:

...the 20th century ... witnessed the most extensive changes in the means of communication since the development of writing. The printing press was only a more efficient and uniform way of producing written materials and silent reading was a change in the way in which writing was normally perceived. But the elements of continuity with the written manuscript were primary: marks on paper, bound together in books, read with the eyes, distributed by being moved from place to place, and requiring extensive training in order to be perceived. Electronic communications is a radically different means of communication: no needed paper, widely varied distribution systems, both audio and visual data, instant availability, and no required education to be perceived. The only media change that compares in magnitude with the shift from literacy to electronics is the shift from orality to literacy. In light of the changes in Biblical interpretation that took place in response to earlier media shifts, we live at a critical juncture in the history of Bible interpretation (1993:218).

Boomershine's insights get to the heart of what we face today as we try to make the truths of the Bible relevant to younger generations that are increasingly post-print in their worldview. Their picture of reality is oftentimes filtered through information access via the computer, internet and world wide web, with the power of hypertext connectivity that, according to Richard M. Harley, gives

readers unprecedented control of what—and how—they read. Hypertext overthrows the author's usual preeminence, since the text is 'atomized' into blocks of text, and these are again dispersed and reconfigured with other texts. As a result, the linear drive of the printed page gets disrupted as readers choose among a virtually endless number of paths along which to work and think nonsequentially (1993:166).

With this digital worldview the book as we know it is taking less and less priority. As the contents of the book are digitized, people no longer become linked to the book as a physical entity that they can pick up and feel. Instead they become linked to the digitized representation on their computer screens that is the book but is not the book.

As a result, these younger generations are increasingly no longer people of the book, they are people of the byte. Many of them are not willing to do the hard work necessary to interpret the Bible through reading the Bible as a book and using other books in helping them to understand it. They would rather download their information from the Internet and talk about religious matters in the anonymous confines of on-line chat rooms. The supposed staid Bible just doesn't make it anymore compared with the immediacy of the world wide web. All of this may have grave

implications for the next generations entrusted with rightly dividing the Word of Truth if that Word is found only in book form.

The Church today has two options. The Church can continue on in her post-Reformation industrial age document-driven traditional mode of approaching the Bible. Or the Church can proactively adjust to the realities that it faces with the twenty-first century digital generations and approach the Bible as a living document whose transmission and interpretation can and should be adapted to the specific cultural and historical situations that it faces. This second choice squares with what the Church has done throughout history. Again Boomershine:

Just as the Church faced a new situation in the second and third century in which the leaders and thinkers of the Church finally had no choice but to develop allegorical and theological methods in order to interpret the traditions of Israel and the early Church in the Hellenistic world, so now we may have no choice but to develop new methods in order to interpret those same traditions in this new cultural context.... But the question is: how can we accurately communicate the meaning of Biblical tradition in its original historical context in the world of electronic media and its various cultures? (1993:228)

Therefore, for the Bible to remain relevant to the new generations of media-savvy young people, the Church needs to once again adapt. Five hundred years ago the monks in the scriptorium were undoubtedly muttering about the dangers of Guttenburg and his press. Will we be the same today in our use of modern technology for Bible interpretation? Hopefully we will not. Indeed we are even now making breakthroughs, especially in the increasingly user-friendly Bible software that is being used by the majority of (Western) Bible scholars and being utilized in biblical language courses at most (Western) seminaries. However, this increasing use of sophisticated Bible software, though a major first step, is only scratching the surface of the digital revolution.¹² Such

12. Already many Bible scholars are using computer-aided Bible study helps that are changing the way that they study the Bible and the way that they teach their students to study the Bible. I myself am currently using Hermeneutica's BibleWorks program. These kinds of computer aids are changing my approach to Bible study in at least two major ways. First, and most obviously, the method of Bible study that I was trained in—spreading out open resource books on a large table and consulting each one in turn—has been replaced by spreading these same resource books in various windows on my computer screen. This has greatly reduced the time necessary to do the background reading and study of particular texts since I no longer need to get the various books down from the shelf, open the books to the particular pages that need to be read, shuffle books back and forth on the desk as I read and compare them one with the other. Now I have displayed before me on the computer screen several different English translations of the particular Bible passage that I am studying, as well as the Greek or Hebrew and LXX versions. With the mere wave of my mouse over a specific Hebrew word I can get the complete morphology of that word, as well as various lexicon definitions. I can do a complex search for a specific word in combination with other words throughout the entire text of the Bible in less than a second. And the incredible time-saving advantages go on and on. However, there is a subtle danger here: the assumption that these computer-enhanced Bible study methods will make us better interpreters. More efficient and speedy Bible study methods will not necessarily make for better Bible interpreters or interpretation!

Another more subtle change involves how I am now actually perceiving the biblical text. Before computers I was able to physically handle the text—to feel its weight in my hands as I carried it from place to place, to feel the slim pages and hear them rustle as I turned to the particular passage I was studying. I had a tactile relationship with the text. This tactile relationship helped me to somehow connect with the biblical text in a way that was far more personal or intimate than what I now have staring at various open windows on the computer screen. This text was God's Word in written form, the pages were bound in an impressive leather cover, the pages gilt-edged in gold. There was something "authoritative" about the Bible before its words were even read. I realize that Bible covers and gilt-edged pages are just packaging—but, as all advertisers know, packaging is everything. Now, however, the Bible has been reduced to words on a screen. No tactile intimacy between me and the text. No feeling of the computer monitor in my hands or the rustle of electrons as the text is displayed on the screen. So while I have gained in the speed and accuracy of my Bible study in byte form I have also lost an intimacy with the text that I had when I formerly studied it in book form. Intimacy has been sacrificed for convenience and efficiency. Not everyone who has changed to

use causes us—especially those of us older scholars who are of the book generation—to believe that we are using the capabilities of the digital Bible to maximum effectiveness. We still need to delve much more deeply into how the digital revolution is influencing our digital generation students in how they actually interpret the Bible.

In the past few decades there have been several efforts to take advantage of the new digital technology and apply it to the Bible and, correspondingly, to its interpretation. The first rather primitive (non-digital) attempts merely narrated the entire Bible on to audio-cassette tapes with one narrator. There was little room for the interpretation of individual Bible passages with this approach, only in the emphasis of the narrator and his modulation of particular words, phrases and sentences. This single narrator attempt was quickly upgraded to multiple-voice narration on cassette (later digital CD) done to the accompaniment of an entire vocal cast and orchestra with appropriate sound effects. Here there was more room for influencing the interpretation of particular Bible passages depending on the type of background music used, its loudness or softness, etc. Then, in 1979, Campus Crusade for Christ produced the highly successful Jesus film (on video, later DVD) that put the actual words of the Gospel of Luke in digital form. Here there was much more room for the interpretation of the various events in Luke in terms of casting (who can forget the blue-eyed Jesus?), directing, and even how the individual Lukan pericopes were acted out. But the Jesus film was only a foretaste of the hermeneutical possibilities opened up by the digital world of the computer.

The year 1989 marked the first significant attempt to use the tools of the digital revolution and apply them to the Bible when the American Bible Society established what it called the “NewMedia Project” in its Translations Department. Placing the Project under the auspices of the Translation Department was significant. Why? Because, according to Richard M. Harley, what the ABS was attempting to produce were not merely audio or video dramatizations of the biblical text, but rather to attempt, using the latest digital technology,

to stay close to the meanings scripture had for the original receptor audiences.... In short, the multimedia translation aspired from the outset to be genuine translation, not adaptation. The now well-known concept of functional or dynamic equivalence, developed within ABS, remains very much at the center of this effort.... Combin[ing] a faithful functional equivalent rendering of the source text with supplementary audio-visual features that maximize the potential for both a proper understanding of and an appropriate response to the message of the source text” (1993:170-171).

The goal of Bible translators when translating the Bible in recent years has been to make dynamically equivalent text to text translations. Now, for the first time, this same approach is being applied to translating the Bible in text to multimedia translations like the NewMedia Project. Thus, Bible interpretation is no longer confined to only a text, as in the past. Because of the ground-breaking work of the NewMedia Project, Bible interpretation is now possible without using the text at all, or perhaps only as a secondary source. Dynamic-equivalent digital

computer-aided Bible study will feel the loss of intimacy as I do. I believe I now feel perhaps as did the master storyteller long ago when oral story was replaced by hand-written scroll, or the scribe when hand-written scroll was replaced by mass produced books: something is lost.

translations allow Bible interpretation to occur after viewing the multimedia translation rather than after the reading of a translated text.¹³ It may be a return to how Bible interpretation was done, mainly in community, before the onslaught of silent, individualized reading.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons—one of which being the high costs involved—the NewMedia Project was abandoned by the ABS in 1999. But before its demise the Project gave great promise to what Bible translation and interpretation may look like in the future. The Project produced three MTV-like music videos with supporting educational materials in video, image, sound/audio, music and hypertext on CD-ROMs: “Out of the Tombs” in 1991 (taken from Mark 5:1-20); “A Father and Two Sons” in 1992 (taken from Luke 15:11-24); and “The Visit” in 1993 (taken from Luke 1:39-56). In 1998 the Project also developed a complete interactive website based on the parable of the good Samaritan entitled, “The Neighbor.” A final video was produced in 1999 and called simply “Resurrection” (taken from John 20:1-31). Both “The Neighbor” and “Resurrection” can be readily accessed at <http://www.newmediabible.org>. I encourage you to visit this website. Especially click on “The Neighbor” and experience the new media translation of Luke 10:25-37. More than words on paper can describe, “The Neighbor” website shows the potential of the new paradigm of the Bible as byte.

As demonstrated by the work of the NewMedia Project, in the twenty-first century we will return to the Bible as Story approach to interpreting Scripture. The currently dominant approach of the Bible as silently read and solitarily learned will be replaced by a return to the Bible as experienced as story in community. But this community experience will not be limited to an orally read experience, as in the past, but now will also be a virtually experienced video hypertext story as exemplified in “The Neighbor” website. Right now we are only at the very beginning stages of what the Bible can be in terms of the new Bible as byte paradigm. In the future, however, more and more endeavors similar to the NewMedia Project will be made. In fact, they must be made. Despite their high cost and their reliance upon a whole host of other experts besides the Bible experts—art historians, musicologists, graphic designers, composers, film-makers and editors, computer and communication experts etc.—the effort must be made.¹⁴ Increasingly, as home computer video-editing capabilities become more sophisticated and less costly, more individuals and groups will have ready access to the technology that will allow them to contribute to the new Bible as byte paradigm.

How will the Bible as byte paradigm affect Bible interpretation? Many of the answers to this question must remain open for the time being since there are as yet so few examples of the new paradigm. Eventually, however, as more individuals and groups make their own media translations of the biblical text, interpreters will have to determine what is the best or most accurate digital presentation of that text (something akin to what textual critics do today—a new form of text-video criticism?).¹⁵ They will, for example, have to choose which digital version of the good Samaritan is the best dynamic equivalent translation, the NewMedia version or some other future version. Again, how will Bible interpretation be affected? At the very least, Bible

13. Such interpretations could possibly be akin to how oral Christians in non-reading cultures interpret the Bible after hearing it read to them by a reader or on tape. More research needs to be done concerning the relationship between oral Bible interpretation and multimedia Bible interpretation.

14. Cf. J. Ritter Werner (c.1999) for an overview of some of the complexities of the NewMedia Project.

15. For example, Mel Gibson’s, *The Passion* (2003)—largely his own interpretation of the Gospel accounts of Jesus death—reflects some of the future digital interpretation issues that will arise.

interpreters will also need to rethink the entire process that they currently use in studying written texts since digitized video translations tend to blur the old lines between exegesis (investigating the text) and application (applying that investigated text). A whole host of related questions follow: Will the old distinction between exegesis and application be appropriate in dealing with new media versions of the Bible? How will the Bible interpreter go about exegeting a digitized video translation of a written text? How will the older paradigm theological terms like inspiration, inerrancy and illumination apply to the new paradigm of the Bible as byte? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the entire process? All of these questions—and more—will need to be carefully thought through by Bible interpreters in the twenty-first century.

While we will continue to be text-based for the immediate future—even the good Samaritan website has an accompanying contemporary print version of Luke 10:25-37—those of us in the Bible as book paradigm must still try to relate Scripture to the Bible as byte generation. How do we do this? In my own hermeneutics classes I make my students aware of the growing number of Bible as byte resources that are already available.¹⁶ This awareness not only legitimizes my student's use of these resources in their own Bible interpretation but also forces them to recognize the reality of this new paradigm among the younger generations today. At the same time I attempt to work out a balance between the trusty historical critical approach to the Bible coupled with a practical application approach that begins to make the Bible more relevant to the digital generation. As a result, in interpreting particular texts I have my students answer the following six questions:

1. What kind of literary genre is the passage and what are the implications of this?
2. What is the original context of the passage?
3. What was God saying through this passage to the original audience?
4. What is God saying through this passage today to your target audience?
5. How will you communicate the truths of this passage to your target audience? What media (film, TV show, song, MTV video, website, etc.) will capture the essence of these truths for your target audience?
6. Explain how you will use that media in your individual or group Bible study session.

Questions 1-3 draw upon some of the basic questions that historical criticism asks. Questions 4-6 begin to move beyond the text to the increasingly digitally-savvy target audience, especially questions 5 and 6. I realize that these last two questions are but a start in the complicated process of trying to bring the truths of the Bible to the byte generation. But a start must be made somewhere!

16. There are several recent resources. I have found two books particularly helpful for using films in relationship with the biblical text: Robert K. Johnston's *Reel Spirituality* (2000) and Doug Fields and Eddie James' *Videos that Teach* (1999).

Conclusion

So what is the Bible? Is it the 66 books of Old and New Testaments sandwiched between a black leather cover? Is it the words that we read in the English text? Is it the original Hebrew and Greek words in the text? Is it the remembering of the oral sayings that lay behind many of the texts and passing them down from generation to generation? Is it the original words as spoken by Jesus, or by Abraham, Moses, or the prophets? Is the Bible the active Word of God that the people of God have held in their hearts for generations? Or is it all of these things and more? The fact is this: the Bible is the Word of God, and remains the Word of God, whether it is communicated in oral, written or digital form. This, indeed, is the mystery of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

Furthermore, reviewing the history of Bible interpretation, even briefly, clearly shows us that the Word of God prevails over the technological changes of history. This fact should give us great hope that the Church will be able to meet the new challenges of the byte generations of the twenty-first century. For whether it was Moses writing down the Torah for the first time for a newly freed Hebrew people now wandering in the wilderness, or the new generations of Diaspora Jews after the Captivity who needed interpretations to help them reconnect with the faith of their fathers, or the Christians of Luther's day who desperately needed to read the text for themselves in order to throw off the tyranny of the Roman church—in like manner the Church in the future will rise to this latest technological challenge. Guided, as always, by the Holy Spirit, the people of the byte will also discover culturally appropriate ways of “rightly dividing the Word of Truth” that will make sense of the Bible for them and for their generations.

In the final analysis the new Bible as byte paradigm will force Bible interpreters to rethink the entire purpose of the Bible down through the centuries: a form—both oral and written—that God used to communicate His truth to each new generation. Seen in that light, technology is but a means to an end; God uses technology for the continuing communication of His truth. As a result, the storytellers of the past were replaced by the writers and readers of the scrolls because that is where technology had taken the next generations. The content of the message was still God's truth, but now in scroll form. In turn, scroll writers and readers were replaced by printers as the mass-produced book technology gained popularity. But, once again, the uniformly printed document was still God's truth. Likewise today the Bible will still continue to be God's truth whether in digitized written form on a computer screen or in new digitized video translations. Whether by the spoken words of the storyteller who had committed God's truth to memory, or the spoken words of the scroll reader who was reading God's truth from a written scroll, or the individual Christian who was silently reading God's truth alone in his home on a mass-produced book, the point is that this entity that we call the Bible—in its oral, scroll, or book form—was God's truth presented in ways that made sense to those various generations. The Bible as byte paradigm will simply carry all of this one step further. God's truth will still go forth.

Let me end with a story. On a recent Sunday morning I attended the church where I am a member. I entered into worship with the rest of the congregation, singing Scripture songs displayed on the wall via the wonderful combination of Powerpoint and state-of-the-art video projection, with photographs of nature forming a beautiful backdrop to the words that we sang.

Again, with the rest of the congregation, I read out loud the Bible passage of the day that also was displayed on the wall, this time with bold italic script on dark blue background. Then I listened to the pastor as he gave his sermon, which this day happened to be his annual masterful recitation, from memory, of the Sermon of the Mount. After the service I asked myself: “Where was the Bible today?” We are a Bible-believing church, it is in our very constitution. But today no Bible—at least no physical book called the Bible—was touched by any of the thousand members of the congregation. In fact, the vast majority of the congregation no longer bring the book Bible to church, or if they do, it is now the much lighter version found on their palm pilots. Yet I had to admit that the entire service had been from the Bible and of the Bible, but not the Bible that I grew up with. Back then all of us, from youngest to oldest, had our own copy of the book Bible that we dutifully carried to church with us. We all would turn—fingers on pages making a cacophony of rustling sounds in the sanctuary—to the Bible passage that the pastor would read aloud to us as we followed along silently. Then as the pastor expounded on the passage we all would follow along in the text as he expertly unwrapped its divine mysteries for us.

But that was a long time ago now. It worked for me and for my generation. And it would perhaps still work today if we let it. Unfortunately, the world will not let it. So I will change—reluctantly I must admit, for I still continue to carry my heavy book Bible to church with me every Sunday even though I don’t need it any more, much to the chagrin of my children. And in the sanctuary I still actually turn to the passage of the day—rustling the pages—and read from my book Bible while the rest of the congregation reads from the wall-projected image of the digitized Bible. I must continue to change, as must we all, in the midst of palm pilots and video projections and internet web pages and who knows what else in the future. The questions of Bob Hodgson will keep coming back to both haunt us and to challenge us: “Where is our Bible today? And where will our Bible be in the twenty-first century?”

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