

VERN S.
POYTHRESS

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P U B L I S H I N G
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*To my parents,
God's greatest blessing to me during the earliest
times when he was at work in my life*

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■

THE CHALLENGE OF UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

On the campus of Commoner College, Libbie Liberal has invited her friends together for a discussion of the Bible.

Libbie Liberal: *I'm glad to see you here. The Bible is really a stimulating book for me. I hope you will experience the same thing as we look at it together. My favorite character is Jesus, and today we will be discussing a passage that talks about him. He is such an inspiring person because he reminds me of how God loves everyone and accepts everyone as his child. He encourages me to believe in the preciousness of humanity and the ultimate goodness underneath even the most forbidding exterior. I hope you feel the same way.*

Is everyone here? Let's see. Where is Heidi Hedonist?

Natalie Naturalist: *She's gone to the beach with her latest boyfriend.*

Liberal: *What about Ivan Indifferent?*

Roland Relativist: *He's hanging out in the game room.*

Liberal: *Well, we'd better begin. The passage for today is Luke 4:31–37. Norma, would you read it for us?*

Norma Narratologist: *Sure. It says, "Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.*

"In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 'Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'

"'Be quiet!' Jesus said sternly. 'Come out of him!' Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.

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“All the people were amazed and said to each other, ‘What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!’ And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.”

Liberal: *Now let’s discuss it. What’s your reaction?*

Naturalist: *It shows what I’ve always suspected: the Bible comes from primitive, superstitious times. People attributed natural phenomena like mental illness to demons and occult forces. They used God and the supernatural to allay their fears. Then science came along and gave us the true explanation of how the world works. I would guess that Jesus had some kind of personal influence that helped those who were mentally ill, and then people exaggerated it into a story about an evil spirit.*

Liberal: *Isn’t Jesus’ concern for the mentally ill inspiring!*

Naturalist: *Well, at least he tried to help them. But he was a person of his own times, and probably believed a lot of that superstitious stuff himself. I really don’t see what’s so exciting, Libbie. Everything of significance can be found in a much more enlightened form in modern scientific thinking.*

Carol Critical-Method: *It is still illuminating to apply modern historical methods to ancient documents. I’ve been doing some research. We can establish that this story was once transmitted as an oral tale during the period of the early church. It belongs to the category “miracle story” and the subcategory “exorcism.” The early church used it to reinforce its claim that Jesus had divine power and to confirm the authority of its teaching, which it claimed was derived from the Master. But as people passed on the story, they introduced changes and embellishments over time. There is probably some historical core to this story. But it is so typical of the genre that it would be impossible to be dogmatic. We really don’t know what happened.*

Naturalist: *So why should we bother to discuss this story?*

Danny Demythologizer: *Wait a minute. Don’t dismiss the story out of hand. Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann, two of our outstanding modern thinkers, showed us that mythical stories like this one can still have a hidden message for us today. The man possessed by a demon is a picture of every individual who is alienated from God and therefore alienated from his fellow human beings. He lives a confused, inauthentic life, in bondage to hidden psychic powers that he does not acknowledge. Then he meets Jesus. Jesus shows that authentic, free living can be achieved by communion with God. Jesus calls him out from the alienation that fears death and hidden powers. He moves him into the joy of*

loving and respecting others. Through this call of Jesus, people can still have an existential encounter with God today. People in the ancient world expressed these truths in mythical form, because that was part of their culture. Our culture is different, but the fundamental human struggles are still the same.

Theo Therapist: *I feel that Danny is onto something. But he is still too caught up with the religion thing. Sure, the culture back then was different. But what is the same is the need for self-esteem. This guy described as demon possessed must have had low self-esteem. He was kind of weird, and so everybody despised him and called him names. They began to say that he was demon possessed. This accusation only made him worse. Because of the power of suggestion, he began to believe it himself, and acted more and more in the way that other people expected a demon-possessed man to act. Jesus broke the power of his psychic dysfunction by affirming him. Jesus distinguished between the man himself and the picture of low self-esteem that others had imposed (symbolized by the demonic voice).*

Newton New-Ager: *Theo, you're right. In a sense, it all has to do with self-esteem. But what is this self that we are supposed to esteem? Do most people really know? We rush around with trivial kinds of busyness. We never stop to meditate and discover who we really are. Psychotherapy can help people part of the way. But in my experience it does not touch the deepest recesses of the self. Those deepest recesses are spiritual.*

When I started exploring my spiritual self, I began to see that mysterious spiritual forces are at work in a lot of areas. I've started trying to get into contact with spiritual forces. I grew in self-esteem only when I really began to discover my inner divine self. I think Jesus knew something about this secret. Doesn't the Bible say somewhere that Jesus was God? Well, we all have that divine spark within us. He manifested it much more fully. That gave him spiritual power. So I'm not so surprised that he had a deep spiritual influence on someone whose spiritual self was tangled up.

You know, if I studied the Bible some more, maybe Jesus could give me some tips about how to manifest my divine self.

Relativist: *This discussion is a perfect illustration of the need for everyone to react to ideas in his or her own way. Each one of us has different ideas about this text. Each person sees the text against a different background of previous views and experiences. So the ideas are inevitably different. Sometimes our ideas are even opposite to each other's. How*

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much richer we are for appreciating everyone's point of view! We can all benefit from the Bible, or from any other book, by letting it stimulate our ideas. Each of you must discover what is true for you. Whatever works for you is true for you.

Dick Deconstructionist: *Roland, people's reactions differ because language is always fluid, flexible, and inherently ambiguous. No one can affix a meaning once and for all to this passage. And no meaning, even if it could be fixed, could be passed on to someone else without changing it.*

Marvin Marxist: *But most of it is propaganda and power plays. Luke probably wrote this piece to buttress his authority and the authority of the church leaders of his day. The church offered deliverance for the disenfranchised classes, as symbolized by the demonized man. But once people were in the church, they had to submit to the authority of the leaders, as symbolized by Jesus.*

Liberal: *Oh, my! Our time is already up. And we haven't heard yet from Olivia Occultist, Norma Narratologist, Fay Feminist, or Susan Sociologist. Let's continue this discussion next week.*

Susan Sociologist: *I'd like to hear from Chris Christian, too. Can we get him to come?*

Liberal: *Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't invite him. He's so, uh, narrow, you know. He actually believes that the Bible is literally God's word and is completely true.*

(Laughter)

God is who he is, in all his power and mercy and majesty. He is supremely good and desirable (Pss. 16:11; 27:4; 34:8; 84:10-12). So why do we not see everyone eagerly seeking him and honoring him? In the West, many people are interested in spiritual things. The Bible is available in bookstores and hotel rooms. But people are largely bent on fleeing from him.

Why? In a sense, hostile responses are not new. Ever since sin entered the human race, people have been fleeing and hiding from God (Gen. 3:8!). They can do so even in religious practices (Judg. 2:11-13; Ezek. 8:9-18; Matt. 23). They can do so even when they are studying the Bible (Matt. 22:29).

But what is happening now in the West? What makes it possible for people to discuss the Bible as Libbie Liberal's group did?

Christianity has been practiced in the West for hundreds of years. In the course of that long history, Christians have committed plenty of horrendous sins and made ghastly mistakes that discredit the faith. Moreover, those antagonistic to the God of the Bible have, over a period of several centuries,

produced a whole marketplace of culturally fashionable stratagems for evading God. Some are incredibly sophisticated and awesomely complex.¹ They include ways of immunizing ourselves from the Bible and its message. So we have plenty of ways to hide our spiritual nakedness.

Christians Reading the Bible

Within this atmosphere, we who are Christians can also be seduced. Like the naturalists, we can begin to read the Bible as a merely human book. Or, with secular psychotherapists, we can read it merely as one more source for advice: we can use it on our own terms to promote our self-esteem. Or, with New Age religion, we can search the Bible for stimulating thoughts about angels, demons, and altered states of consciousness. Or, with the hedonists, we can simply go on our pleasure-seeking way, without taking time to meditate on the word of God.

Maybe we have escaped these blatant distortions. But we may still carry more subtle distortions into our study of the Bible. As an illustration, let us break into another Bible discussion, this time among Christians.

In another room on the campus of Commoner College, Chris Christian is meeting with a group. The discussion happens to be focusing on the same passage, Luke 4:31–37.

Peter Pietist: *The central purpose of the Bible, and of Christianity as a whole, is to promote a life of intimate personal devotion to the Lord. In Luke 4:31–37, the Lord speaks with authority to the sinful tendencies in my heart. I react to him by acknowledging him, but also fearing him. He says to my sin, “Be quiet,” and “Come out of him!” The passage promises that, as a result, I will be delivered. It tells me that I should be amazed at Jesus’ work in my life, and that I should be zealous to tell others about my deliverance.*

Dottie Doctrinalist: *No, you are missing the point. The central purpose of the Bible, and of Christianity as a whole, is to promote sound doctrine. This passage teaches the deity of Christ by calling him “the Holy One of God” and by demonstrating his divine authority and power. It teaches that there is a realm of evil spirits, and that these spirits can take control of a person. But it also shows the sovereignty and the grace of God in delivering people from these spirits.*

Curt Cultural-Transformationist: *You are both missing the point. The central purpose of the Bible is to promote the transformation of the*

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world. This passage shows Christ transforming the world, so that we ourselves may engage in active transformation under the authority of Christ. The passage shows us the authority of Christ, not as a doctrinal abstraction, but as an active, powerful authority engaging in world transformation. The overthrow of the demonic realm and the entry of the Holy One with his power imply a reordering of political, social, aesthetic, and linguistic structures. The passage illustrates this reordering by speaking of the utter destruction of evil, the total change in the formerly demonized man, and the obvious social consequences in the reaction of the crowd and the people in the surrounding region. It energizes us to attack the demonized structures of evil in the institutions of our day.²

Laura Liturgist: *The central purpose of the Bible is to restore true worship. Out of worship will flow healing that affects all of life. The passage sets forth a pattern for an order of worship: first, proclamation of the authority of God; then, awe and fear at the holiness of God; next, reception of the saving word of God; next, response of amazement and gratitude; finally, dismissal to go out to tell others.*

Missy Missiologist: *The story ends with the news spreading “throughout the surrounding area.” That reminds us that our task is to spread the news of the gospel throughout the world. In some areas of the world, Christians have to engage in spiritual warfare against evil spirits and against demon-possessed people. This passage provides a basis for casting out demons when the missionary church comes up against the powers of darkness. We in the West tend to have a horizon that is too narrow. If we don’t see demons in our own situation, we imagine that they don’t exist. We imagine that our problems with personal piety or with corrupt institutions are the only ones out there. We have to hear what’s going on in other parts of the world and in other cultures in order to see the full force of this passage.*

Fatima Factualist: *I think that we are letting our imaginations run away with us. The message is simple and obvious. The passage is just saying that these things happened when Jesus was on earth. The evidence of miracles shows that Jesus is who he claimed to be, and that the Bible is what it claims to be. It furnishes us with historical evidence with which to confront unbelievers.*

Amy Affirmationist: *You are all saying such wonderful things! I think everyone is right. The Holy Spirit can bring different messages to different people. Maybe the Spirit intends to minister in different ways to each person’s need. He is speaking to each of us according to our needs. We don’t need to be upset when people see different ideas in the same passage.*

Oliver Objectivist: Amy, affirming everything is no solution at all. Look, we're in a pickle because we haven't got a clear objective when we read. Everybody is being swept along by his own prejudices. To have a clear objective, and for agreement even to be possible, there must be only one meaning to the passage. That meaning is the intention of Luke, the author. It is there objectively, for all time, before we start our discussion. Our task is to determine that meaning. Everything else belongs to what E. D. Hirsch calls "significances," that is, the relationships between the one meaning and our outside interests. These outside interests naturally differ from individual to individual. So there are many possible significances, but only one meaning. We have had a problem up to now because all of us have gone and looked for significances instead of the meaning. We have brought in our own personal agenda prematurely. First, we must look at the one meaning.³

Herman Hermeneut: Oliver, you want all of us to use your theory of meaning. But how do we know that your theory is right? Maybe it is only one more instance of the "prejudices" that you abhor.

Objectivist: My theory is right. It has to be right. It is the only way that we can hope to move beyond the prejudices that personal interests introduce.

Hermeneut: Your theory advocates focusing on the single, objective meaning. Peter Pietist would object that your theory intrinsically distorts interpretation by ignoring the essence of the matter, namely, personal fellowship with God. Curt Cultural-Transformationist would object that you distort interpretation by exalting theoretical knowledge over cultural action. Laura Liturgist would object that you wrongly prefer theoretical knowledge to worship. Missy Missiologist would object that your approach is monocultural. Amy Affirmationist would object that you have misjudged the work of the Spirit.

You have a preference for theoretical, objective meaning. They have preferences for various other things. So how is your preference any less "subjective" than theirs? What gives it any special claim to be free from all "prejudice"?

Objectivist: We must first study the Bible objectively. Only after that, as a second step, can we decide whether the Bible primarily promotes piety, doctrine, worship, or whatever. Whichever way the Bible points, we will follow. We will then adopt a life in conformity with its direction.

Hermeneut: I don't think that you understand deeply enough the others' viewpoints. From their viewpoints, the theory you propose involves not minor errors, but fundamental misjudgments that are bound to

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corrupt the entire process of interpretation. You think of your theory as a reliable vehicle for arriving at any destination to which the text may steer us. But we see your theory as a preprogrammed, computerized vehicle. It will frustrate anybody who tries to steer it over terrain that it does not recognize.

You want your theory to be a neutral arbiter among opinions. But to us, it represents one more opinion, one more point of view about the manner in which we understand the Bible. It seems to me to be just one more view alongside the others. So why should we adopt your point of view?

Objectivist: *Because I am right and the rest are wrong!*

Hermeneut: *But can you show us so in an objective manner?*

Objectivist: *My approach is necessary if we are to decide among competing interpretations and attain the truth. If we pursue ten or a hundred different goals, we obviously get chaos. How do we get unity? We must accept that the author provides our control. He has one meaning that he has expressed. Determining his meaning is then the goal that we can all pursue. We argue methodically from the textual data in order to test our ideas of what this one meaning is.*

Missiologist: *People from non-Western cultures often do not agree with you. Not all cultures prize methodological control. They may not even see why you treasure a theory of objective meaning. For example, Asian cultures are more concerned with practice and life, not merely theoretical agreement.*

Affirmationist: *Objectivist, why not just trust that the Spirit will lead us all? Is your method superior to the Spirit? I will admit that your method may be something into which the Spirit has led you. But he may lead others in other ways.*

Objectivist: *Scholars agree that we must have objective control.*

Hermeneut: *Do they, now, all of them?*

Objectivist: *Well, scholarship these days is degenerating seriously around the edges. But scholars used to know that interpretation should be objective.*

Hermeneut: *Yes, the historical-critical school desired scientific objectivity. Did they achieve it?*

Objectivist: *No, they had a prejudice against miracles and the supernatural. We certainly have to free ourselves from that prejudice. We do so precisely in order to be objective. Many conservative scholars, and not just ant-supernaturalist critics, agree that objective meaning and objective methods are necessary.*

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Hermeneut: *Maybe scholars like your theory because it fits the inclinations of their profession. Scholars are occupied with issues of intellectual content and intellectual control. So they are occupationally comfortable with a theory that promotes their class interests.*

Objectivist: *I admit that the full-blown theory originates primarily from the scholarly world. But it is designed to describe in principle what everyone should be doing.*

Hermeneut: *But perhaps your theory of meaning has hidden prejudices against the nonscholarly origins of the views of Pietist and Affirmationist. Or are you prejudiced against Missiologist's non-Western cultures?*

Objectivist: *No, no, it's not prejudice; it's the truth.*

Hermeneut: *But according to your own desire to be objective, you must ground your claim in something deeper than your own preferences or the preferences of a select group of scholars.*

Objectivist: *(desperate): I will show you from the Bible.*

Hermeneut: *Very well. You will show us how your theory of meaning derives from the Bible?*

Objectivist: *Yes.*

Hermeneut: *And what principles of interpretation should we use as we proceed to study the Bible?*

Objectivist: *My objective principles, of course.*

Hermeneut: *But we do not yet agree to yours.*

Objectivist: *Well, I admit that is a problem.*

Hermeneut: *It's called the hermeneutical circle. We all have assumptions before we start. We must critically examine those assumptions. In order to appreciate our problem, let's read some advanced twentieth-century hermeneutical literature together.*

Doctrinalist: *Wait, Herman. I admit that you have given Objectivist a lot to think about. In fact, you have given us all something to think about. Much of what you have said applies not only to Objectivist, but to all of us, including you. We are all making assumptions, and we do not agree about what assumptions are most fitting. We do not agree about how to interpret the Bible. But neither could we agree about how to interpret the hermeneutical writings that you are so keen on. So how could those writings resolve our problem?*

Pietist: *Aren't unbelievers producing most of the "advanced hermeneutical literature"? If we read that stuff, we will probably fall victim to the spirit of false philosophies, as Hermeneut suspects Objectivist has done already. If we cut loose from the Bible in order to do*

hermeneutical self-examination, we are just staring at our navels. We are no better than the Hindu gurus. I agree with Objectivist that we had better go to the Bible.

Hermeneut: *But we don't agree on how to interpret it!*

Doctrinalist: *So what? The Bible will make itself clear. The Bible is self-interpreting. God has put within it sufficient directions to guide us in its interpretation, even if our first attempts are biased.*

Affirmationist: *And the Spirit will be with us.*

Strengthening the Foundations

People can do all kinds of crazy things with the Bible. But if we would profit spiritually, we must reckon with what God himself requires. Some ways of reading are right, and other ways are wrong. God himself speaks to us to indicate the difference: “Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart” (Ps. 119:33–34).

The Bible itself is our primary resource. But we also receive some help through other channels. We use our own previous experience in interpretation. Our fellowship in the church nourishes us spiritually. Those around us with gifts of teaching set an example. Any number of books give guidance on improving our practical skills.⁴ But these secondary channels are all fallible. To some extent, they rely on an unsure foundation, namely, various popular theories and unexamined assumptions about language, meaning, history, and human nature. These assumptions may or may not be fully in accord with biblical truth. In fact, as we shall see in the course of this book, present-day thinking on the Bible needs radical reform.

It is thus worthwhile to reexamine foundational questions. Who is God? What is his relation to the Bible? What sort of things are the human languages in which the Bible is written? What is meaning? How does God expect us to respond to the Bible? What interpretive procedures do justice to the character of the Bible and our responsibility? In this book we reevaluate these foundations.

We leave it to other books to focus more on the step-by-step development of detailed skills. Those skills are important. But it is equally important that practical skills should operate within a framework and with a controlling direction set by the word of God. Otherwise, we may find ourselves like the foolish man in Jesus' parable, the man who built his house without a foundation on rock (Matt. 7:24–27).

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ENDNOTES

1. For a popularized account of the process, see the works of Francis A. Schaeffer, especially *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968) and *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1968).
2. The idea for these three types of approach came from Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The AACCS in the CRC," *Reformed Journal* 24, no. 10 (December 1974), 9-16.
3. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
4. One of the best elementary guides is Oletta Wald, *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975). For group study, see James F. Nyquist and Jack Kuhatschek, *Leading Bible Discussions*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985). Slightly more advanced is T. Norton Sterrett, *How to Understand Your Bible*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974). Then there are fuller and more elaborate expositions: Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1994); Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950); and many more.