

If you are really interested in Bible interpretation you will pay attention to two gods. Obviously Yahweh is the author of the book(s) that so captures our devotion. Yet there is another god (lower case 'g') that captures our imagination. He was a winged imp named Hermes, a favorite of orators and poets, travelers and merchants, thieves and liars. Why? Because of his skills in both travel and speech. You can recognize him by his winged feet which carried him from the Pantheon of the gods to mortal realms. When Zeus, or some other notable deity, had a message for humans, Hermes was his herald. He



had no choice but to carry the message of his superiors; however, he loved to play the trickster, giving the right message with the wrong implication. He entertained himself by purposefully deceiving his 'clients.' It was from this messenger god that Bible interpretation got its formal name: 'hermeneutics' (though we certainly have no intentions of twisting the message as he did). Simply put, *hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation.*

## The Science of Bible Interpretation

What you are about to study is a science. It is not a 'hard' science that can be reduced to test tubes and element charts. Rather

*Hermeneutics is the science of the way language actually works in everyday life.*

it is a science of language—specifically, how language works. Language has rules, you know—rules about words, grammar, history, and logic. If you look back at the table of contents of this book you will notice the major subjects we will investigate: The rules of *literary* and *historical* context; rules for defining *words* and understanding *grammar*; rules for *parallel* passages and appropriate *applications*; as well as rules for reading specific *genres* (categories) of biblical literature—psalms, gospels, history, prophecy, etc. *Who makes up these rules? No one and everyone.* It's not like a bunch of theologians sneaked off to some cathedral in the Alps and came down with a list of divine hermeneutical 'do's' and 'don'ts.' These rules come from observing how language actually works in the rough and tumble of real life. They are observations about the language of the marketplace and the blog, the sitcom and comedy central. This is why we can say that hermeneutics is truly a science—it comes from observing this incredibly complex and eminently fascinating phenomenon we call 'language.'

**Caution:**

*The scientific rules of Hermeneutics will not tell you what every difficult passage means but it will help you know what it can not mean.*

## The Art of Bible Interpretation

Hermeneutics, however, is more than scientific rules; it requires a good bit of artistic skill. For example, if one of your friends says, "What a fox!" You may not know precisely what this means without the help of your inner artist. After all, if you are a guy and another guy says this about some cute girl at school, you probably understand him to mean that she is 'hot' (not thermally) or a 'babe' (not chronologically) or a 'knockout' (not medically). On the other hand, if he says this about one of your guy friends he probably means he is sly. On the other hand, if you are out hunt-

ing deer and your dad says “What a fox!” he is probably talking about an actual mammalian quadruped of the canine genus. In other words, *language is slippery*. Imagine the poor foreign exchange student whom you happily greet: “What’s up?” She looks to the sky for the answer, so you say, “No, I mean ‘what’s going down.’” She drops her gaze to the ground, so you say, “What’s going on?” “On what?” she asks. All this leads me to believe that English is the world’s most popular language partially because it is so easy to speak badly. (We do have a confusing language, indeed, when something that is ‘hot’ can also be ‘cool’; where boxing rings are square; where you park in a driveway and drive in a parkway; and restrooms are the last place you actually want to rest.)

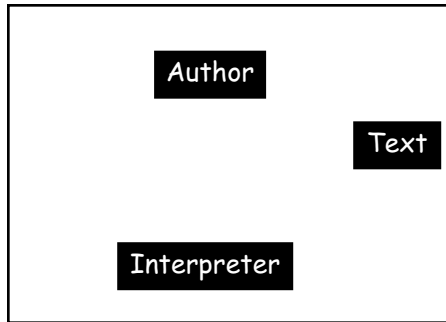
Mastering language is one of the most interesting and exhausting tasks of human life. Literalistic rules just won’t cut it. For example, one time I was in Mexico drinking a Coke. I wanted to offer a ‘sip’ to the missionary’s daughter (read here an appropriate sigh from a teenager pining over a lovely Latina). My Spanish was pretty pathetic, but I wanted to give it a try. I knew how to say, “Do you want” — “¿Quieres?” And I knew the verb “to drink” — “beber.” I even knew how to put a diminutive ending onto a word to make it mean “small” — “ito.” So my sentence came out, “¿Quieres un bebito?” The problem is, of course, that this does NOT mean, “Do you want a drink?” it means “Do you want a baby”!!! Like I said, mere rules are insufficient. It takes both the rules of linguistic science as well as the interpretive artist. Yet consider this: human beings are the only animals that use language. Oh, I know about Koko the gorilla who uses simple sign language, and the moans of whales (I even have a new age CD of

*Language is an  
expression of our  
Imago Dei.*

whales on my iPod). But to compare this with the abstract concepts of human language is like comparing an inadvertent belch with a Mozart sonata just because both started in the key of ‘C.’ What we do as humans is more than complex, it is more than extraordinary; it is nothing less than a spiritual activity, for this is an attribute that we share with God and his angels to which no other animal can stake a claim.

## The Simplicity and Complexity of Human Language

All human communication consists of three elements: the *author*, the *text* (written, oral, or visual), and the *interpreter(s)*.<sup>1</sup> It is that simple. Now, let's illustrate how it works. *Written Texts*: As you read this book, three elements are involved: The author (yours truly), a printed text which you hold in your hand, and a reader (the possessor of said hands). *Audio texts*: If you listen to the radio, there is a singer or DJ who produces certain sounds, these sounds are transmitted through a radio signal, and listeners receive and interpret the sounds. *Visual texts*: If a traffic light goes haywire and a police officer waves his hands wildly, the drivers must see and interpret the actions. Summary: it doesn't matter if the particular kind of communication is written, oral, or visual, it will always have an author, the text, and the interpreter. That seems simple enough.

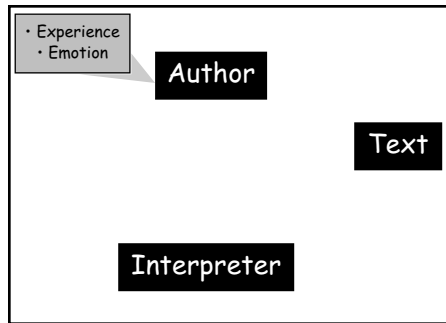


Here is where language gets more complicated, as well as more interesting. The authors are neither robots nor Mr. Spock (except, of course, in the unfortunate situation where you really are named 'Spock'). Authors have both emotions and experiences. What that means is that if a speaker/writer is to be clearly understood, the listener/reader must know something of her

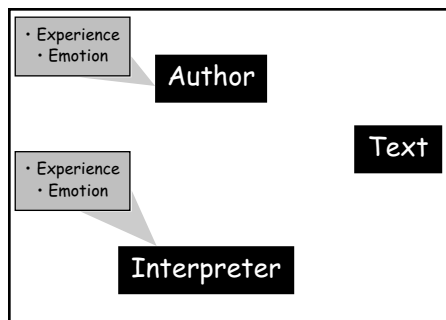
<sup>1</sup> In each chapter you can view PowerPoint slides that correspond with the text of the book. These can be found at <http://markmoore.org/classes/principles/> or <http://collegepress.com/SeeingGod/>. For this chapter, click on the PowerPoint button and open the first introductory PowerPoint. Scroll down to the screen that says "Three Elements of Interpretation."

background. Let's say you hear someone give a talk about forgiveness. Do you suppose it would make a difference in how you listened to that person if he was a victim of child abuse, or a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, an adulterer, or a theologian? The illustrations here could go on endlessly but surely you get the point: *If you are to fully understand the author's words you must know something of the author's experiences and emotions.*

*All language acts come prepackaged with the author's point of view.*



Likewise, every reader/listener has certain experiences, emotions, levels of interest, intelligence, and vocabulary which enables her to a greater or lesser degree to understand an author. If you are into sports, for example, a basketball commentator who uses terms like 'downtown,' 'on fire,' 'zone,' or 'defense' makes great sense to you. For a fireman or a political analyst these same terms are loaded with very different meanings. Or again, the way a divorcee reads the words 'honor your husband' would be quite different than a thirteen-year-old boy, a preacher, or a marriage counselor. Each of us brings our personal history to the text. Our



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age, race, religion, political affiliation, hobbies, and health all serve to shape our 'listening' of any text, whether it is written, oral, or visual. An inner-city African American in the South may well view a college education, bankers, policemen, or the White House very differently than an Asian-American family in Seattle.

*The Plot Thickens:* All communication acts are filtered through language which is always an imperfect science (and art). There are pitfalls all along the way.

**Pitfall #1:** Written texts lose the advantage of vocal inflection (although bold print and italics help with modern texts). We often have to guess at someone's meaning. For example, in John 14:1b the NIV has Jesus saying, "Trust in God; trust also in me." Both phrases are interpreted as commands. But what if we read the first phrase as a simple statement? It would come out: "You trust in God; you *should* trust in me also." Or perhaps we could read the first phrase as a rhetorical question with an obviously affirmative answer: "You trust in God? *Well, then* trust also in me." These other readings are perfectly acceptable grammatically. Contextually these alternate interpretations make a great deal of sense considering Jesus is about to say, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father!" The problem is we can only know the correct interpretation by listening to Jesus' vocal inflection which was lost approximately 2,000 years ago.

**Pitfall #2:** Nobody is a perfectly clear communicator. Sometimes stuff just comes out badly. Here is an actual announcement from a church paper: "For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs." How about this one? "Bertha Belch, a missionary from Africa, will be speaking tonight at Calvary Methodist. Come hear Bertha Belch all the

*This principle is similar to the Rorschach Test used by some psychiatrists to determine a person's overall composite. What do you see?*



*For more see:*

<http://www.inkblottestwallpaper.com/>

*Misspeaks can be embarrassing.*

*Check these out:*

*Dinner special —  
Turkey \$2.35;  
Chicken or Beef \$2.25;  
Children \$2.00*

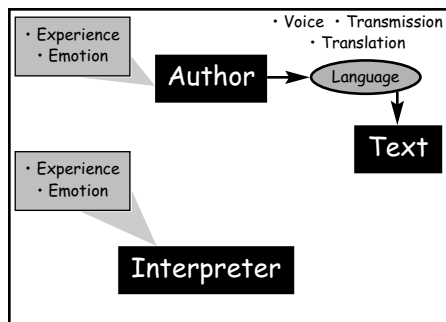
*Used Cars: Why go  
elsewhere to be cheated?  
Come here first.*

*Auto-Repair Service:  
Free pick-up and delivery.  
Try us once, you'll never go  
anywhere again.*

*Now is your chance to get  
your ears pierced  
and get an extra pair  
to take home, too.*

way from Africa.” Now all of us know that everyone misspeaks at times. If we are to be courteous listeners, this will require giving others the benefit of the doubt as we try to understand what they *meant* to say, not just what is written on the page. Political commentators (such as Rush Limbaugh or Tim Russert) are often more interested in using people’s words against them than listening sympathetically with the purpose of understanding the author’s intended meaning.

**Pitfall #3:** Translations from one language to another often have difficulty capturing the meaning of a phrase. Why, for example, does Jesus say God ‘loves’ sinners (Matt 4:44-45) when the Psalms say, “God hates sinners” (Ps 11:5). Is God schizophrenic? For us the terms of ‘love’ and ‘hate’ are emotional terms that imply how one feels. For the Hebrew they were descriptions of how one *treated* the other person. So God can provide sunshine and rain for sinners and then turn around and punish them for their evil—he both loves and hates them with his actions. In the same vein, Jesus said we must *hate* our parents or we cannot be his disciples. It is not that we *feel* antipathy for them, but Jesus calls us to leave our homes and families to follow him, and in any Middle-Eastern home that action can only be understood as ‘hateful.’ Some things just don’t translate well.

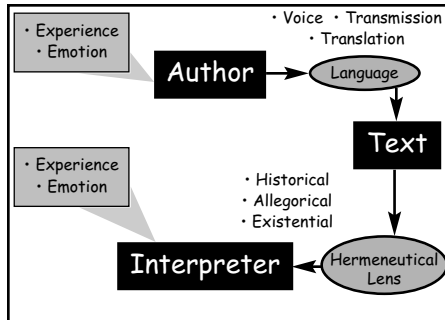


*What you fish with will determine what you catch.* Or to put it another way, some people wear 3-D glasses and others wear rose-colored lenses. OK, enough with the metaphors, here’s what I mean. Some people see the Bible as a history book, and so they find in it historical data. Others see it as a storybook and find helpful moral lessons from fables. Some see it as an ethics text-

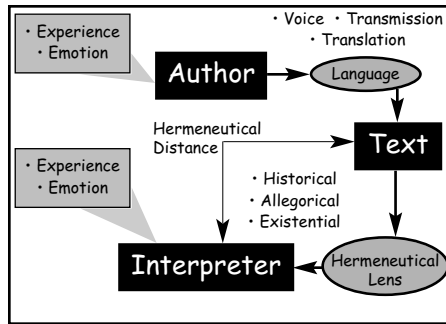
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*What you bring to the text will largely determine what you take away from the text.*

book and walk away with rules and doctrines. Still others see it as a quasi-magical book or a lucky rabbit's foot and seek power or mystical comfort from reading it. What you look for is likely what you will find. Let me illustrate how this works. Come with me to the world of romance. Let's say 'girl A' dumps some sorry chump because he is a loser, and 'girl B' adopts him as a lovable 'project.' Girl A sees an immature, selfish pig. The new 'sweetie'—girl B—sees a vulnerable, good-hearted man with potential if she can just love him through this tough spot (oy veh!). It's kind of like that with the Bible. The hermeneutical lens you wear when you approach the Bible will largely determine what you see in it. If you want to see a Jesus who is a middle-class white Republican, you can find him there. If you want to find a reason to criticize God's actions as unjust, you can find it there. If you want to find proof-texts for the liberation of women, just dig a bit, it's there.



Not only does our hermeneutical lens separate us from the text, so does our hermeneutical distance. Have you ever stared deep into the eyes of an Egyptian mummy and wondered what his life must have been like? Well, if you have, and if you wanted to find out, you would need to do several things. First, (aside from inventing a time machine) you would have to cross the Atlantic, pass through the Mediterranean to the delta of the Nile. Second, you would have to learn hieroglyphics and some pretty funky religious stuff. Third, you would have to dress, eat, work, and commute differently. This, in a nutshell, is the problem of 'hermeneutical distance.' We have these sorts of challenges particularly when we are talking about the



Bible. The words on the page sound familiar to us thanks to years of church traditions, songs, and sermons. But sometimes the familiar sounds are deceptive for we are separated from the text in a number of significant ways. (1) **Time**—we live after Freud, Darwin, the Protestant Reformation, and nuclear bombs; this means we think differently than Peter, Paul, and Mary. (2) **Culture**—in the western world we are democratic capitalists who vote for presidents not peasant Mediterraneans who live under the colonial rule of Roman Emperors. (3) **Language**—Jesus spoke Aramaic, read Hebrew, and was written about in Greek. Most Christians today can't read any of those three languages. (4) **Geography**—so how many camels have you ridden lately? And what does living in a desert region really feel like? Or what about living in a perpetual war zone? (5) **Religion**—Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jew who wore a prayer shawl, refrained from pork, and worshiped on Saturday. These are all significant barriers, but none are impossible hurdles. Yet, like a track star, if we are to keep from landing on our faces as we run our hurdles, we will need to train a bit to make sure we can rise above our own narrow world and enter into the world(s) of the Bible.



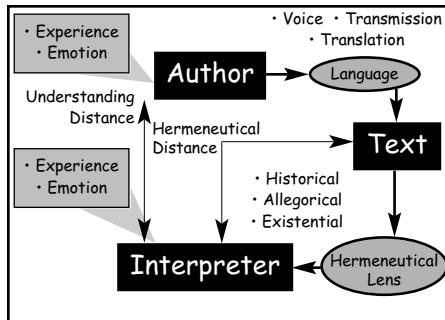
*The author wearing a common prayer shawl (Talitah) to recreate the Sabbath call on a ram's horn (Shofar).*

**Summary:** Communication is simply the conjunction of an author, a text, and an interpreter. That is simple enough. Yet language is a complicated process because (a) both author and reader have their own experiences and emotions that may hinder proper understanding. Furthermore, (b) all communication is fil-

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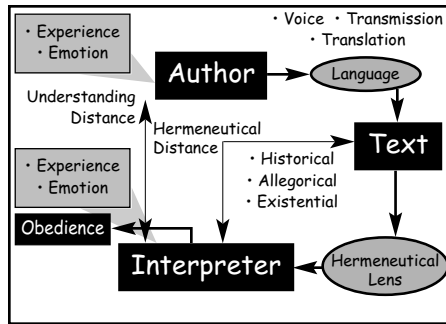
*The further the divide between author and interpreter, the greater the effort will have to be to come to within an understanding distance.*

tered through language that is filled with pitfalls one must watch out for. Moreover, (c) what we are looking for (or perhaps how we are looking for it) will determine what we find. Finally, (d) we are separated from the text by time, language, culture, geography, and religion, all of which are difficult hurdles to jump. Add all this up and one might come away with a pretty pessimistic view of understanding anything. Yet the reality is that we *do* understand each other. Mothers tell their children to clean up their rooms and they 'get it' (whether they 'do it' or not is determined by other factors). Women and men actually get married and have families (crossing the male/female divide which is perhaps the most mystifying divide of all human communication). Simply put, language works. Why? Because despite all the difficulties inherent in language, we are somehow able, with courteous listening, to understand one another. Perfectly? No, but we are close enough to buy and sell, make appointments, express our feelings, describe events, and even tell a joke now and then. In short, we can come within *understanding distance* of the author. This point is proved by the very fact you have not yet put down this book as complete nonsense. Communication can work if we work at it.



## Finishing the Task

The hermeneutical process is not yet finished. Before you can adequately say you comprehend a particular bit of communication, especially from the Bible, you must do two things: Obey and Tell.

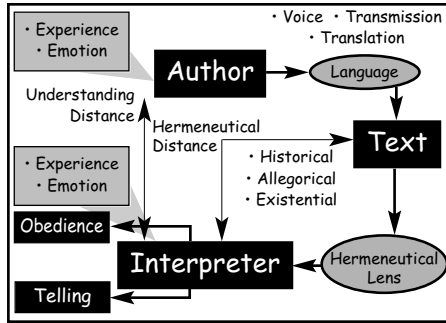


**Obedience** is to communication as romance is to a relationship. Flowers and candlelight dinners tell the story of love better than Hallmark cards. Guys, I know this is very odd for you, but women would rather be *shown* your love than told. This is a deliberately chosen metaphor. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Is this really much different from a teary-eyed mother who cries to her children, "Why can't you just *listen* to me?" Surely she doesn't mean by 'listen' that your auditory sensory nerves register sound waves! This is a plea for obedience. Parents, lovers, teachers, and coaches all feel the same about this point: "Do what I tell you!" In fact, if you don't obey the words of Scripture, you have no right to claim that you understand them.

*Your hands must heed what your mind concedes.*

For biblical hermeneutics is about *holistic* understanding. If your feet are not aligned with your cerebellum you cannot claim spiritual comprehension. There is something about the pulsating experience of obedience that enables one to fully grasp the Lord's teaching. It's like the woman (true story) who stood on the precipice overlooking the Oregon coast, soaking in the grandeur of the Pacific for the very first time. After absorbing the sight for a moment she mumbled, ". . . Huh, it's not as big as I thought it would be." Lady, you won't comprehend the vastness of the Pacific until you start to swim! The romance of movies shot at the coast can only be comprehended by those of us who know the suffocating smell of seagulls and seaweed, the flesh-stripping surf, and the angry grip of sand in every orifice after body-surfing. Then, and only then, can you say you understand the ocean. Obedience is not as romantic as you think, but far more invigorating than you imagined.

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**Telling** is to communication what announcement is to an engagement. Let us return to our patron deity, Hermes. His job was to ‘communicate’ the message of the Pantheon, not to merely comprehend it. Now, not every Christian is obligated to become a teacher. Yet those who have been privileged with studying the Bible will only find their comprehension complete when they attempt to communicate what they have learned to others. Why? Well, there is something about hearing ourselves say something that powerfully embeds it into our brain. Educators have researched this. The most powerful way of transforming someone’s belief system is to have them teach what they have learned. There is another reason: gravitational pull does not exist in an ivory tower—what flies inside the tower may sink like lead in the real world. Lots of ideas sound perfectly good in the privacy of your study, but shrivel more quickly than a truffle when exposed to daylight. Can I make a confession here? Often I have come to the pulpit with a ‘brilliant’ idea that I was sure would ignite a national revival, only to be rebuked by a corporate bewilderment not dissimilar to what one might expect when seeing a streaker in the Vatican. If your ideas fail to impress your audience, it could be due to their ‘itching ears’; but a more likely cause is your new-found ‘truth’ just ain’t so. Sometimes we fail hermeneutically because we wanted to sound clever or novel. We must do better than the original Hermes that deceived his hearers; our own pride will have to take a backseat to the needs, wisdom, and practice of the community through which God filters his grand message of salvation.

*Creativity is never a replacement for clarity.*

## Three Concluding Clarifications

Before tying a bow around this first chapter, there are three clarifications about hermeneutics that must see the light of day. We mustn't leave you with the wrong impression about the nature of this science and art. First, *sometimes hermeneutics is done consciously but most of the time it is unconscious*. If you have ever learned a foreign language, you know how this works. At first you labor over everything. Vocabulary words are hard and weird. Sentences are put together in a strange order. Figures of speech seem senseless. In fact, at some point you will read a sentence,

*Newspaper Headline:*

**TIGERS  
MASSACRE  
INDIANS**

*Depending on the section of the newspaper, you will interpret the message differently, right? The "international news" section describes the death of natives from India, while the "sports" section describes the result of a baseball game between Detroit and Cleveland, and the "local news" section describes an unfortunate incident because of an animal escape at the local zoo near a Native American reservation.*

understand the meaning of every word, but still not know what in the world the author means. It is frustrating. But if you keep at it, one day something magical happens. You read or hear something, and it strikes you that you understood the meaning without translating! You crossed an invisible line and your brain thought in Spanish or French or Arabic. It is truly exhilarating.

Likewise, if you have ever traveled out of the country, you know that driving is different, ordering food is different, borders, politics, relationships, etc., etc. are all different. Simply put, when things are foreign to us, we have to make a conscious effort to understand what others are saying and doing. We use artificial props like dictionaries and maps, guidebooks and interpreters. After a while, things get to be more familiar, and we don't have to work so hard. This is what you will experience with the Bible. It is a foreign book about foreign people in foreign places. Give yourself some time to get adjusted to the climate. It will never be as comfortable as reading the newspaper, I suppose, but you will begin to listen better. Why bring this up? Because some say, "We don't need to interpret the Bible, we just read it and obey." WRONG! You interpret all human communication. If you are in your own cultural environment, you do it unconsciously; if you do it in a foreign con-

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text, you probably must do it consciously. But whether consciously or unconsciously, language is always interpreted. *And if you try to interpret foreign language with your own native language it won't be long before you make some very serious errors.*

A second clarification, which was alluded to earlier, is that hermeneutics will not solve all your questions about difficult passages. In fact (and I hate to tell you this), by reading this book you are going to have *more* questions than before. Why? Because you will see things you didn't see before. You will learn about textual variants, apparent contradictions, figurative language, problems with application, language barriers, and more. So, be warned. If you prefer a life of simple naïveté, then *put down this book!* If you simply want to "read and obey," even if that requires wearing blinders, then find the nearest exit. Look, there are real problems in understanding the Bible. We simply believe that facing them squarely will put us in a better position to come within understanding distance of the authors. Hermeneutics will not solve all the problems, but it will guide you in the right directions. The bad news is that you will see there are mines out there that must be avoided. The good news is that if you can avoid the land mines there are gold mines beyond.

Third, I want you to know of my own convictions about the Bible. (1) *The Bible is the Word of God.* This carries several important implications. For instance, if it is God's word, then it is understandable. After all, God created humanity, including our linguistic ability. Therefore, he knows how we think and speak. He knows how to say to us what he wants us to know in language that we are able to grasp. (2) *The Bible is inspired.* Honestly, I'm not even sure what all that means. But it has something to do with the Holy Spirit using people to put into words the living message of God. Men like Paul, Luke, and David recorded on scrolls the activities of God in Israel and the Church. It is a story of God's relentless love and miraculous intervention through the person of Jesus. This story is *flawless* in its ability to communicate the message of salvation. It is *truthful* in what it says about God, humanity, evil, ethics, etc. This book is a sufficient guide to every life crisis from raising children to going to war, from your deepest thoughts to your public discourse. And this book is *lovely*. David puts it this way in Psalm 19:7-11:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul.  
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,  
making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the LORD are right,  
giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the LORD are radiant,  
giving light to the eyes.  
The fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring forever.  
The ordinances of the LORD are sure  
and altogether righteous.  
They are more precious than gold,  
than much pure gold;  
they are sweeter than honey,  
than honey from the comb.  
By them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

Finally, I am convinced that *study of the Bible is the highest form of worship*. Many (read 'most') have substituted the word "music" for "worship." And music is, indeed, an incredibly powerful means of expression. But worship, in its essence, is understanding who God is and who we are in his presence. The Bible, more than the hymnal or chorus chart, is a clear guide to the character of God and the claim he makes over our lives. It is through the Scriptures, more than anything else, that the community of God's people come to understand the revelation of who God is. So come let us worship together.

## Going Further:

### Assignments and Further Reading

#### Assignment #1:

- ✍ Select a text to use throughout the rest of the book as a case study for the tools and principles that you are learning. Remember, meaning is found in pericopes and not in single verses, so choose a section of 6-8 verses and/or a couple of paragraphs (e.g., Col 1:15-23).
- ✍ Once you have selected your text, write or type out the text inserting a significant amount of space between each line, as shown below:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*

- ✍ Read the following short story about looking at a fish:  
<http://www.bethel.edu/~dhoward/resources/Agassizfish/Agassizfish.htm>
- ✍ Next, write out all the observations and questions about your text you can think of (25-30 each). Go crazy here! No question or observation is too trivial or too silly. Ask questions you know cannot be answered; sparking your imagination is as important here as is scientific precision. Here are the kinds of things to look for: literary patterns, repetition, contrasts/comparisons, lists, cause/effect, conclusions, figures of speech, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, questions asked. Who wrote this? To whom?

Why? What was going on politically, socially, inside and outside the church? How does this section connect in its literary context? Are there any contradictions or apparent mistakes? If this section of Scripture were not here, what would be missing in the text? How does this text fit into the overall flow and purpose of the book? Why did the author choose this strategy of writing? What is the tone of the passage?

- ✍ Naturally, your questions and observations will be guided by what text you have chosen to examine. Furthermore, use the above questions as a mere launching board for your own list of questions and observations. These are by no means exhaustive.

#### *Further Reading:*

- ✍ If you don't already have a computer concordance, download your own Bible for easy, computer access to your biblical text at: [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=3086](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3086) or look at the website appendix for other Bible downloads.
- ✍ Read this article on Biblical Hermeneutics at: <http://hermeneutics.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/introherm.htm>
- ✍ Search this website to start becoming familiar with various resources online and construct a 'favorites' list on your computer entitled 'Hermeneutics.' Hyperlink five sources from the following website that you find most helpful. <http://home.comcast.net/~rciampa/>
- ✍ From the previous website, write down three books you would like to buy to build your Bible study library.