

(A Brief Explanation of the Chart)

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S COMMUNICATION TO US: THE BIBLE

This flow chart illustrates various issues related to the Bible. It is not intended to be a complete explanation of everything, but a framework which shows the relationship between these issues.

Message (in God's mind)

The difference between God (as the Creator) and us (as created beings) is so great, that it is beyond our comprehension. Because of this, God's ways and thoughts not identical to ours. (Compare to Isaiah 55:9.) This is so, even when we *don't* take into consideration the negative effects of sin, which reduces even further our ability to comprehend God. Because of this, God "translates" his thoughts into terms that we can comprehend. He interacts with us on *our* level - and he is fully capable of doing so, without introducing any error!

Inspiration - "From God to the human author; how the Word got written down."

This word, also translated (more accurately) as "God-breathed," is found in 2 Timothy 3:16. This part of the chart deals with issues related to God's use of the prophets and apostles to accurately write down *his* thoughts on paper, while at the same time allowing them to express *their* individual personalities, vocabularies and writing styles. God "breathes" his message into the prophet's words. (This concept is summarized in 2 Peter 1:21, which tells us that the Holy Spirit "moved" - led or prompted - them.) There are several other issues related to this concept of "inspiration" - issues such as:

- ***The authoritative nature of the Word.*** God speaks with authority on every matter mentioned in the Word - even though it will often disagree with what people may claim is true.
- ***The fact that it is totally accurate and without error, even in the tiniest detail.*** There are no mistakes or errors in any detail mentioned in the Word - even though it will often disagree with the conclusions, speculations, "facts" and interpretations that people may believe are true. This includes historical and scientific facts.

Of course, this requires us to understand what is written in the Bible *within its context*, or we may reach false conclusions. For example, when the Bible was written, the concept of "star" referred to a point of light in the sky, not a huge ball of fiery plasma somewhere out in space. Using *their* definition - which was accurate for what it said - it would be totally correct to describe planets as "wandering stars." However, with *our* definition of "star" - which is also accurate *within our context* - a planet would not be considered a "wandering star."

- ***The distinction between genuine "God-breathed" writings (the Bible) and spurious writings.*** God's people do not "vote" for what books they want as part of the Bible; rather they are to simply "recognize" them for what they are. Various influences may cause specific individuals (or groups) to reach wrong conclusions about some specific book; various "religious institutions" may choose to "vote in" certain books, to suit their agenda. But *across the span of time*, the same group of books will tend to be recognized by God's people - compare to John 10:27, where Jesus reminds us, "My sheep *hear* my voice."

By "God's people," we are referring to those who have chosen to be followers of Jesus, rather than to those who have chosen to become "members" of an institutional "church."

Who were the human authors? In some cases we know, but in other cases we don't. Why? In many instances it wasn't necessary. If the book was prophetic (such as the book of Isaiah), the people would need to know who the author was, so they could verify the prophet's accuracy, and put him to death if he proved to be a false prophet. (Compare to Deuteronomy 18:20-22. God says that being a false prophet is a *serious* matter!) But if it was a record of history (example, the book of Judges) or a song (such as the Psalms), knowing the human author was unimportant. In such cases the human author frequently did not tell

us who he was. Why? One of the factors has to do with humility. Being followers of the true God, the human authors wanted *God* to receive the attention!

Transmission of the text - "From the human author to us; how the Word got passed along."

For the first 14 centuries, hand-written copies were made from the original manuscripts and passed on from generation to generation. After that, the printing press was invented and copies of the Bible could be mass-produced. This section of the chart would include the issue of manuscript variations, as well as the need to translate the Bible into languages that people can understand. After translation, copies would be printed and distributed for people to use. (Of course, if a person understands the original languages of the Old and New Testaments, he could skip the translation step. But that would not apply to most people!)

One of the issues included here involves the collecting and recording of any manuscript variations which may have occurred because of human error. We do not have the original manuscripts, but we have many good copies of them. As they were being hand-copied, down through the centuries, people sometimes made mistakes - spelling errors, accidental omission or repeating of a line of text, misreading a blurred or worn part of an old faded manuscript, etc. (Even with the printing press and computers, there are still occasional mistakes, when a book is printed!) By comparing the many copies we have, we can tell where these mistakes are. Most are obvious mistakes and easy to correct. Of the relatively few places where uncertainty still exists, we know the options, and none of them make any serious impact on our understanding of the message of the Bible. *No other ancient book can boast this fact!*

This analysis of manuscript differences is called "Textual (or 'Lower') Criticism." As used here, the word "criticism" is not a negative word. It is unlike the "Higher Criticism," which often tends to focus so much on the *human* aspect of the Bible's origin, that it ignores, or even denies its *God-breathed* nature. Frequently, this "higher criticism" treats the Bible as a mere human book (no different than any other) that "evolved" (frequently changed) down through the centuries. They reach such conclusions, not because of genuine manuscript evidence, but because of preconceived assumptions, which they have superimposed into the text.

Exegesis - "How to understand it; gaining a clear understanding of the Word."

Our goal, when studying Scripture, should be this: "Neither adding to it, nor subtracting from it." Exegesis focuses on understanding the text in its context.

This section focuses on how to gain an *accurate* understanding of God's Word, with minimal error. To whatever degree a person can understand language and communication, he will reach approximately the same understanding of the Word, as would someone else who was examining it - *if* he restricts his view to what can be obtained by exegesis. It is *impossible* for it to be otherwise! On this level, the *only* type of disagreement we could have would involve issues such as a person's preference of one manuscript variation over another (which won't drastically change the meaning of the text), the precise definition of a word, etc. Such disagreements are relatively insignificant, when compared to the differences in opinion that can occur when people rely on the things listed *below* the line, in the "eisegesis" section. When we keep to the "exegesis" level, we cannot stray very far.

As we have listed it, the first level of exegesis involves understanding the *words*, and the way they fit into sentences. Here we focus on the definitions of the words, as well as special uses of words - legitimate figures of speech, idioms, etc. The second level has a greater focus on the immediate *context*, which defines the significance of the words. This will limit the range of potential interpretations. For example, many words have several "dictionary definitions," yet the context would determine which of those definitions could be applicable in a specific verse.

There is some potential for error on this level, but not much. This would involve issues such as faulty word definitions, the misunderstanding of symbolism, etc. But even then, there would be a limit as to how far we could stray from the truth. If we simply strive for accuracy and clarity in our comprehension of the words and the way they fit together, any potential for error will be kept to a minimum. This stands in great contrast to the "eisegesis" described below.

Eisegesis - "How to distort it; how to increase the potential for error and confusion."

We could describe this section as: "Adding to it and subtracting from it." Eisegesis refers to instances in which we read *into* the text something that is not actually there.

This is where we get into trouble - and even heresy. This section focuses on the typical reasons why there are so many different opinions about what the Bible says. Once people start allowing influences *outside* the Bible to determine its "meaning," the sky is the limit, as to the potential differences in interpretations. Even relatively accurate "facts" - which *do* have value - can have the potential for error. (Example: Archaeology, which can often provide us with background information about various events in the Bible, has occasionally been found to be wrong, when "new" evidence was discovered.)

Once we start to choose what criteria is necessary for understanding the Word, we have abandoned the realm of *objective fact* and entered the realm of *subjective opinion*. Even pasting together various verses ("proof texts") from unrelated contexts, can open the door for error. Opposite "interpretations" can result, depending on which verse we choose, for "explaining" (or "explaining-away") the verse in question!

There is one additional word of caution we must give: Some of the things listed in this category may have value, but *not* for determining what God says. If we needed the information, in order to have an accurate understanding of what God meant, he would have included it! We need to remember that anything that is *vital* to our understanding of the Bible is already in the Bible. God didn't accidentally forget anything! It must be our goal to maximize our understanding of what the text itself says, and to minimize the input of external influences. Every time we *add* something to the Scriptures, we *subtract* something from it.

As we have listed it, the first level of "eisegesis" includes information that tends to be more objective, such as archaeological discoveries and Bible "proof texts." Yet the very fact that it involves people, who decide the significance of the information, opens the door for potential error. If the things in this first level are kept in their place, they can provide useful insights. If used properly, these things will *not* cause us to go in directions we wouldn't have gone, if we relied on the Word of God alone. A good principle to consider is this: If it doesn't reinforce what we get when we examine Scripture *alone*, we should be suspicious. (It wouldn't hurt to also re-evaluate our understanding of the text itself - in case we had a faulty understanding of the words and sentences. But we need to avoid the temptation of "adjusting" what the text actually says, so that it better "conforms" to the supposed "facts" we have brought to it.)

The second level of "eisegesis" is more subjective and opinionated. This would include the assumptions and interpretational schemes that people claim are "needed," in order for us to understand the Bible correctly. Many false religions and cults try to get a person to accept something which seems "obvious," and then lead them down a path that reinterprets (or blinds them to) significant portions of the Word.

A Few Comments About Deduction and Induction

The words *deduction* and *induction* are included in the chart. These words are often misunderstood by people who have not studied formal logic. As used here, *deduction* refers to the conclusions that can be *legitimately* stated, based on the evidence of the text. (Nothing is being added which isn't already implied by the text.) *Induction* involves reaching conclusions that go beyond the text, and which might or might not be true. (Without other direct evidence, the most we could say is that the conclusion may or may not be probable. Evidence not currently known could later prove a "probable" conclusion wrong.) When applied to the Bible, we have no right to condemn people who do not accept our "induced" conclusions. Nor do we have a right to treat our "induced" conclusions as "God-breathed truth," or to allow those conclusions to "redefine" what can be *objectively* known in Scripture (by exegesis).