Pietism, in its post-Puritan expression, had a number of distinctive features. It was a quest for personal holiness and, conversely, a resistance to compromise with the world on the part of the officially established churches. It was an effort to live the Christian life within the walls of new communities and in patterns of individual response, and thus a sectarian reaction to institutionalism. In part, it was an evasion of the theological questions posed by a rationalistic scientific world and a flight into personal piety. But although it may have been an intellectual retreat, it was an evangelistic advance; and from its various expressions, sprang a new desire and a concerted effort to win the world for Christ.¹

In its original form, Pietism was a Lutheran and Reformed movement on the continent. The term first appears in 1689 as a rebuke to Lutheran holiness movements.² One of its first representatives was Philipp Jacob Spener (-1705) of Alsace-Lorraine who, in his *Pia Desidirea*, argued for a converted ministry and an increase in devotional life. The movement grew under the leadership of the founders of “pious colleges” such as August Hermann Francke (-1727) of Halle who established a “little church” within the larger church for those most eager for spiritual growth. Continually frustrated with the official church, harassed by the government and persecuted by fashionable society, Pietism emerged into a powerful force in eighteenth century church life in the Lutheran world.

Reformed Pietism had an easier time of it than its Lutheran counterpart because its moralism was somewhat more congenial to Calvinism and Arminianism. In a time of rationalistic apathy, dedicated Christians pulled together assorted strands of Dutch and English Puritan holiness movements and, combining mysticism with an appeal to the lower classes, developed Pietism into a major movement. One of the most effective efforts was that of the Moravians under Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (-1760). Influenced by Spener and Francke, wealthy and spiritual, Zinzendorf used his resources and his estate called Herrnhut to build an impressive Pietist community.

Yet no Pietist organization ranks in scope and influence with English Methodism. Under the guidance of John Wesley, Pietism moved from Europe to the fertile soil of England. The prevailing features of English life

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²Ibid., p. 282.
in the mid-eighteenth century were especially conducive to the Wesleyan form of Pietism. Uninspiring church life, diesthetic and rationalistic theological views, and poor social and moral conditions all helped to make the masses receptive to Wesley's message. He went to the people not with philosophy, but with a religious appeal; and for Wesley, "religion is the most plain, simple thing in the world. It is only, 'we love Him, because He first loved us.' " It is this religious appeal that provides the clue to understanding Wesley's interpretation of the Bible. But to gain a clearer conception of what the "religious appeal" consisted and how it expressed itself in Wesley's hermeneutical system, it is necessary to look briefly at the formative influences in Wesley's life.

The Formation of Wesley's Thought

John Wesley was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, on June 17, 1703. His father Samuel was a learned though eccentric and impractical man who served as rector of the church at Epworth. Wesley's mother Susanna was both matriarch and saint and presided with equal grace and firmness over the affairs of the large impoverished family.

Wesley's formal education began in 1714 when he was sent to Charterhouse in London on a scholarship provided by the Duke of Buckingham. Six years later he went to Oxford and matriculated as a Charterhouse scholar. In spite of the relatively low standards that existed at Oxford at this time, Wesley, with the aid of a few good tutors and disciplined habits, acquired an adequate education.

Up until 1725, Wesley's religious interests were relatively immature. But suddenly, under the right stimulation, his earlier background and religious training coalesced into faith and personal commitment. Wesley recorded his Oxford "conversion" as follows:

> In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book I was exceedingly affected, by that part in particular which related to 'purity or attention.' Instantly I resolved to dedicate *all my life* to God, *all my thoughts and words and actions*, being thoroughly convinced there was no medium, but that *every part of my life* (not *some* only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or to myself. . . . In the year 1726 I met with Kempis' *Christian Patterns*. The nature and extent of *inward religion*, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even *all my life* to God . . . would profit me nothing unless I gave my *heart*, yea, *all my heart* to him. . . . A year or two later, Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hand. These convinced me more than

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ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian, and I determined, through his grace . . . to be all-devoted to God: to give him all my soul, my body and my substance.6

By 1725, the significant influences on Wesley's life are evident in his new religious interests. The rich heritage of his home and family, the stimulation of a university environment and religious friends, and the radical demands for utter seriousness in religion as they had been discovered by him in Taylor, Kempis and Law had all combined to teach him that the Christian life is devotio, the unconditional yielding of the whole person in love to God and neighbor.

With this awareness, Wesley decided to prepare for the ministry and, in anticipation of ordination, shifted his academic pursuits from the classics to the Bible and theology. In 1726, he was elected fellow of Lincoln College, an appointment that established his position in the university, assured him of financial security as long as he remained unmarried, and gave him the freedom to pursue his divine calling. He was ordained in 1728.

Except for the time he served as his father's assistant at Epworth (1726 and 1729), Wesley remained at Oxford. When he returned to Oxford from Epworth in the latter part of 1729, he became involved in a small group that had been gathered by his brother Charles for the purpose of Bible study, mutual discipline in devotion, and frequent communion. To this group, called many things but most frequently "The Methodists," Wesley devoted much of his time and energy.

Also at Oxford, with the help of one of his fellow "Methodists," John Clayton, who was a competent patristics scholar, Wesley began the study of ancient Christian literature. He was especially taken with "Macarius the Egyptian" and Ephraem Syrus. What fascinated him in these men was their description of "perfection" as the goal of the Christian life. This notion became central to Wesley's thinking as he attempted to fuse the Eastern tradition of holiness as disciplined love with the Anglican tradition of holiness as aspiring love.7

Yet with all his fervent religious activity, Wesley remained discontented and unsatisfied with his religious life. He rejected the idea of going to Epworth to take over for his father on a permanent basis. But when the opportunity to go to Georgia as a missionary came along, Wesley saw it as his opportunity to serve the Lord and to put some of his ideas into practice. Unfortunately, the experience proved to be less than successful. He had a disillusioning love affair, got entangled with the law and fled in two years. The time, however, was not a total loss. He continued his studies, particularly in the thought of the Eastern church, and made contact with the Moravians who taught him by example and precept that faith

7Outler, op. cit., p. 10.
should be fearless and piety joyful. Looking back on the stormy voyage across the Atlantic, Wesley recorded in his *Journal* that

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [the Moravians] calmly sung on.*

Such behavior made a lasting impression on Wesley.

He was back in England in the early part of 1738, still unsettled but continuing to search for a deeper religious insight that would bring meaning to his religious longings. The divergent forces at work in his life—Eastern notions of *synelthesis* (the dynamic interaction between God's will and human will), classical Protestantism with its concepts of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* and the Moravian stress upon "inner feeling"—came together in a more satisfying pattern in his "Aldersgate experience." The *Journal* recording on May 24 reads:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*

In the summer of 1738, Wesley visited the Moravians in their homeland at Herrnhut and Marianborn. On returning to England, he began to preach, believing as Jonathan Edwards had written, that God honors those who preach His word. With some reluctance, he accepted in 1741 Whitefield's invitation to preach to the angry mob at Bristol and, to Wesley's surprise, "revival" broke out. These first fruits gave him confidence, and his late-starting though longlasting career was launched.

The next 50 years were devoted to preaching, organizing the Methodist Societies, providing literature for his converts, debating with Anglicans, Calvinists, Roman Catholics, and Moravians, and developing his own theological system.¹⁰ Few people have traveled farther, preached more, and organized better than John Wesley. He died in 1791.

**Wesley's Interpretation of the Bible**

From a close observation of the formative influences on Wesley's life and a careful reading of his writing, it is possible to reconstruct the assumptions behind his approach to scripture. It is clear that faith is the comprehensive posture with which Wesley comes to the Bible. He believed

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in the God about whom the biblical authors spoke. But the crucial question is: What are the precise contours of Wesley’s faith? What form did his faith take?

One important element in Wesley’s approach to scripture, reflecting his deeply rooted piety, might best be characterized by the term “expectancy.” Wesley expected the Bible to speak a poignant word to his personal life and to the lives of all believers who would expose themselves to its message. The word which Wesley expected the Bible to speak broke in on the believer in at least three dimensions: the practical, the pious, and the experiential. It was practical in the sense that he believed the scriptures gave specific guidelines for daily living and decision-making. It was pious in that he felt that the precepts of the Bible could lead the pilgrim Christian along the way toward holiness. It was experiential in the sense that its proper reading created peace and joy in the believer’s heart. On this latter point, it is significant to note that Wesley’s own heart had been “strangely warmed,” and that the pattern of his religious growth in his formative years jumped from experience to experience. He believed that God the Holy Spirit could use the pages of scripture to speak directly to the believer, often in the crisis of the moment.

Further, he conceived the Bible to be the book that leads the person of faith to Christian spirituality. The most important immediate source of this emphasis was the Anglican theological literature in which he steeped himself while at Oxford and in Georgia. This Caroline moral theology, most ably represented by Jeremy Taylor and William Law, had taught Wesley that faith is a serious undertaking. From the great scholars of the seventeenth century revival in patristic studies (William Beveridge and Robert Nelson), he grasped the intimate correlation of Christian doctrine and Christian spirituality. To these shaping forces was added the decisive influence of his continual perusal of the pious reflections and wisdom of the early Christian fathers, Ignatius, Clement, Macarius, Ephraem Syrus, and others, and the devotional literature of the Middle Ages, particularly the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Incorporated into this theme of understanding the Bible as the Christian’s guide to holy living were the basic presuppositions held by the Reformers regarding scripture. Wesley assumed that the Bible is authoritative, inspired, and that it can be understood. These ideological assumptions merged into a complementary relationship in Wesley’s thought and helped to shape the basic direction of his interpretation of scripture.

Wesley’s approach to scripture also reflected the first signs of an emerging appreciation in his time for historical studies. It is clear that Wesley gave a large place to experience as that which authenticates a particular interpretation of scripture. Yet he was aware that experience, without careful study of the historical and grammatical, can mislead. He attempted, not always consistently, to hold these two emphases in tension, i.e., he tried both to allow room for God the Holy Spirit to speak directly
to the believer's experience and to take into account the need to study the Bible in its historical setting and original languages. What is important to note is that he did make a conscious effort to apply a historical methodology, albeit a primitive one, to the study of the Bible.

As a final word about the assumptions behind Wesley's hermeneutical orientation, it is important to observe his capacity for the synoptic view. He had an uncanny ability to glimpse the underlying unity of Christian truth as it was expressed in all of its varieties from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. While assuredly a man of his age and afflicted with its assorted prejudices, he was also a man who possessed a universal vision. He was able to fuse "faith and good works, Scripture and tradition, revelation and reason, God's sovereignty and human freedom, universal redemption and conditional election, Christian liberty and an ordered polity, the assurance of pardon and the risks of 'falling from grace,' original sin and Christian perfection..." into a reasonably well-ordered theological system.

Now, the question is: How did Wesley's eyes of faith read, understand, and interpret the Bible? The convictions undergirding Wesley's handling of the Bible may be divided into two sections: his view of the nature of the Bible and his actual interpretation of the Bible, the latter hinging on the former.

Following the tradition of the Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura, Wesley viewed the Bible as the absolute authority in matters of faith and practice. This theme runs throughout all of his teaching and preaching. Neither the united testimony of the ancient fathers and Reformers nor religious experience, important as these are in Wesley's system, are sufficient to prove a doctrine that is not founded in scripture. "For," as Wesley says, "as all faith is founded upon divine authority, so there is now no divine authority but the Scriptures; and, therefore, no one can make that to be of divine authority which is not contained in them." In reference to the Roman Catholic church, he further asserts that "as long as we have the Scripture, the church is to be referred to the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures to the church..." For Wesley, Scripture was sufficient in itself and "neither needs, nor is capable of, any further addition."

In general, Wesley applied the principle of authority equally to all of scripture, and therefore, quoted from both the Old and New Testaments. He moved with freedom over all parts of the Bible in search of evidence to support his points. Every page of scripture was uniformly precious. If one

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1Outler, op. cit., p. viii.
4Ibid., p. 94.
5Ibid., p. 141.
seemed more illuminating than another, the explanation was to be sought in the interpreter's own need or present interest rather than in scripture itself. For the most part, he was unhindered by critical questions of date, occasion or authorship and found biblical support for his point as easily from Ezekiel as from Matthew.

The Bible, in Wesley's system, derived its authority from its divine inspiration. The biblical authors, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recorded divine truth. Wesley explains the process as follows:

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first Patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other Prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and the Evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: This is that 'word of God which remaineth for ever'; of which, though 'heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away.'

He also gives us his interesting if not completely convincing "short, clear, and strong argument to prove the divine inspiration of the holy Scriptures." The argument begins with the proposition that "the Bible must be the invention of either good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God." But it could not be the work of good men or of angels because they neither would nor could write a book in which they would tell lies by prefacing their remarks with "Thus saith the Lord." Nor could it be the invention of bad men or devils since they would not write a book which commands all duty, forbids all sin, and condemns their souls to hell in all eternity. Therefore, Wesley concludes, the Bible must be given by divine inspiration.

It follows that if the scriptures are divinely inspired, they are infallibly true. As Wesley sees it, "if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth." Divine inspiration also insures the quality of the content in the Bible. It is "a most solid and precious system of truth"; "every part is worthy of God"; it is "the fountain of heavenly wisdom"; and the arguments are cogent, the expressions precise, and the style above "all the elegances of human composition."

In addition, this authoritative and inspired Bible contains the way to holiness and heaven. From his earliest years at Oxford, Wesley had been preoccupied with the notion of Christian holiness or perfection. This con-

13Works, Vol. xi, p. 484.
cern blossomed into the full-fledged doctrine of "entire sanctification" in the publication of his A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. Wesley believed that in an instant and by a simple act of faith, perfection could be "wrought in the soul." This was the second of two distinct stages of the Christian experience of salvation, the first being justification. Without going deeper into this phase of Wesley's teaching, it is enough to point out that Wesley understood the Bible in this context. The Bible was a practical book which led the believer down the path of holy living toward perfection. It was not primarily a textbook of speculative truths or the record of God's revelation in history, but a source book for the development of pious devotion and godly character. Most importantly, it contained the directions to heaven. Wesley wrote:

I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on the happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from Heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me.23

As Luther understood the central message of scripture to be justification by faith in Christ and read the Bible from this perspective, so Wesley perceived a primary message of scripture to be instructions in true piety and often interpreted scripture in light of this assumption.

Closely aligned with Wesley's devotional understanding of the Bible is another consideration, namely, the close connection between religious experience and scripture. Wesley would not allow religious experience to have authority over scripture, but he did insist that it validated the biblical message. The truth of scripture is to be verified by Christian experience. God's message in Christ is applied to the human personality by the Holy Spirit; and when this happens in the believer's life, the message of scripture is confirmed. The dead written word has come alive by an act of faith that is more than conceptualization or verbalization but an inner reality of the heart.24

Finally, in keeping with the Protestant principle of the perspicuity of scripture, Wesley viewed the Bible as an understandable book, not one whose sacred mysteries could only be penetrated by ecclesiastical officials. Therefore, it should be read by all Christians.26 But the practical streak in Wesley's temperament also made him aware that scripture needs to be carefully taught to the people, a task to which he devoted his life. Underlining this point, he writes: "The Scriptures are clear in all necessary points, and yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained."26

24Outler, op. cit., p. 27.
26Quoted by Yates, op. cit., p. 107.
It was his lifelong teaching of the Bible that forced Wesley to ponder the question of its interpretation. Though he never wrote at length on the correct method, he did articulate some guidelines for himself and his followers as the pressures of his responsibilities demanded them.

Wesley's method of interpretation in part grew out of the practical demands of communicating the message of scripture to masses of unlearned people, of teaching "plain truth" to "plain people." There was little room in Wesley’s mind for a complicated hermeneutical theory. The literal sense of scripture was sufficient though a "spiritual" sense was also possible. But for the most part, "the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it is not contrary to some other texts; but in that case, the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly."27 In his instructions to his fellow Methodist preachers regarding the teaching of the Bible, he asked a series of rhetorical questions, one of which is "am I a master of the spiritual sense (as well as the literal) of what I read?"28 Wesley did not make clear what is meant by "spiritual," but it most likely is a reference to interpreting scripture in terms of practical piety. It is certainly not a suggestion to interpret the Bible in terms of esoteric and speculative truth. In keeping with his insistence on the obvious and literal sense, Wesley also exhorted his preachers to be acquainted with grammatical constructions, the biblical languages, and the context and scope of each book.

Another selection from Wesley's preface to his Standard Sermons gives us a clue to the next three principles of his interpretive method:

I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book... Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: 'Lord, is not Thy Word, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?" Thou "givest liberally, and upbraidest not." . . . ' I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, yet they speak. And what I thus learn, that I ever teach.29

The first point to observe in this passage is the place Wesley gives to the direct guidance of God. Alone in meditation, the interpreter is led by the Spirit of God to the true meaning of the biblical passage. Not infrequently, applying this principle to decision-making and stretching it to its breaking point, Wesley would seek divine guidance by a fortuitous opening of the scriptures, taking the first passage he lit upon as the answer to his query. It was this kind of direct divine guidance that was given an important place in Wesley’s interpretive method. He writes: "Man's human and worldly wisdom or science is not needful to the understanding of scripture but the

27Ibid.
29Standard Sermons, pp. 31-32.
The revelation of the Holy Spirit who inspireth the true meaning unto them that with humility and diligence search.\textsuperscript{30}

The second principle to glean from the long section quoted above is that Wesley places great confidence in the analogy of faith, i.e., that the central tenets of the Christian faith shed light on the difficult and incidental passages of scripture. The whole gives meaning to the parts. This principle involves letting one passage interpret another, for "Scripture is the best expounder of Scripture. The best way, therefore, to understand it is carefully to compare Scripture with Scripture and thereby learn the true meaning of it."\textsuperscript{31} Following Luther, Wesley maintains that those passages of scripture that contain the essence of the gospel and, therefore, throw the most light on the rest are Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galatians.\textsuperscript{32}

Still a third principle alluded to by Wesley in his summary statement of how he determines the meaning of scripture is the consultation "of those experienced in the things of God." Wesley had great respect for the church fathers, the leaders of the Reformation, and biblical scholars of his own time. He did not hesitate, in difficult passages, to compare his own views with what others had written. In the preface to his Works he pays tribute to the tradition of the church when he writes that "in this edition, I present to serious and candid men my last and maturest thoughts: Agreeable, I hope, to Scripture, reason, and Christian Antiquity."\textsuperscript{33} Bearing in mind that scripture was his supreme authority and reason the authority of his age, "Christian Antiquity" is given a high place of authority in Wesley's system.

There is one final matter to mention regarding Wesley's hermeneutical method and that is his willingness to make use of what critical tools were available to him. He was a first-rate Greek scholar and was not adverse to correcting the text of the Authorized Version. He states in the opening section of Explanatory Notes on the New Testament his procedure:

\begin{quote}
I design, first, to set down the text itself, for the most part, in the common English translation, which is, . . . the best that I have seen. Yet I do not say it is incapable of being brought, in several places, nearer to the original. Neither will I affirm that the Greek copies from which this translation was made are always the most correct: and therefore I shall take liberty . . . to make here and there a small alteration.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Nor was he blind to or happy with the theological and practical implications of some of the Psalms. In drawing up the Sunday services for American Methodism, he omitted many of them on the grounds that they were "highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation."\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{30}Outler, op. cit., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{31}Works, Vol. x, pp. 92, 142, 482.
\textsuperscript{32}Outler, op. cit., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{33}Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{34}Notes of the New Testament, Preface, 4.
\textsuperscript{35}Works, Vol. xiv, p. 317.
How far Wesley would have allowed a critical historical understanding of the Bible to influence his views had he lived in the modern era, one can only conjecture. But at least it appears that in principle he would not have completely rejected such an approach.

**An Assessment**

It would be easy to underestimate the value of the more distinctive features of the pietistic approach to the Bible as they emerge in the writings of John Wesley. Religious “experience,” in an age where all of a person’s inner life is exposed to intense psychological scrutiny, is bound to be a little bit suspect. Few these days would be prepared to accept the testimony of one who claims to have a direct “pipeline” to God. Yet there may be some truth in the pietist claim that the Bible’s message only has value when it becomes personal in the believer’s life. Where this emphasis is balanced with a healthy respect for historical exegesis, it will not necessarily mean a distortion of the biblical message. One avenue to true understanding of the Bible is an internal sensitivity and openness to its message. Is this not what the pietist-influenced Schleiermacher emphasized a few decades after Wesley in his divinitory method and what Dilthey in the late nineteenth century and Bultmann in our time have stressed, though in different language? The Bible is best interpreted and its message rightly understood when faith is present. And faith is, among other things, an attitude of affinity that is able to receive and identify with the message of scripture. It is this aspect of Wesley’s hermeneutical position that has lasting value.

But where Wesley fails (and here he should not be judged too harshly because he lived in an age that neither fully understood the historical method nor greatly appreciated the value of history) is in his nonhistorical understanding of the Bible. As such, it was only his intuitive good sense, Christian character, knowledge of the traditional interpretation of the church and scholar’s desire for truth that gave his interpretations their balance. It is true that Wesley was not uncritical of the Bible in his own primitive and limited way, carefully examining the text and exhorting his co-workers to know their Greek and Hebrew and something of the historical context of the books of the Bible. But on principle, he could have been far wide of the mark. Believing as he did that scripture is divinely inspired and uniformly authoritative and that the Holy Spirit guides the interpreter to the correct view, he might easily have imposed on the words of scripture almost any meaning that his own prejudices and desires dictated. As it was, his chief sin was pulling verses out of context either for the purpose of effective homiletics or to support his favorite doctrines. In so doing, he may have missed the essential meaning of several passages, but he was neither the first nor the last to commit this error. Fortunately,
Wesley's bias was working for him rather than against him, and flagrant interpretive violations of the intent of scripture are the exception rather than the rule in his work. A lesser person than Wesley, however, employing the same hermeneutical principles, and unchecked in the interpretation of the Bible by the application of the historical method, might miss the meaning of the scripture altogether.