



RABBIT'S FOLLY IN *POOH'S GRAND ADVENTURE*

Reading the Bible and the Nature of Inspiration

By John N. McDowell

Once upon the last day of a golden summer..." Thus begins the Walt Disney movie *Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin*. This movie has delighted my children. As with almost all Disney children's movies, it has the requisite mix of adventure, danger, humor, and music, with an ending in which everything works out. Watching it over and over again, as my children were wont to do, I began to see allusions that,

taken together, comprise a morality tale on the way we read and misread texts.

Because there are a number of what can be seen as biblical allusions, I began to see *Pooh's Grand Adventure* as a lesson on how we should, or rather—how we should not—read Scripture. I do not wish to raise a Disney movie to the level of a biblical allegory, but there is enough here to be instructive. Understanding the relationship a reader has with a text can help us avoid Rabbit's folly of misreading and help us appreciate the dynamic process that happens when we read. Understanding the reader-text relationship opens us to understand inspiration as a dynamic, ongoing process.

On the last day of summer, Christopher Robin comes to the Hundred Acre Wood to speak with his friend, Winnie-the-Pooh. The Hundred Acre Wood is an idyllic place that may be understood as a type of Eden. Christopher has come to give Pooh a message. The message is that Christopher Robin has to go away, but that he will return. This message, however, is not something that Pooh wishes to hear. Pooh wants his "very best friend" Christopher Robin to stay with him "forever."

The two spend the day together and in the evening Christopher Robin gives Pooh an alternate message: "if there is ever a time when they are not together there is

something that you must remember... You are braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem and smarter than you think." Pooh jumbles up the message repeating it as, "We're braver than a bee, and longer than a tree and taller than a goose...or was that a moose?" Christopher repeats the message and adds that "the most important thing is, even if we are apart, I will always be with you...always be with you." Pooh falls asleep.

The next day Pooh wakes to find a honey pot outside his door with an attached note. The viewer understands that this is the original message Christopher Robin wanted to give to Pooh about him having to go away. The viewer also knows that the gift of honey and the note are to assure Pooh that he, Christopher Robin, will return. (Perhaps Psalm 119:103 comes to mind: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.")

Pooh, being Pooh, sees only the honey, and the honey gets on the note. When he does get around to seeing the note he can't read it. Pooh searches for his friends—Tigger, Rabbit, and Piglet. They are, however, also unable to read the honey-covered note. Their solution is to go and see Owl. Owl is the scholar, or, in this reading, the theologian. Owl has no doubt that he can read the note and proceeds to do so with great authority and profundity. The viewer again understands that Owl gets it mostly wrong.

In any event, Owl reads the note confidently and pronounces that Christopher Robin has gone "far away" and needs help. Owl goes on to read the word "school" as "skull," and thus determines that Christopher Robin is in trouble and has been taken to "Skull." (We remember, of course, that Golgotha is the place of the skull.) This is "not good." The friends are mightily and thoroughly distressed. Pooh is utterly despondent.

The solution, provided by Owl, is for them to go on a quest, a "long and dangerous journey," to save Christopher Robin from Skull; he, Owl, will provide them with a map. Here we remember that the Bible is often called a map. We are often exhorted to read and follow the Map in our journey through life.

Owl salutes and praises the friends for going on this adventure, but he, himself, of course, cannot possibly go along with them. He salutes and sends them off. They cross the river and head into that part of the Hundred Acre Wood that Owl calls "the great unknown," into thickets of thorns and through various and often terrifying adventures. Rabbit, who wants things done "by the book," becomes exasperated with Pooh's indecisiveness about how to read the map.

Rabbit takes control of the map and its interpretation.

In a pivotal scene, Rabbit is finally questioned about the way to go. His response, although humorous in the movie, makes a point about how all too often texts, including the Bible, are approached. Rabbit asserts with confidence in a song that the map (read Bible)

is not a guess and estimation or a hunch, a feeling or foolish intuition.

A map is a dependable, unwavering, inarguably accurate portrayal of your position.

He asserts that you must never trust your senses, as that is "most unwise." It is in

the printed word that truth lies.

If it says so: then it is so.

If it is so: then so it is.

Never trust that thing between your ears.

Brains will get you nowhere fast, my dears.

I haven't needed mine in years.

On the pages where truth appears.

If it says so, it is so on the pages where truth appears. The irony that the viewer of the movie sees is that however "true" the map may be it does not insure that Rabbit can read it any more successfully than Pooh. Because of who he is, his own overconfidence—which hides his insecurities—combined with his impatience hinder his ability to read the map correctly.

They all get lost and Rabbit has to surrender his pride and admit that he has not read the map well. Rabbit confesses, and Pooh sings a song—essentially a prayer to Christopher Robin—in which he cries out, "I am lost without you." They sleep; Rabbit gives the map to Pooh as a blanket. In the morning, they find that they are actually right where they belong: at Skull.

In fear and trepidation, they enter "Skull" to find Christopher Robin. The friends discover that they are indeed braver, stronger, and smarter than they believed, and in the end it is Christopher Robin who finds them and they are all saved. He provides the correct reading of the original note, and they all march back home in a triumphal procession, Christopher Robin riding on the back of the donkey Eeyore. All the thorns are now flowers, and all is well.



We do not live lives as in a Disney children's movie, but the question is worth asking, "How does one avoid Rabbit's folly?" Many are ready and eager to answer that question, especially when it comes to reading the Bible. There is a plethora of denominations, schools, books, commentaries, and individuals ready with answers of certainty, all saying that their way is the correct way. Within Adventism itself, there are multiple voices sometimes in tension over the correct path the Church should or must take in the realization of Truth.

A saving grace that should be exercised more, I believe, is the belief in the priesthood of all believers. Each individual believer has the responsibility to read and understand Scripture. This does not necessarily make matters any easier. How then to get out of the thicket? Again there are many answers, but understanding the relationship between text and reader can help.

The Bible, the more one pays attention, indeed calls us to use what is between our ears. The Bible deeply and profoundly repays close, careful, considered readings and re-readings by leading us on to show that ever-deeper questioning, reading, and understanding is possible. A first step in avoiding Rabbit's folly is to consider the relationship between the text and the reader. The Bible, or any other text, does not mean anything until it is read.

Out of the relationship between the text and the reader meaning emerges:

establishment of meaning.

Let's first consider the reader. As readers, we do not come to read the Bible innocently. We are not, nor should we be, a tabula rasa on which the truths of Scripture can be inscribed. For the Bible to have meaning, we must bring who and all we are to the text, and we all bring a great deal.

How we view the world and the expectations and assumptions we bring to any relationship are formed by a wide variety of factors that include when and where we were born, our family, culture and ethnicity, gender and personality, education, beliefs, and even our health. Stage of life combined with the sum total of life's experiences powerfully shape how we view ourselves and others, as well as what we find meaningful in our reading of Scripture. The variety of what people bring to a reading of a scriptural passage is demonstrated in almost any Sabbath School class with lots of discussion.

Sabbath School class also raises another aspect of the reading process. We read, particularly the Bible, as part of a community, which itself informs our personal reading. For the Adventist reader of the Bible, this community, the community of the Church, is both local and immediate. Church, in its more formal context, begins with the Sabbath sermon and extends to the various Adventist journals and books we read, and finally to the organizational levels of the Church.

Whether or not we are in concert with interpretations and meanings offered by our religious community on either the local or more formal levels, the fact remains that our community informs, shapes, challenges, or otherwise influences how we read. Readers, shaped by the communities of which they are parts, provide for a dynamic interchange of ideas that, if healthy, encourage, stimulate, challenge, and thus enhance reading of the Bible. If unhealthy, they can all too easily discourage and alienate.

We need community. We need to have a place and people who accept, affirm, and appreciate how we view the world. In essence, we need a community that accepts how we read. As parts of an Adventist community, whatever form it takes for the reader, we also read the Bible through the lens of Adventist doctrine, history, and tradition. Even if we react against this heritage and seek to modify the tradition, it plays a vital role in our reading of Scripture. The following diagram summarizes the reader's side of the equation:

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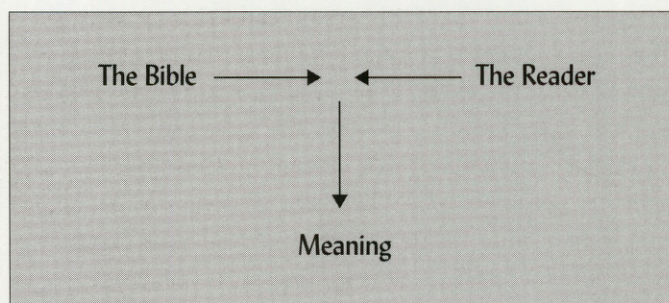


Figure 1

What is clear, and perhaps obvious, is that when meaning is created both the text and the reader bring something to the relationship. The diagram above is simple, and as such, it masks other realities that need to be considered. To understand better the relationship, we need to examine what each side brings to the

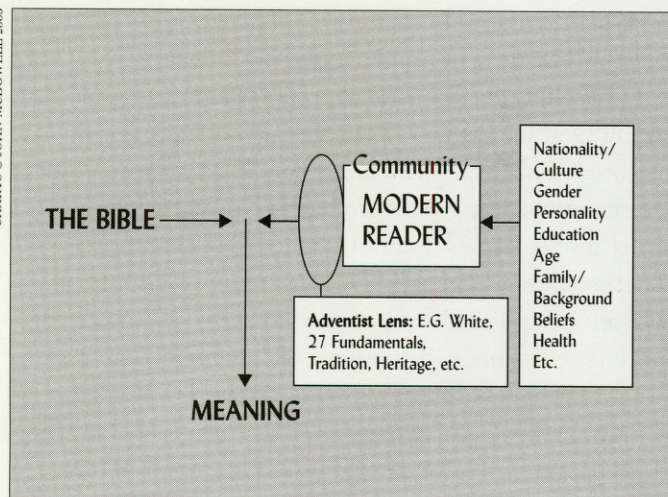


Figure 2

Understanding what we bring to the reading of the Bible and understanding the nature of the community in which we read are powerful aids in overcoming (or at least accounting for) bias and prejudice.

Knowing what the Bible brings to the relationship is another important task. On the text side of the relationship, there is also a variety of things to consider in our effort not only to understand the relationship, but also to enhance what we find as meaning. Understanding much of what the text brings to the reading relationship comprises what is generically understood as biblical studies.

We know little about most of the original authors of the books of the Bible and we know that a good deal of the Bible as we have it has been edited and redacted sometimes over long periods. Humans deeply involved in the history, culture, and politics of their time wrote the Bible.¹

The Protestant Old Testament has the same content as the Jewish Bible, but the various books are divided differently, with the Protestant Old Testament having thirty-nine books rather than twenty-four, as in the Jewish canon. The first datable event that we have in the formation of the Old Testament is 622 B.C.E. and the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22:8). The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) became canonical by about 400 B.C.E. Not until three hundred years later, around 100 B.C.E., was the canon for the Old Testament, which at that time included the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, closed.

The formation of the New Testament also involved a great deal of debate over a long period. It was not until after about 400 C.E. with the influence of Jerome's Vulgate that the New Testament of twenty-seven books became fixed.²

The Bible is not a single, complete document written in the order we have it today. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants all have, in effect, different Bibles. The process looks something like this:

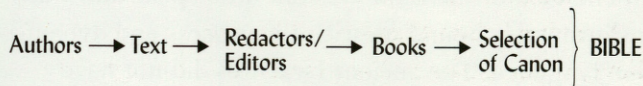


Figure 3

There are also other things to consider. We are also dealing with texts in translation. What do the original languages mean? This area of study, in itself, is ongoing as scholars find better ways to understand and translate the original languages. As anyone involved in translation knows, it is extremely difficult to convey adequately the nuances of meaning from one language to another. Hebrew is a language in which almost every word may have several English equivalents of quite diverse or even contradictory meanings. Sorting out the best English word to use is a large part of what makes translation an ongoing process.

How is theology developed in the Old and New Testaments? What is the relationship of historical event to narrative? Where and to what extent does oral tradition come into play? These and many other questions form the basis of biblical studies and biblical commentaries.

There is now also a much wider understanding and appreciation of the superb literary qualities of the Bible. The field of biblical literary analysis has developed rapidly and grown very large within the last twenty years. Not to recognize the literary qualities of the Bible is likely to lead to misreading. Reading the Bible for spiritual, theological, and doctrinal reasons is important and necessary, but most biblical scholars now recognize the importance of reading the Bible in consideration of its literary nature because the literary qualities speak to what is fundamental about the Bible itself.



It is useful to remember that the Bible was largely story, poem, and letter before it was sacred text. Understanding the nature and function of the literary compositions is also essential to understanding other dimensions of the text. But, as Andrew Ford of Princeton University notes, to study the Bible as literature or art is paradoxical. The Bible has been taken as anything “other than a work of human art”; it is the “Word of God.” This makes the Bible quite different from other literary works.³

The God of the Bible was one who spoke and was thus intimately bound up with the process and dynamics of language. The ancient Israelites did not have monuments, sculptures, or paintings, as did the larger, more powerful nations of Egypt and Babylon. They had story and text to give themselves cultural identity. There is the sense, particularly evident in Proverbs, that Wisdom, as Robert Alter states, “[i]s a language craft.” The “transmission of wisdom depends on an adeptness at literary formulation, and the reception of wisdom...by an audience of the ‘wise’ and the ‘discerning’ requires an answering finesse in reading...with discrimination.”⁴

Alter demonstrates that the writers of the Bible, whether the original authors or later editors, were highly skilled literary artists who took delight in the skillful creations of prose and poetry, but that the “pleasure of imaginative play is deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency.” As readers, we can, “by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories..., also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.”⁵

Given the literary nature of the Bible one question that gets asked involves the relationship of narrative to history. It is useful to think of history and the Bible in the following two ways: (1) the Bible is a work of history in that it tells a history, and (2) the Bible has been realized through history—passed from community to community, where the words of the Bible have been given different meanings at different times.⁶

As for the Bible as history, it tells a story that “has a beginning, middle and end.” It starts with creation and narrates the interaction between God and the people of earth (a select, special group). This is a special kind of history. It is a narrative of a divine

power external to human time, yet participating in the ebb and flow of human events.

Time has a shape, and there is a destiny toward which God moves within the narrative: creation restored. This gives meaning and value to human time. In this manner, the God of the Bible does not resemble other ancient gods. Part of what gives the biblical narratives their compelling appeal and power is that the narrative has a God who does not create and disappear, but one who comes back repeatedly and will come back again. The world of human hopes, fears, loves, desires—the world of human narrative—becomes the arena through narrative of divine action and interaction.

The relationship of the Bible to historical event is another complex and intriguing area of biblical study primarily bound up with biblical archeology. As with almost everything connected with the Bible, this subject is also controversial and gives rise to a wide spectrum of opinions.

On one end are fervent and ardent believers who assert that every word of Scripture is factual, historical, and literal. These believers tend to be the sort who make claims of finding Noah’s Ark, the Ark of the Covenant, and Egyptian chariot wheels in the Red Sea. (The term “Red Sea” is a mistranslation that newer translations of the Bible are changing to the “Reed Sea.”)

On the other end are perhaps those who still wish to deny that much of anything in the Bible is linked to historical events. Credible biblical scholarship, particularly related to archeology, has done much in this area. A number of Adventists, highly regarded in this field, have made significant contributions to the discipline.⁷ Still, although some parts of the Bible are more intentionally historical than others, what first existed were stories and poems—the literal reality of metaphor.

Another way to understand history and the Bible, as Ford articulates matters, is to see meaning—including the truth and the power of the Bible—unfolding through time. To read the Bible as a spiritual or faith document is to read it, almost always, as if it were intended for us now. The Bible in this sense is always contemporary. We tend to project ourselves, and our time—with all its attendant assumptions and expectations—onto the text.

But in a sense the Bible was not written for us at all. The audience for the written text was immediate and the message was often directed to a specific group in a specif-

ic place and time. The meanings we now find in Scripture will not be the fixed meaning for future generations. Meaning is also historical. Those who find or claim to find a perfect meaning in the Bible are taking a religious, spiritual, or theological track. The Bible is always a matter of interpretation. Interpretation makes the text continually new; the Bible's meaning unfolds.

Another dimension of the relationship between reader and text is the experience of reading. What happens when we read? The answer to this question, like others we have considered, has generated a subdiscipline within the field of literary criticism.

Essentially there are three levels to the reading experience.⁸ The first, and most superficial level, is simply impressionistic. We read and immediately gain some impression, and our response is based on how we feel; that is, it is an emotional response to what we read. We all do this.

The second level is when we begin to reflect. If we have read a story, we begin to think about what we read and imagine the characters and the events. The more we reflect, the more we can come to a considered judgment about what we have read. The more fully we have considered the nature of the text and what we bring to

the text, the more informed will be our evaluation and understanding. This is the level of discrimination.

All three aspects are important. A diagram of this process appears below.

The final important issue is the role of divine inspiration. How does the Holy Spirit fit into this scheme? For the believer, this is very important. Perhaps it is also useful to think about the action of divine inspiration as a dynamic, ongoing process. Rather than a single action or quality enacted on a person or text, inspiration is perhaps best understood as a process unfolding in and through time and experience. Each point in the process of the text's development is also a moment for divine inspiration to be at work.

Given the fallibility of humanity, God seeks to engage at every opportunity; likewise for the reader. As readers and as members of a community, we seek God's blessing in our quest for meaning. The act of reading, where text and reader come together, is the moment in which divine inspiration can work most fully. The process of inspiration is not a one-time event restricted to creation of the text. Inspiration is an ongoing dynamic. We see through the glass darkly—thus the possibility of fallibility and incompleteness is always part of the equation.

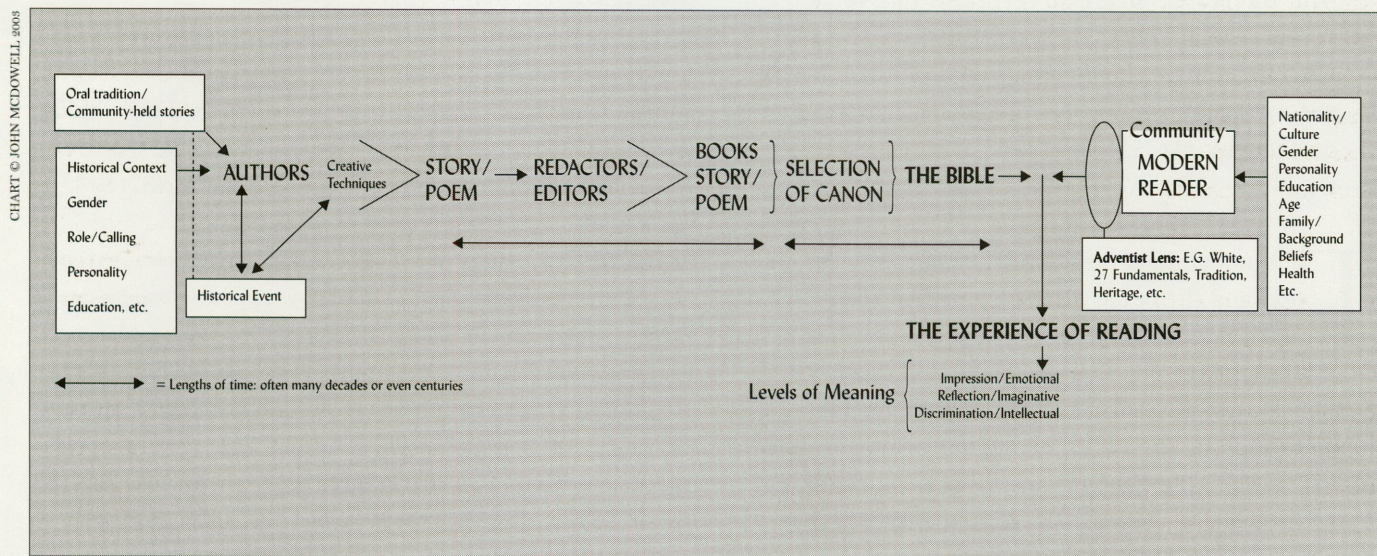


Figure 4



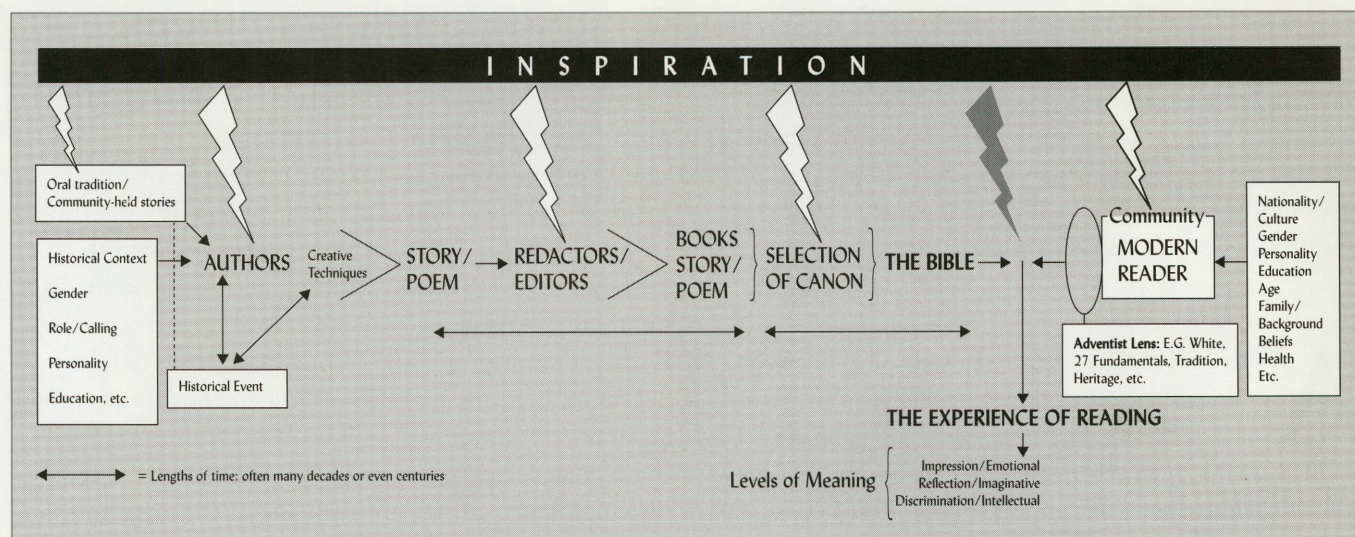


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Figure 5

Thus, God continually calls. We are continually called to understand more clearly and more deeply. A diagram of this process appears above.

Perhaps in the end it is not so much the inspiration of the text that matters so much as the inspiration of the reader. The reader, in essence, recreates the text in the act of reading. This is perhaps one way to understand Hebrews 10:15–16:

And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." (NRSV)

Thus, understanding the relationship between the text and the reader can show us that the better we understand our own biases and the more we understand the history, literary forms, and theology of the biblical text the richer our understanding. This should caution us about canonizing our own particular reading of the Bible. Study of the Bible is a lifelong process in which meanings will continue to unfold. It should be clear that the Bible always invites us back and that the doctrine of progressive truth coupled with the priesthood of all believers are important enough to be valued and embraced.

We are, to return to Pooh, still waiting for our author, Christ, to come back and find us. Until we are back in his Hundred Acre Wood, we should use all

senses, imagination, and yes, especially, brains to read and understand the map.

Notes and References

1. For a reference, see *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, by John B. Gabel, Charles B. Wheeler, and Anthony D. York, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87.
2. See "The Formation of the Canon," in Gabel, Wheeler, and York, *Bible as Literature*, 87–100.
3. Andrew Ford, "Genesis: Introduction to Biblical Study," lecture two from *The Bible and Western Culture*, by Michael Sugrue, Andrew Ford, Robert Hollander, and David Thurn. (Chantilly, Va.: Teaching Company, 1998).
4. *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 167–68.
5. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 189.
6. The discussion about the two ways of understanding the Bible in relationship to history is developed and taken from Andrew Ford's lecture, "Genesis: Introduction to Biblical Study."
7. For example, the Madaba Plains Project, a highly regarded ongoing archeological study that involves a consortium of schools, including La Sierra University, Canadian University College, Pacific Union College, and Walla Walla College, working together in Jordan. For more information visit <www.wvc.edu/mpp>.
8. The three levels are adapted from John Dewey's discussion of responses to visual art, discussed in *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958). See pages 123 and 14–47.

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