

## **Human Reason and Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction**

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It is our intention to explore some of the issues involved in the use of reason in a hermeneutics that seeks to properly interpret the Scripture. This is necessary in an intellectual context where reason, in spite of postmodernism, remains the omnipotent ruler of knowledge. I will approach the assignment as a Christian who believes that God is the Creator and Redeemer and that He has revealed to us the fundamental elements and concepts necessary to find meaning in life and in the world in which live. The content of this revelation, preserved for us in the Holy Scripture, should define the role of reason in the interpretative task.

The Enlightenment brought with it an understanding of the role of human reason that prevailed until the rise of postmodernism. The appointment of reason as the ultimate judge in the search for truth was a rejection of any external authority, including the authority of Scripture. Reason was used to determine the extent to which the Bible was a reliable expression of true events and ideas. This understanding of the role of reason became a cardinal presupposition in the historical critical approach to Scripture. Its role in hermeneutics was to subject the Bible to rigid and scientific scrutiny in order for reason to establish the reliability and dependability of its content. Although postmodernism has established the limits and questioned the reliability of reason in the search for ultimate truth, it is still captive to reason. It cannot be any other way because reason remains with us and we cannot function in its absence.

## **Reason and Scripture**

### *Defining Reason*

One of the challenges we face as we approach this topic is defining the term “reason.” Surprisingly, philosophers have not been able to produce a generally accepted definition of reason.<sup>1</sup> We do find an abundance of definitions because every person who deals with the subject brings to it his or her own definition. But what reason is remains elusive to human thinking. In other words, reason cannot fully understand itself. This should have alerted us to the serious limits of human reason and to the dangers of claiming for it autonomy.

There are some aspects of the understanding of reason that are generally accepted. Whatever it may be, reason certainly consists of being able to establish connections between objects or concepts or ideas in order to draw logical judgments or conclusions from those connections and thus increase knowledge and/or understanding. We will use this broad view of reason as our working definition.

### *Biblical View of Reason*

The Bible assumes that humans possess what we call reason. This is a given in the biblical understanding of human nature and there is no need for us to spend much time demonstrating the obvious. A few comments will suffice. In the Old Testament, every human activity assumes the human capacity to think, to reason, and to draw conclusions (e.g., construction of buildings, defining military strategies, doing business, legal debates, and royal administration).<sup>2</sup> Rationality is an intrinsic aspect of being human. In the New Testament, reasoning is fundamental in theological arguments as well as in parenetical materials.<sup>3</sup> It is in the Wisdom Literature that the role of reason becomes more prominent.

The appropriation of wisdom was based on the human capacity to observe, analyze, and draw conclusions. The sages observed nature and

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<sup>1</sup> G. J. Warnock, “Reason,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7: 84, wrote, “It is far from immediately clear what reasoning is—on what occasions, in what activities or processes, reason is exercised.”

<sup>2</sup> See, N. J. Oppenwall-Galluch, “Reason; Reasoning; Reasonable,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:51; and Edwin C. Hostetter, “Reason,” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 4:739.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Günther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 29-46; and Hostetter, “Reason,” 739.

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social life and left behind them a deposit of knowledge. The formulation of the proverbial sayings found in the Bible always involved “this fundamental process of observation to a greater or lesser degree.”<sup>4</sup> Proverbs deal with a multiplicity of social and personal observations as well as with the natural world. Concerning Solomon we are informed that “he described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish” (1 Kgs 4:33). This type of study was used to draw moral teachings but at the same time the knowledge of nature increased. The process itself is well illustrated in Prov 6:6: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in the summer and gathers its food at harvest.” The comments about the ant are based on what comes very close to being a scientific observation of animal behavior (“its ways”). The sage observed that the ant was active during the harvest season, that is to say, it took advantage of the cyclical or seasonal order of nature. During the harvest it gathered food in order to have it available during the dry season.<sup>5</sup> This discussion is based on observation and rational analysis. What particularly impressed the sage was the industriousness of the ant and its self-motivation. From these elements he drew a moral lesson (v. 7). The order of nature serves as a vehicle to motivate proper human behavior.<sup>6</sup>

The sages also observed human activities and interpreted that behavior in terms of its results. A very well-known case is recorded in Proverbs 24:30-34. The sage passes by the field of the sluggard and observes the deteriorated condition of his vineyard (observed the phenomenon). Then, he “applied his heart” to what he had observed (rationally analyzed the phenomenon) and “learned a lesson” from what he saw (draw conclusions). He is now observing human behavior and drawing conclusions from it. In all of this reason was active.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, wisdom itself is understood as rational intellect and appears to be an “an open-ended search for new knowledge and deeper understanding”<sup>7</sup> (e.g., 1:13, 18; 8:16). The author seems intentionally to be relying on “his own powers of observation, analysis, and

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<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 6.

<sup>5</sup> See, Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 5:75.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2000), 125.

<sup>7</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up: A Reading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 74.

reason.”<sup>8</sup> It may be that such emphasis on the centrality of reason in gaining knowledge was what led him to conclude that all is meaningless, even absurd, implying that wisdom has limitations. Such a discovery probably contributed to his personal conviction, expressed at the end of the book, that what humans need is to “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13).

Based on that evidence we can conclude that reason is a human faculty or tool that assists us in understanding ourselves and the world God created. It does not simply aim at increasing knowledge and understanding, but also at determining how we should relate to others and to God. Reason is an indispensable faculty for the hermeneutical task and could assist us in joining and enjoying God’s established order. Therefore, we reject the classical view of reason as a characteristic of the soul which is capable of discerning on its own the essence of reality.

#### **Reason as a Hermeneutical Tool/Faculty: General Observations**

As we explore this topic in the light of Christian thinking I should clarify some of my basic biblical assumptions; what I am bringing with me to the analysis. I will argue that these assumptions are more than assumptions, that they are grounded on the biblical understanding of reason and its role in seeking understanding.

#### *Epistemic Ground of Reason*

I will argue that reason needs an epistemic ground in order to be activated. It does not operate in a noetic vacuum, creating knowledge by itself. An epistemic ground would not be necessary if reason is considered to be fully autonomous and self-creative, as in the classic view of reason. In that case reason would be a center for unreal, imaginary thoughts and images totally detached from the concrete realities within which the possessor of reason exists. In that scenario reason becomes irrational. From a biblical perspective, the judgments and conclusions arrived at through rational analysis are always a response to something “given” to the thinking person.<sup>9</sup> There is an objective reality to which reason is applied, and with which it interacts through analysis and logical thinking.

Although we will say more about the nature of this epistemic ground, for now we could say that the most obvious epistemic ground of reason is

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter, “Introduction,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2005), 6.

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the cosmos as an expression of the creative power of God. The psalmist unapologetically affirms, “The heavens declare . . . the skies proclaim. . .” (19:1). The world of nature is an explosion of knowledge available to intelligent creatures for exploration and analysis. The Bible assumes, or perhaps better, reveals that the cosmos is intelligible and therefore accessible to human rationality. Here lies the basis for the biblical emphasis on wisdom and the call to seek wisdom. This wisdom is to be accessed through the observation and analysis of the natural and the social worlds. The purpose of that search is to reaffirm or even restore proper relationships and thus contribute to the preservation of the cosmic order established by God during creation.

*Divine and Human Rationality*

I assume that rationality is a divine gift to humans grounded in the rationality of the Creator. The creation narrative reveals a God whose actions are intelligible. One of the fundamental characteristics of creation, as disclosed in the narrative itself, is order, and order presupposes intelligence and rationality. We first read about the creation of the raw materials and then the organization of that material into a most beautiful and meaningful world. The elements were separated, distinctions were made, functions were assigned; all of this in an effortless way. This is not a creation out of chaos, but a creation out of nothing. It is the word, the rational word of God, that creates and shapes things in accordance with His mind and will. The result is an intelligible creation properly ordered and structured. It was declared by Him to be “very good.” This means that it was beautiful and above all it expressed the structural and functional unity that the Creator intended it to have.

This thinking God, who created objective realities in a systematic and orderly way, also created human beings in His own image. The presence of that image in humans should not be circumscribed to human rationality, but it certainly includes it. Humans participated in God’s *ratio*. This made it possible for them to interact with the Creator in meaningful ways. They could respond to His word with their own word and rest with Him participating in His own rest. That rationality allowed for a deeper understanding of God and of themselves as they interacted with each other.

But rationality also allowed humans to explore nature and comprehend its mysteries. When commanded to rule over nature, humans were not simply being asked to govern it. They were being commanded to rule over it through their minds by uncovering the mysteries of the created world, its

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order, beauty, and function. This was to take place through careful observation and analysis. When asked to name the animals, humans were being commanded to observe their behavior and draw conclusions that would be expressed in the names assigned to them. To name is to organize and systematize and in those activities reason is of central importance. All of this implies that reason is a gift and that consequently it cannot claim independence without damaging itself. It even suggests that reason is not the exclusive property of the person. In fact, reason is part of the created order and cannot transcend itself by claiming absolute autonomy and acting as the ultimate arbiter of meaning.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate arbiter of meaning has to be the Creator who is beyond creation and who is the absolute objective observer of His creation.

*Reason Disfigured*

In Christian theology, the eruption of sin and evil in the world damaged in significant ways every aspect of God's creation. I will also assume that it particularly corrupted human beings without obliterating the image of God in them (Rom 3:23). This meant that the inner structure of human rationality was disoriented and began a search for meaning centered on the sinful human concern for autonomy from God and self-preservation. The epistemic ground of reason was now an irrational search for meaning in a world that had been conceptually disjointed from its Creator. The prophet proclaims, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). There is something wrong at the rational and volitional center—the heart—of human beings. It cannot understand itself and therefore it exists in a state of disorientation. Paul goes on to argue that, because of the fall, humans have misunderstood what nature reveals about its Creator and consequently they corrupted themselves (Rom 1:18-23).

Although reason is common to human beings, we have not been able to use it harmoniously. There is not a field of knowledge in which scholars have reached perfect agreement in the conclusions arrived at through the use of reason and common methodologies. Reason has been unable to interact fully and harmoniously with reason itself. This does not mean that it is a useless capacity. On the contrary, it continues to be helpful to humans

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<sup>10</sup> Ernstpeter Maurer writes, "Reason must reflect that it has been *given* to human person. *Ration* is not at our disposal—which is certainly a limitation, because we cannot fathom our essential capacity" ("The Perplexity and Complexity of Sinful and Redeemed Reason," in *Reasons of Faith*, 196).

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even in their fallen condition. But the disfigurement is still there making it impossible for us to fully understand who we are, what we are doing here, and our *telos*. One of the most difficult things for fallen human reason to accept is its need for healing. It cannot properly operate by itself. Unaided reason leads to a dead end. It needs guidance, correction, and validation in order to become an efficient tool in the interpretation of itself and the realities within which it exists. This is provided by the epistemic ground given to us through God's self-revelation.

**Use of Reason in Biblical Interpretation**

How, then, should reason function in biblical interpretation? Where does the interpretational process begin? We should make it clear that it is the whole person who is seeking to interpret the Scripture and not just one of his or her faculties. This means that the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual dimensions of the person are involved in the hermeneutical task. However, it seems to be the function of reason to establish connections, organize ideas in a logical sequence, and draw conclusions in an effort to gain or increase understanding. Let us now be more specific in defining the role of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. I will list several important elements in that task.

*A Starting Point*

Our brief discussion of the biblical literature revealed that the use of reason was particularly emphasized in the wisdom literature. It would be good to begin where the sages began. Their search for knowledge led them to observe nature and human interaction, but this took place within a very particular frame of reference. They explicitly mentioned it: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10; cf. 1:7). This was their point of departure, the launching platform for rational analysis. This was not simply a fundamental assumption but an experiential grounding. Although the phrase "fear of the Lord" could express different ideas, in the case of the sages the emphasis is on commitment to the Lord. The term "beginning" is to be understood as the point of departure. It is what "enables a man [person] to acquire wisdom; it trains him [her] for wisdom."<sup>11</sup>

The idea or the "thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God is a statement of penetrating

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<sup>11</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 66.

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perspicacity.”<sup>12</sup> The fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom assumes that the search for knowledge throws “the one who seeks the knowledge back upon the question of his [her] self-knowledge and his [her] self-understanding.”<sup>13</sup> Israel raised the question of epistemology and consciously decided that true knowledge is acquired within the frame of reference of the fear of the Lord. Israel believed “that effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts a man [a person] into a right relationship with the objects of his [her] perception, that it enables him [her] to ask questions more pertinently, to take stock of relationships more effectively and generally to have a better awareness of circumstances.”<sup>14</sup>

In the use of the faculty of reason, the sages did not begin with abstractions like the knowledge of nature or society. They began with God and a commitment to Him as the source of knowledge. Their study or observation of the natural phenomena was framed within the conviction that God was the Creator as revealed in the Torah. One could suggest that the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom functions “as a presupposition or preunderstanding. It is the first thought that makes all other thoughts fall into place.”<sup>15</sup> We could, then, conclude that in defining the role of reason in Biblical hermeneutics our epistemology should be grounded in God and in a commitment to Him.

*The Scripture as the Epistemic Ground of Reason*

For the sages, the Lord whose fear is the beginning of wisdom is Yahweh, the Creator and Redeemer of Israel. The New Testament is going to identify Him with the Incarnated Logos. The knowledge of this particular God is not the result of natural theology or an intuitive outburst of knowledge. This is the God who revealed Himself to the patriarchs, to Moses, to the prophets of Israel, and who finally spoke to us through His

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 67. See also, Fuhs, “*Yārē’*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, ed. G. Johannes Butterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:311, who writes, “Wisdom is here set in an intimate relationship with fear of God, which precedes all wisdom as its necessary condition and instructs in wisdom. In other words, all human knowledge can be traced back to its divine roots. No one can be expert in the complexities of life who does not begin with the knowledge of Yahweh and dependence on him.”

<sup>13</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 67.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>15</sup> T. Longman III, “Fear of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 203.

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Son and His apostles. This body of knowledge, preserved for us in written form, provides the epistemic ground necessary for reason to function and find healing. How should reason deal with this body of knowledge? The whole field of hermeneutics is an attempt to clarify how reason should go about the tasks of interpreting the Scripture.

What we are suggesting is that reason is subservient to revelation. The interpreter must immerse him/herself in the Scripture. It is after gaining a substantial knowledge of the message of the Scripture that reason is able to establish conceptual connections, to logically organize them, and to arrive at conclusions that contribute to the increase of our understanding of the Scripture. I must clarify that throughout this process reason is in dialogue with the biblical text, but what it seeks is to understand it on its own terms. Therefore, reason is in the process open to correction (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Tim 3:16). The biblical epistemic ground reaches reason as a gift and reason does not have the right to alter it.<sup>16</sup> Reason submits to it and in doing this the healing process begins.<sup>17</sup>

*Reason's Self-awareness of its Limitations*

Since the Scripture testifies to the self-corrupting nature of reason, it is important for reason to recognize its own limitations and its need for guidance as it approaches God's self-revelation in nature and Scripture. This requires from reason a spirit of humility in that it recognizes that in order for it to operate as effectively as possible it has to depend on the Lord, its Creator. It is a well-known fact that the interpreter does not approach the object of interpretation, in this case the Bible, as a *tabula rasa*—free from preconceptions or preunderstandings. In the formulation of preconceptions, reason was fully involved; and therefore, there is a personal commitment to them, a sense of ownership. One of the roles of Scripture is to challenge and correct preunderstandings and assumptions that reason may have brought to the text based on a different epistemic model. At this point in the hermeneutical task the searcher becomes, through the work of the Spirit, the

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<sup>16</sup> If the epistemic ground of reason is a gift, then, the nature of reason as understood in modernism would have to be rejected. In that view reason defines reality as what can be apprehended by thought (the noumenon) and this provided the basis for the historical-critical method. If the epistemic ground is a gift, then, the grammatical-historical method would be the right one in the study of the Bible.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White adds, "When we come to the Bible, reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself, and heart and intellect must bow to the great I AM" (*Testimonies for the Church* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958], 5:704).

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object of analysis of the text. By exposing him/herself to the text, the Spirit is able to convict the person and to lead him/her to all truth (John 14:26). Paul wrote: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Sprit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1Cor 1:14; NSAB). Without the assistance of the Spirit we could not properly understand the Bible. The teaching role of the Spirit is the continuation of the teaching ministry of Jesus (John 14:26). Through Him the mind is illuminated and prepared to find in the Scripture God’s self-revelation to us and the Word becomes the living word of God. Word and Spirit cannot be separated from each other because in the Scripture we confront the mystery of the work of the Spirit. He revealed the Word to the prophets and inspired them to preserve it for us. Therefore they cannot coexist in a state of conflict. In the hands of the Spirit, the Word becomes the sword of God that penetrates deep into our beings and frees us from our bondage and spiritual darkness delivering us into the glorious light of the Son of God (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). When the Spirit comes to us there is an encounter and it could produce intellectual and spiritual dissonance, thus inviting reason to reexamine its preconceptions and to surrender them. This is possible to the extent that reason is willing to acknowledge its limitations and to reject any claim to autonomy. Without this inner attitude, the role of reason in biblical interpretation will be distorted from the very beginning.

### *Proper Methodology*

How does the Spirit guide us in the interpretation of the Scripture? Does He ignore our rationality? The study of the Bible is both an intellectual experience and a spiritual one. The Spirit uses the tool we have, reason, in the interpretation of the Scripture. We are back to the question of method/hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is an attempt to establish a proper methodology for the study of the Bible. Since in the study of the Scripture the whole person as an emotional and a rational being is involved, methodology becomes indispensable in order for reason to preserve objectivity. It also enables others to test the results of the methodology applied to the text. If the epistemic ground for reason is the Scripture, then, it is important for reason to draw its methodology from the text itself. The knowledge found in the text presupposes that the writers encoded their message in a particular way and that they expected the readers to be able to decode the message through the use of certain principles suggested by the text itself. One of the tasks of reason is precisely to find the principles that

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will make it possible for it to understand Scripture from within the Scripture itself. At every step reason is to remain in subjection to the text and willing to refine the methodology as the understanding of the text increases. This perhaps could be also called the hermeneutical spiral according to which there is a dynamic interaction between the understanding of the whole and the interpretation of its parts through a back and forth movement.

A biblical hermeneutics has to be built out of the Scripture itself. This is one of the most difficult challenges that the interpreter, as a rational entity, faces. We are referring to the Protestant principle *sola scriptura*. Once the Bible is accepted as the epistemic ground from which reason is expected to operate, then, *sola scriptura* becomes an indispensable methodological principle. This principle assumes the unity of the Scripture which by itself witnesses to the intelligibility of the biblical text. In other words, the unity of the Bible is an expression of its inner order and rationality. Since the ultimate author is God in His self-revelation, we have rational human beings interacting with the Giver of rationality through a text that mediates His message in a rationally appealing way. Human reason is in dialogue with this revealed rationality, listening to it and in subjection to it.

*Reason and the Self-Interpretation of Scripture*

Is reason the creator of meaning? Postmodernism has argued that texts do not have intrinsic meaning but that readers imbue the text with meaning. In that case, reason works on a text and creates meaning. This assumes a high view of reason and places it above the text as its master. In the case of the biblical text, Christians have always assumed that God speaks to us through it. The divine speech is meaningful in itself and through the medium of words it reaches us as rational beings. If that is the case, as we believe it is, then the meaning of the Scripture is contained within itself and is not created by reason. Reason is confronted by it and challenged to submit to it in humility and self-dependence.

We have traditionally referred to this phenomenon under the hermeneutical principle known as Scripture interprets itself. The message and meaning of the Bible is given to us; we do not create it. The character of meaning as a gift found in the sacred writings may not be that obvious, but it is there. Reason approaches the text persuaded that it is meaningful in itself and allows the Scripture to unveil that meaning. In that task, Scripture is compared to Scripture through an exegetical analysis that allows one passage to shed light on another until the message of the text

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appears before our eyes. Therefore, reason functions as *a tool* that makes it possible for us to dig deep into the mine of biblical truth until the meaning embedded in the text itself surfaces to our consciousness.

### *Reason as an Evaluative Tool*

It appears to be the role of reason not only to uncover the meaning of the text but also to express its content in a logical and systematic way. In that task, the Bible will continue to provide the epistemic foundation for the interpreter. This means that the main categories of thought in the theological system that is being developed are to be provided by the text and are not to be imported from other epistemic centers. In fact, when entering into a dialogue with other systems reason becomes an evaluative tool and assumes a *critical* function based on the knowledge of the content of the biblical text. The scriptural world view is now to be employed by reason to deconstruct other alternatives (2 Cor 10:3-5; Acts 17:16-34). Among those alternatives we find modern and postmodern approaches to science and philosophy. These are usually developed in the absence of the principle of the fear of the Lord and independent from the Scripture. In other words, very often the epistemic ground for the study of science and philosophy is reason detached from its Creator and in a state of autonomy. The critical function of reason that we are referring to is not the one assigned to it by the Enlightenment and that assumes the self-sufficiency of reason, but the one assigned to it by the Scripture under the illumination of the Spirit and that requires humility and submission. Reason, enlightened by the Spirit and grounded in the Scripture, becomes a powerful tool in decoding the natural world.

### **Conclusion**

God, as a rational being, created rational intelligent beings and an intelligible cosmos. The presence of sin and evil in the cosmos impacted reason to the point that unaided by God it would not be able to properly interpret itself and the context within which it functions. The Bible recognizes the importance of reason and the need to use it as a God-given faculty that through observation, conceptual connections, and analysis could increase our knowledge and understanding of ourselves, nature, and God. But this is to take place on the epistemic ground provided by God's self-revelation as preserved in the Scripture. By building on that fertile ground, reason begins its healing process in humility and commitment to its Creator—what the sages called the fear of the Lord. The interaction of

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reason and Scripture, under the illumination of the Spirit, acknowledges the foundational function of *sola scriptura*, the unity of the Bible, and the need to allow it to interpret itself. Using the Bible as its epistemic foundation, reason can function as a critical tool in seeking to understand other fields of knowledge.

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