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Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find non-denominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions such as What does postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and
on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.
When “postmodernism” is invoked outside the rather insulated confines of the academy, it is usually a shorthand for “anything goes,” synonymous with unmitigated relativism and hermeneutic licentiousness. Granted, a lot that traffics under the banner of postmodernism seems to warrant this impression. Talk of the “death of the author” and the “play” of interpretation is often invoked for interpretive license. Indeed, interpretation is often seen as the root of the problem: postmodernism is perceived to be anything-goes relativism precisely because it assumes that “everything is a matter of interpretation.” And we should note that there are both “left” and “right” versions of this. While some of us will worry that deconstructionists can make Milton or Paul mean anything they want, others worry when “interpretation” is a cover for redescribing torture as “enhanced interrogation techniques.” In some ways we’re all postmodernists now.

There is, then, an intertwining of postmodernism, interpretation, and the specter of relativism. And the stakes of this intertwining are raised in the contexts of communities of faith. For “peoples of the Book,” whose way of life is shaped by texts, matters of interpretation are, in a way, matters of life and death. In fact, for Christians, many of the anxieties of hermeneutics are nothing new. Well before we were haunted by the specters of Derrida and Foucault, the Christian community grappled with the
conflict of interpretations. One can see such conflicts embedded in the New Testament narrative itself. In Acts 15, for instance, we see a conflict of interpretations of “the law”—and we see a community grappling with interpretive difference within its midst. Despite a common mythology, the early church was not a hermeneutic paradise; rather, debates about what counts as the tradition have been integral to the Christian tradition. The early church was not a golden age of interpretive uniformity; rather, the catholic councils and creeds are the artifacts of a community facing up to the conflict of interpretations.

The Reformation perhaps unleashed this hermeneutic monster with a new intensity, and many of us live in its wake. If the Reformation was about anything, it was about being confronted anew by Scripture, wrestling with the text firsthand. It was nothing short of a Reformation of reading. And though the concern was to recover the gospel—to get back to the interpretation of salvation—the result, as we now know, was a proliferation of interpretations and the multiplication of interpretive communities. The irony is that, concurrent with this hermeneutic fragmentation, a specific hermeneutic doctrine arose regarding the perspicuity or “clarity” of Scripture. While medieval (read “Catholic”) approaches to the Bible were portrayed as a morass of allegorical and imaginative acrobatics, the Reformers and their heirs championed the “plain sense” of Scripture. This basically amounted to the claim that, while others might interpret the Bible, we just read it, straight up, without any filters or biases or obfuscating meddling from ecclesiastical authorities. If we’d just stop interpreting and simply start reading, we’d arrive at the crystal-clear, objective truth of the matter. Thus the now-common refrain: Interpretation breeds relativism. Hermeneutics is the problem.

Whose Community? Which Interpretation? is a crisp, concise, provocative antidote to this common construal of the situation. And it comes from the pen of one of the masters. For two decades now I have prized and admired Merold Westphal’s lucidity (not a term often associated with Continental philosophy!). He regularly weds erudition with a kind of folksy accessibility that is as entertaining as it is illuminating. Indeed, this book is essentially a “course in a box,” a compact opportunity to learn from a master teacher. Crammed into this little book is a veritable curriculum on philosophical hermeneutics that gives us a peek into the background in figures like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, introduces us to critiques

Merold Westphal,
Whose Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church,
from Hirsch and Wolterstorff, and provides a core exposition of the great hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer—all with a view to philosophical hermeneutics serving communities that read and pray and preach the Word.

I don’t mean to suggest that Westphal is out to comfort all our fears and worries, to make interpretation safe and secure. Indeed, he will make the case for what he calls “relativist hermeneutics”—a label that’s not going to thrill the purveyors of so-called absolute truth. But the burden of the book is to help us distinguish “anything goes” relativism from the relativity of finitude. One might say that Westphal is redeeming relativity and dependence, which seem to be the specific features of creaturehood. Along the way, he helps us navigate between “hermeneutical despair” and “hermeneutical arrogance.” That, it seems to me, is a gift for the church.

Westphal can pull this off because these two worlds—philosophical hermeneutics and the church—come together in his thought. Or perhaps we could say that Westphal holds dual citizenship and is fluent in the language of both worlds. His project here is motivated by the conviction that the rigors of philosophical hermeneutics, when understood and appreciated, can actually help the church to be a faithful community of interpretation. Who could ask for more?
Preface

This book is intended for Christian theologians of three kinds: academic, pastoral, and lay. What they have in common is that they interpret the Bible and might do well to think about what is involved in such interpretation. By academic theologians I mean those whose interpretations are written; by pastoral theologians I mean those whose interpretations are oral; and by lay theologians I mean those whose interpretations take place in the silence of devotional reading. In publication, in preaching, and in private, personal reading, Christians interpret the Bible.

Since Christians are not isolated atoms but members of the body of Christ as the people of God, we can say that these three modes of interpretation are the ways in which the church interprets its Scripture. If the church misunderstands this vital task and privilege, it misunderstands its own identity, both communally and individually.

The first volume in this series, Jamie Smith’s Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? bears the subtitle Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church. This present volume might have had the subtitle Taking Gadamer to Church, for it is the hermeneutical theory of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002—yes, he lived that long) that I wish to present as an aid to thinking theologically about biblical hermeneutics (“hermeneutics” meaning the theory and practice of interpretation).

It is dangerous for Jerusalem (theology) to turn to Athens (philosophy) for guidance. The word of the cross does not conform
to the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1:18–2:13). But there are two reasons why the risk is worth taking, especially when one is conscious of the danger. First, theologies that pride themselves on being free of contamination by philosophy are often, even usually, shaped by philosophical traditions that have become part of the culture to which these theologies belong and that operate without us being consciously aware of them. So an explicit reflection on philosophical issues in hermeneutics can be an aid to critical self-understanding. The point is not to be uncritical of some philosophical tradition (a genuine danger) but to be willing to be self-critical as theologians. Second, we just might learn something about interpretation that applies as much to biblical interpretation as to legal or literary interpretation.

Chapters 6 through 9 of this volume present Gadamer’s theory. The first five chapters provide a preparation for “reading” him by providing some historical and contemporary context. The final three chapters explore the implications of Gadamerian hermeneutics within the context of the church, for if interpreting the Bible is in important respects like interpreting Shakespeare and the United States Constitution, it is in other important respects different. For example, the witness of the Holy Spirit, not only in attesting to the Bible as divine revelation but also in teaching us what it means, is a distinctively theological assumption that the church brings with it to the interpretation of Scripture. Theological hermeneutics will have other specific presuppositions that do not derive from philosophical hermeneutics and are not involved in interpreting Shakespeare or the Constitution.

Like others, such as Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, Gadamer insists that interpretation is never presuppositionless. We come with prejudices (pre-judgments) that shape our interpretations and that, in turn, are revised or even replaced in the course of interpretation. This is the hermeneutical circle in which presuppositions and interpretations mutually determine each other. But this means our interpretations are always relative to the presuppositions that we bring with us to the task of interpretation and that we have inherited and internalized from the traditions that have formed us. Unless we confuse ourselves—as tradition-bearing individuals and communities—with God, we will acknowledge a double relativity: our interpretations are relative to (conditioned by) the presuppositions we bring with us, and those presuppositions, as human, all
too human, are themselves relative (penultimate, revisable, even replaceable) and not absolute.

One of the central arguments of this book is that such relativity is by no means the same as the relativism in which “anything goes.” We are easily frightened by the specter of “anything goes,” and there is no shortage of those willing to play on this fear in order to imply their own absoluteness. But there are three good reasons to resist this fear. First, from the relativity of our interpretations to the historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives out of which they arise (as can be seen easily enough by looking at church history), it simply does not follow that “anything goes,” that each viewpoint is as good as any other. Second, those who use “anything goes” as a fear tactic and as a defense against admitting their own relativity regularly fail to identify anyone who holds such a view. Not even Nietzsche, one of the most radical philosophical perspectivists, thinks that Christianity and Platonism are just as good as his own philosophy of the will to power. Third, there are good theological reasons to resist this fear. Under its influence, we end up thinking ourselves (our interpretations) to be absolute (at least in principle). But only God is absolute. Both because we are creatures and not the Creator and because we are fallen and not sinless, our vision is imperfect, at once finite and fallen.

We need not think that hermeneutical despair (“anything goes”) and hermeneutical arrogance (we have “the” interpretation) are the only alternatives. We can acknowledge that we see and interpret “in a glass, darkly” or “in a mirror, dimly” and that we know “only in part” (1 Cor. 13:12), while ever seeking to understand and interpret better by combining the tools of scholarship with the virtues of humbly listening to the interpretations of others and above all to the Holy Spirit.

While this book is addressed to all Christians, including laity, I especially hope it will find its way to pastors and to readers in divinity schools and theological seminaries, where academic theologians and pastors in training properly engage not only in interpreting the Bible but also in reflecting on what this involves.

My thanks to Jamie Smith, for urging me to write such a treatise for his series, and to him, along with Ryan Weberling and especially my wife, Carol, for suggesting ways to make my argument clearer and more accessible.
Interpretation or Intuition?

It may seem obvious that Christians interpret the Bible. Is not every devotional reading (silent), every sermon (spoken), and every commentary (written) an interpretation or a series of interpretations of a biblical text? Does not the history of Christian thought show that Christians in different times and places have interpreted and thus understood the Bible differently? Even at any given time and place, such as our own, is there not always a “conflict of interpretations”\(^1\) between, among, and within various denominational and nondenominational traditions? So it seems obvious that Christians would be interested in hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation that is sometimes normative (how we ought to go about interpreting) and sometimes descriptive (what actually happens whenever we interpret).

But often enough the hermeneutical theory, if we may call it that, of lay believers, pastors, and academic theologians consists

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simply in denying that interpretation is necessary and unavoidable.
We encounter this general attitude when we offer a viewpoint about,
say, some controversial moral or political question to someone who
(1) doesn’t like it and (2) doesn’t know how to refute it (perhaps
depth down knowing that it is all too much on target) and so replies,
“That’s just your opinion.” Similarly, an unwelcome interpretation
of some biblical text may be greeted by the response, “Well, that
might be your interpretation, but my Bible clearly says . . .” In other
words, “You interpret; I just see what is plainly there.” I am reminded
of an ad for a new translation of the Bible billed as so accurate and
so clear that the publishers could announce “NO INTERPRETA-
TION NEEDED.” The ad promotes “the revolutionary translation
that allows you to immediately understand exactly what the original
writers meant.” But, of course, this “immediacy” is mediated by this
particular translation, one among many, each of which interprets
the original text a bit differently from the others.

This “no interpretation needed” doctrine says that interpretation is
accidental and unfortunate, that it can and should be avoided whenever
possible. Often unnoticed is that this theory is itself an interpretation
of interpretation and that it belongs to a long-standing philosophical
tradition that stretches from certain strands in Plato’s thought well
into the twentieth century. This tradition is called “naive realism” in
one of its forms. It is called naive both descriptively, because it is easily
taken by a common-sense perspective without philosophical reflection,
and normatively, because it is taken to be indefensible on careful
philosophical reflection. Before looking into why this interpretation
of interpretation might deserve to be called naive in this second sense,
let us first try to be clear about what it asserts and why.

Realism begins as the claim that the world (the real) is “out there”
and is what it is independent of whether or what we might think about
it. But since, in spite of appearances, no one actually denies this, if real-
ism is to be a claim worthy of defending or denying, it must say more,
and it does. It is the further claim that we can (at least sometimes) know
reality just as it is, independent of our judgments about it. In other
words, our thoughts or judgments about the world correspond to it,

2. See James K. A. Smith, The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for
a Creational Hermeneutic (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 39. Jamie Smith, the
editor of the present series, first called this ad to my attention years ago at a conference
on biblical hermeneutics, and I have often had occasion to recall it.
3. More precisely, the latest scholarly version of the original text.
perfectly mirror it. It is because Kant, who affirms the first claim, denies the second claim that he is the paradigmatic antirealist. He insists that we don’t know the “thing in itself,” the world as it truly is, but only the world as it appears to human—all too human—understanding. We don’t apprehend it directly but only as mediated through the forms and categories we bring with us to experience. In other words, the human mind is a kind of receiving apparatus, like a black and white TV set, that conditions the way in which what is “out there” appears. Thus the world as we see it is partly the result of the way the real gives itself to us (as passive, receptive) and partly the result of the way we take it (as active, spontaneous). Like the Gestalt psychologist, Kant does not suggest that we are aware of our contributing role, that our “taking” is conscious or voluntary, much less deliberate. It happens, so to speak, behind our backs.

Incidentally, although scholars usually ignore this fact, Kant regularly identifies appearances as the way we see the world and the “thing in itself” as the way God sees the world. Things really are the way the divine mind knows them to be. So theists, who have good reason not to identify our finite, creaturely understanding of reality with God’s infinite, creative knowledge, have a sound theological reason for being Kantian antirealists. Our thoughts are not God’s thoughts (divine wisdom) any more than our ways are God’s ways (divine holiness, mercy, and love).

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:9)

Naive realists, including the “no interpretation needed” school, who may never have heard of Kant or of antirealism, deny, at least implicitly, the inevitability of such mediation. They affirm a direct seeing that simply mirrors what is there without in any way affect-

4. The image in an imperfect mirror, like the funny mirror at the circus, fails to correspond to its object.

5. Kant calls these elements a priori. Because we bring them with us to experience, they are in place prior to any particular experience in which the real gives itself to us, and they function as “the conditions of possible experience.” In other words, the a priori compels the real to appear in a certain way. See Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

ing what is seen as it is seen. Plato expresses this view in connection with the philosopher’s apprehension of the forms—the purely intelligible structures that are the highest, indeed the only, objects of genuine knowledge—when he speaks of contemplating “things by themselves with the soul by itself.”

In speaking of this direct, unmediated rendezvous of subject and object (of whatever sort), philosophers view the object as immediately given or immediately present. The claim to immediacy is the claim that the object is given to the subject without any mediating (contaminating, distorting) input from the subject, be it the lens through which the object is seen, the perspective from which the object is seen, or the presupposition in terms of which the object is seen, all of which might vary from one observer to another or from one community of observers to another.

Common sense doesn’t talk about immediacy, presence, or givenness. But it does claim to “just see” its objects, free of bias, prejudice, and presuppositions (at least sometimes). We can call this “just seeing” intuition. When the naive-realist view of knowledge and understanding is applied to reading texts, such as the Bible, it becomes the claim that we can “just see” what the text means, that intuition can and should be all we need. In other words, “no interpretation needed.” The object, in this case the meaning of the text, presents itself clearly and directly to my reading. To interpret would be to interject some subjective bias or prejudice (pre-judgment) into the process. Thus the response, “Well, that might be your interpretation, but my Bible clearly says . . .” In other words, “You interpret (and thereby misunderstand), but I intuit, seeing directly, clearly, and without distortion.”

Why Seek to Avoid Interpretation?

Let us turn to the question of motivation. Why would anyone want to hold to the hermeneutical version of naive realism? Let us dismiss (but not too quickly) the suspicion that this view is attractive because it makes it so easy to say: “I am (we are) right, and all who

7. Phaedo 66e. For Plato this pure and uncontaminated knowledge of pure and uncontaminated reality (the thing in itself) is possible only insofar as the soul has freed itself from the body, that is, its senses and desires. For modern philosophy, as a theme and variation on Descartes, genuine knowledge occurs when thought is no longer shaped by tradition.
disagree are wrong, and not merely wrong but wrong because of bias or prejudice.”

There are more respectable reasons, two of which immediately come to the fore: the desire to preserve truth as correspondence and the desire to preserve objectivity, a closely related notion, in our reading, preaching, and commenting. So far as truth is concerned, the hermeneutical question is not whether what the text says corresponds to or perfectly mirrors the real; it is rather whether what the reader, preacher, or commentator says corresponds to what the text says. This is especially important if we take the Bible to be the Word of God that as such again and again becomes the Word of God for us as we read it for ourselves or pay attention to its exposition by the preacher or commentator. But if, according to the Kantian interpretation of interpretation, what we find in the text is a mixture of what is there and the (human, all too human) lens through which we read and by which the text is mediated to us, is the voice we hear divine or merely human? The hermeneutics of immediacy is not the only way to preserve correspondence between what the text says and what we take it to say, but it is probably the simplest.

Closely related to the notion of truth as correspondence is the notion of objectivity. For the sake of truth as opposed to mere opinion (“That’s just your opinion”), it may seem that the contingent and particular factors that make one knower or knowing community different from others should be filtered out as subjective and distorting. Since Plato, mathematics, which is highly immune to subjective interpretations, has been a paradigm—if not the paradigm—for truth as objectivity. We should all get the same answer to the question “What is the square root of sixteen?”

If we ask what are the contingent and particular factors that need to be filtered out—the a prioris, the lenses, the presuppositions, the receiving apparatuses that might contaminate our readings and produce misunderstanding—one of the most conspicuous candidates would be the traditions within which the Bible is read and expounded. The rich diversity of readings of the Bible that make up Christian history

8. Or perhaps, “We are the people, and wisdom will die with us” (see Job 12:2). This attitude might be taken to be the formal definition of fundamentalism, whether political or theological, whether of the left (liberal) or the right (conservative).

9. This is an interesting example, because there are two right answers, not just one, and the student capable of answering “four” might not be able to give the answer “negative four.”
are not, for the most part, the result of individual idiosyncrasy but of traditions that have developed and are passed on and shared by communities and generations. The desert fathers, the Geneva Calvinists, the American slaves, and today’s Amish belong to different traditions of interpretation, as do the two sides of the debate within the Episcopal Church (and others) over homosexuality.

This is precisely a powerful motivation to privilege intuition over interpretation, for the latter seems linked to the notion (or rather reality) of different traditions, and if interpretation is relative to the tradition in which it occurs, the specter of relativism haunts us. If the meaning derived is a product both of the text and of the tradition within which the text is read, we arrive at a familiar question: what happens to truth and to the voice of God if every understanding of the Bible is relative to some human, all too human, tradition of interpretation? Once again, the appeal to intuition, to “just seeing” what the Bible says, is not the only way to attempt to avoid relativism, but it is quick and clean, if it can be sustained.

Can Interpretation Be Avoided?

But can the appeal to intuition be sustained? The case for “just seeing” is not easy to make, and the naive realism inherent in the “no interpretation needed” viewpoint may prove to be naive in the second, pejorative sense given above. As we have just seen, however briefly, the whole idea that some construals are subjective interpretations while others are objective intuitions is itself a particular (contented) tradition within philosophy. It is ironic that proponents of theologies that like to think of themselves as innocent of (uncontaminated by) philosophical prejudices (pre-judgments, presuppositions) so easily make themselves heirs of this tradition. It looks as if this hermeneutics, this interpretation of interpretation, is itself relative to the presuppositions of a particular philosophical tradition.

To make matters worse, in a variety of normative areas, including ethics, politics, and theology, individuals and communities appeal to intuitions, to what we’ve been calling “just seeings,” that are as divergent as the traditions from which they are an attempt to flee. There is a “conflict of intuition” just as much as there is a “conflict of interpretation.” And it may be that tradition is at work in the one case as much as it is in the other. Take racial bias as an example. If I have grown up

Merold Westphal,
in a racist community and been effectively socialized into it, I will “just see” that people who belong to a particular racial or ethnic group are morally and intellectually inferior to me and my kind, possibly to the degree of being only semihuman. Quite possibly I will “just see” that the Bible supports my view of the matter. My receiving apparatus has been so formed by a living and effective tradition that the people in question cannot appear to me otherwise (unless and until I am resocialized out of this community of interpretation and into another). We too easily deceive ourselves on this point. What I “just see” as a construal that “just sees” its object with a pure immediacy of intuition may be an interpretation richly mediated by a tradition that is alive and well both in my community and in my own thinking.

While it is easy to show that we can be mistaken in taking a particular seeing to be a “just seeing,” it is harder, if not impossible, to show that no one ever has intuitions that are genuinely immediate. But perhaps the rush to immediacy can be slowed down and (by anticipation) the general fear of relativity somewhat assuaged if we look at some models where the plurality of viewpoints is not a compromise of truth and objectivity.

Consider the following figure (fig. 1.1).

We are told it is the schema of a box with five cardboard sides and an open top. Whenever I draw this figure I see ABDC as the open top. This construal comes so naturally that it seems immediate, and experientially speaking, it is. I “just see” it that way. But then I
remember that there is another way to see it. It takes some time and
some work, but eventually I see ABFE as the open top. In the first
case, I am slightly to the right of the box and can see its right-hand
side from the outside, but not the left-hand side. In the second case,
I am slightly to the left of the box and can see the left-hand side
from the outside, but not the right-hand side. But neither of these
seeings is right in the way that makes the other wrong. Note that
even though there are two correct answers to the question “Where
is the open top?” it does not mean that every answer is correct.
ACGE, CDHG, EFHG, and BDHF could all be seen as open sides,
but not as the open top.

Or consider the famous duck-rabbit that Wittgenstein borrows
from Jastrow (fig. 1.2).\(^\text{10}\)

If I see the critter as looking to the left, I see it as a duck. But if
I see it as looking slightly up and to the right, I see it as a rabbit.
Here again, neither seeing is \textit{the} right one. But, of course, it would
be quite wrong to say the figure is a moose or a spider.\(^\text{11}\)

These two figures are sufficiently indeterminate to accommodate
more than one seeing as correct without permitting the “anything
goes” relativism that is conjured up as a bogeyman at the first hint
that human understanding might be relative to human conditions.

10. In speaking of examples of this kind, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “So we in-
terpret it, and see it as we interpret it” \textit{(Philosophical Investigations}, trans. G. E. M.

11. Just as it would be wrong to say that the square root of sixteen is five. See note
9 of this chapter.
The question that arises is whether certain kinds of texts, including biblical texts, are like this.

Another possibility is suggested by the following poem:

There were six men of Hindustan,
to learning much inclined,
Who went to see an elephant,
though all of them were blind,
That each by observation
might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant,
and happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
at once began to bawl,
“This mystery of an elephant
is very like a wall.”

The second, feeling of the tusk,
cried, “Ho, what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ’tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an elephant
is very like a spear.”

The third approached the elephant,
and happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
thus boldly up and spake,
“I see,” quoth he,
“the elephant is very like a snake.”

The fourth reached out an eager hand,
and felt above the knee,
“What this most wondrous beast
is like is very plain,” said he,
“’Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree.”

The fifth who chanced to touch the ear
said, “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
deny the fact who can;
This marvel of an elephant is very like a fan.”
The sixth no sooner had begun
about the beast to grope,
Than seizing on the swinging tail
that fell within his scope;
“\text{I see,}”, said he, “the elephant is very like a rope.”

So six blind men of Hindustan
disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
exceeding stiff and strong;
Though each was partly in the right,
they all were in the wrong!\(^{12}\)

Here the multiplicity of interpretations stems not from the indeterminacy of the object but from the way it exceeds the ability of any limited perspective to grasp it in its totality. Each man’s perspective (tradition?) enabled him to grasp an aspect of the elephant that the others failed to grasp. So each was “partly in the right” as a perspective without which the truth about the elephant could not be told. But “all were in the wrong” because they took their partial grasp for the whole. Hence the quarrel, which might easily have turned violent if the elephant were considered sacred. It is precisely the inability of human understanding to grasp reality in its totality that led Kant to downgrade human understanding in comparison with divine.

Here the hermeneutical question arises whether some texts, including the biblical texts, are like the elephant: rich enough to require, not merely to permit, a multitude of different readings just because human readings are always partial and perspectival and because no single reading is able to capture and express the overflow of meaning these texts contain. We think this way about Shakespeare. Why not think this way about the Bible? Once again the possibility of necessary multiplicity does not open the door to just anything. None of the six blind men had warrant to say the elephant was like a keyboard or a file cabinet.

\(^{12}\) This poem is found at various sites on the Internet without attribution or copyright.