

A Basic Guide

to

Interpreting
the Bible

Playing by the Rules

Second Edition

Robert H. Stein



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Preface to the Second Edition

Every author discovers in the very first reading of his or her published book things that he would like to add or change. With time this wish list continues to grow. As a result I was delighted when Baker Academic suggested that I do a revision of *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. This is not due to a change in my understanding of the basic goal of interpreting written texts. That goal remains the same. In fact it is held even more strongly in the revision than in the earlier edition. The basic goal of interpreting the Bible and other written texts should be to understand what their authors consciously sought to convey by what they wrote. It is the understanding of the authors' willed meaning, their communicative intent, that continues to be emphasized in this revision as the primary goal of biblical interpretation.

The most evident change in this revision involves the order of the chapters in part 2, "The Specific Rules for the Individual Games." Here the various genres making up the individual chapters have been rearranged according to their order of appearance in the Bible: biblical narrative, covenants and laws, poetry, psalms, proverbs, prophecy, idioms, parables, overstatement and hyperbole, and epistles and letters. In addition, the last chapter in the first edition—"The Games of Treaties, Laws, and Songs"—has been divided into two separate chapters, appearing as chapter 6 ("The Game of Rules: Covenants and Laws") and chapter 8 ("The Game of Songs: Psalms"). In addition, the content of each chapter in the revision has undergone considerable reworking, and two additional exercises have been added involving the use of the vocabulary for interpreting literature given in chapter 2. These exercises are then discussed in appendixes 1, 2, and 3.

I want to express my appreciation to numerous individuals who have read the revised manuscript and contributed to its improvement by pointing out errors and needed corrections, as well as by providing helpful suggestions and examples. These include my sons Keith and Steve, who read the first two chapters; my brother Bill, who lent his legal expertise to the reading of these chapters; and Dr. Daniel W. Taylor, professor of English at Bethel University, who also read these chapters and gave helpful advice concerning literary theory. I am also deeply indebted to four former students who for ten years have used *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* as a text for their classes in hermeneutics. Their familiarity with this text and their careful reading of the entire revised manuscript has resulted in a far better final product than would have come about otherwise. These are Dr. Barry C. Joslin, Dr. Robert L. Plummer, and Dr. Denny Burk of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; and Dr. Benjamin L. Merkle of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Needless to say, any weaknesses and errors of logic contained in this revision are mine and mine alone. A final word of appreciation must be expressed to Jim Kinney, associate publisher and editorial director of Baker Academic and Brazos Press, and to the editorial staff at Baker Publishing Group, who over the years have provided guidance and care in the editing of numerous manuscripts. I have been delighted to have had their assistance over the past twenty-four years in the publication of my books.

Preface to the First Edition

How can I justify writing a book on the study of the Bible when so many already exist? Both on the popular and the technical levels, there are numerous books on interpreting the Bible. How can I defend the publishing of still another? As a teacher I am well aware of the many books available on this subject. Many of them are well written. Yet for various reasons I believe there is a need for still another. This book is an attempt to present in a nontechnical way a text that will help the reader understand what the goal of reading the Bible should be and how this goal can be achieved.

In the first four chapters of this book I seek to demonstrate that the goal of reading the Bible is to understand what the biblical authors meant by their writings. Once this is understood, the next task is to discover the legitimate implications that flow out of this meaning, and how this applies today. To assist in this, I discuss and describe the roles that the author, the text, and the reader play in this process. A precise vocabulary is also provided in order to avoid confusion.

I then discuss the various kinds of literature found in the Bible. The description of a biblical text as being a proverb, a parable, a prophecy, or an epistle is of little value unless the “ground rules” governing these literary forms are understood. We know, for instance, that Luke 15:11–32 is a parable; Matthew 7:7–8 is a poetic form known as synonymous parallelism; and Jeremiah 4:23–26 is a prophecy. But what is the value of knowing this? How does this help us understand these passages? I have sought in this book to explain some of the rules that govern the interpretation of these various literary forms. How should prophecy be interpreted? Hyperbole? A biblical narrative?

The importance of interpreting the Bible correctly cannot be overemphasized. The claim that the Bible is inspired and that it is God's revelation to humanity is ultimately of little value without some understanding of how that divine revelation should be interpreted. When we describe the Bible as "infallible" or "without error," these terms are meaningless if we do not know how to interpret it. What do we mean when we say that the Bible is without error? What is it that is infallible? Is it my understanding of the Bible? Is it yours? Is it the particular translation of the Bible that I am using? Is it the Greek or Hebrew text that scholars use? Who gives meaning to a text? Can a text possess more than one meaning? Should we interpret the Psalms in the same way we interpret Romans? It is hoped that this work will provide the reader with answers to these and other questions.

The present work has been in process for nearly ten years. Much of it took shape in my teaching of a class called "Biblical Prolegomena," which has since been retitled "Hermeneutics." A great debt is owed to E. D. Hirsch Jr., whose *Validity in Interpretation* has made a lasting impact on my thinking. Much of what is said in the opening chapters has been greatly influenced by him. This is especially true with respect to the vocabulary I use. I trust that my use of much of his vocabulary will be understood as a compliment rather than a theft! I apologize, however, for any ineptness that appears at times in my expression of similar views.

I wish to express my appreciation to my students for their assistance in understanding more clearly what is involved in the task of interpreting the Bible. To Duane Tweeten, Gary Johnson, and Michael Welch I want to express my appreciation for reading and critiquing an earlier form of this work. I want to thank Gloria Metz, the faculty secretary, whose assistance has made my task in writing this book much easier and more enjoyable. I am grateful for her assistance over the years in my various writing projects. She has truly been a "gift" during this time. I especially want to thank my colleagues, Arthur H. Lewis and Thomas R. Schreiner, for their many helpful comments. I would also like to express my appreciation to Wooddale Church of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, for its part in the publication of the present text. It was through my teaching a course on biblical interpretation in their lay school that the writing of the present work had its start.

Introduction

Tuesday night arrived. Dan and Charlene had invited several of their neighbors to a Bible study, and now they were wondering if anyone would come. Several people had agreed to come, but others had not committed themselves. At 8:00 p.m., beyond all their wildest hopes, everyone who had been invited arrived. After some introductions and neighborhood chitchat, they all sat down in the living room. Dan explained that he and his wife would like to read through a book of the Bible and discuss the material with the group. He suggested that the book be a Gospel, and since Mark was the shortest, Dan recommended it. Everyone agreed, although several said a bit nervously that they really did not know much about the Bible. Dan reassured them that this was all right, for no one present was a “theologian,” and they would work together in trying to understand the Bible.

They then went around the room reading Mark 1:1–15 verse by verse. Because of some of the different translations used (NIV, ESV, KJV, and NLT), Dan sought to reassure all present that although the wording of the various translations might be different, they all meant the same thing. After they finished reading the passage, each person was to think of a brief summary to describe what the passage meant. After thinking for a few minutes, they began to share their thoughts.

Sally was the first to speak: “What this passage means to me is that everyone needs to be baptized, and I believe that it should be by immersion.” John responded, “That’s not what I think it means. I think it means that everyone needs to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.” Ralph said somewhat timidly, “I am not exactly sure what I should be doing. Should I try to understand what Jesus and John the Baptist meant, or what the passage means to me?” Dan told him that what was important was what the passage meant to him. Encouraged by this, Ralph replied, “Well, what it means

to me is that when you really want to meet God, you need to go out in the wilderness just as John the Baptist and Jesus did. Life is too busy and hectic. You have to get away and commune with nature. I have a friend who says that to experience God you have to go out in the woods and get in tune with the rocks.”

Cory brought the discussion to an abrupt halt. “The Holy Spirit has shown me,” he said, “that this passage means that when a person is baptized in the name of Jesus, the Holy Spirit will descend upon him like a dove. This is what is called the baptism of the Spirit.” Jan replied meekly, “I don’t think that’s what the meaning is.” Cory, however, reassured her that since the Holy Spirit had given him that meaning it must be correct. Jan did not respond to Cory, but it was obvious she did not agree with what he had said. Dan was uncomfortable about the way things were going and sought to resolve the situation. So he said, “Maybe what we are experiencing is an indication of the richness of the Bible. It can mean so many things!”

But does a text of the Bible mean many things? Can a text mean different, even contradictory things? Is there any control over the meaning of biblical texts? Is there such a thing as an invalid interpretation? If so, how does one distinguish an invalid interpretation from a valid one? Is interpretation controlled by means of individual revelation given by the Holy Spirit? Do the words and grammar control the meaning of the text? If so, what text are we talking about? Is it a particular English translation, such as the KJV or NIV? Why not the NRSV, ESV, or NLT? Or why not a German translation such as the Luther Bible? Or should it be the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible that best reflect what the original authors, such as Isaiah, Daniel, Paul, and Luke, wrote? And what about the original authors? How are they related to the meaning of the text?

It is obvious that we cannot read the Bible for long before the questions arise as to what the Bible “means” and who or what determines that meaning. Neither can we read the Bible without possessing some purpose in reading. In other words, using more technical terminology, everyone who reads the Bible does so with a “hermeneutical” theory in mind. The issue is not whether one has such a theory but whether one’s “hermeneutic” is clear or unclear, adequate or inadequate, correct or incorrect. It is hoped that this book will help the reader understand what is involved in the interpretation of the Bible. It will seek to do so by helping readers acquire an interpretative framework that will help them understand better the meaning of biblical texts and how to apply that meaning to their own life situation.

The General Rules of Interpretation

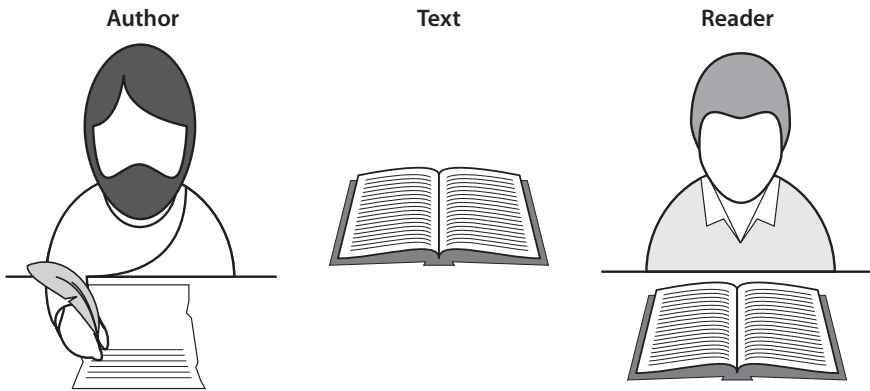
Who Makes Up the Rules?

An Introduction to Hermeneutics

The term “hermeneutics” intimidates people. This is both unfortunate and unnecessary. The word comes from the Greek word *hermēneuein*, which means to explain or interpret. In the Bible it is used in John 1:42; 9:7; and Hebrews 7:2. In the ESV, Luke 24:27 reads, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] *interpreted* to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (italics added). The NIV reads, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] *explained* to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (italics added). The word translated “interpreted” and “explained” in these two versions of the Bible is the word *di[h]ermēneuein*. A noun formed from this verb, *Hermes*, was the name given to the Greek god who was the spokesman or interpreter for the other gods. This is why in Acts 14:12 we read that after Paul healed a cripple at Lystra, the people thought that the gods had come to visit them. “Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (cf. Acts 9:36; 1 Cor. 12:10, 30; 14:5, 13, 26, 27, 28). The term “hermeneutics,” which comes from these Greek words, simply describes the practice or discipline of interpretation and the rules involved. In interpreting the Bible, what are the rules governing this discipline?

The Game Itself: The Various Components Involved in Hermeneutics

In all communication three distinct components are necessary. If any one of these is lacking, communication is impossible. These three components are the author, the text, and the reader; or, as linguists prefer to say, the encoder, the code, and the decoder. And there are other ways of describing this: the sender, the message, the receiver; the speaker, the speech, the listener; and the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. If we carry this over to the analogy of playing a game, we have the creator of the game, the game parts (pieces, cards, dice, board, etc.), and the players. Without these three elements, communication (the game) is impossible.



The main goal, or at least one of the main goals, of interpreting the Bible is to discover the meaning of the text being studied. We want to know what this text means (see the definition of “meaning” on pp. 31–33). Yet where does this meaning originate? Where does it come from? This is not self-evident. Some interpreters argue that it comes from one component, whereas others argue that it comes from another.

The Text (i.e., the Game Parts) as the Determiner of Meaning

Some have suggested that meaning is a property of the text. It is the text that determines what a writing means. We all have probably heard a pastor say in a sermon, “Our text tells us . . .” or “The Bible says . . .” Yet those who argue that meaning is a property of the text mean something very different from what the pastor meant by this. They claim that a literary text is autonomous and free standing. It possesses semantic autonomy in the sense that its meaning is independent of what its author meant when

he or she wrote it. After a text is written, its author loses personal control of it. What the biblical author was thinking about and sought to convey by the text is essentially irrelevant with respect to the meaning of the text. Possessing autonomy, a text has a life of its own apart from its author or its reader. As a result, reading a related work such as Galatians in order to help us understand what Paul meant when he wrote Romans is of little value, for it is the present text that is the focus of attention. Furthermore, what Paul actually intended when he wrote Romans is of little value in determining the actual meaning of the present text of Romans, because Paul's thoughts are now inaccessible apart from the text (see below, pp. 15–18). According to text-centered critics, a text should be read independently of its real or hypothetical author. It has a life of its own and possesses its own meaning(s). T. S. Eliot has argued this strongly in his article "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He insists that the focus of the interpreter's attention should be the poetry itself and not the poet and his or her experience, the present writing and not the hypothetical author.

For most pastors preaching from a book like Romans, "The Bible says . . ." and "Paul means . . ." are synonymous. For those who argue that the text possesses its own meaning, however, these two things are not the same. Every text is perceived as an autonomous work of art that is to be interpreted independently of its author. It is as if it never had an author and simply materialized. According to this view, when a written work becomes literature, the normal rules of communication, in which hearers seek to understand what the speaker means by his or her words and readers seek to understand what the writer of a letter meant, no longer apply. What was once a piece of communication has been transformed into a work of art. Because it is art, the original composer no longer possesses control of it; the art possesses its own meaning completely apart from its creator. If in some way Paul could appear before those who argue for the semantic autonomy of the text and say, "What I meant when I wrote this was . . .," the response of many new critics would essentially be, "What you say, Paul, is interesting but quite irrelevant. Your willed meaning of the text, what you intended to communicate in your writing, and what you actually communicated are not the same. Thus your intended meaning is no more authoritative than any other person's interpretation. Furthermore, after you wrote this text you lost all claim and control over it. It has since then become common property and a work of art rather than communication." Consequently, it is illegitimate to grant any serious authorial control over the meaning of the present text. This view was very popular among the "New Critics" and dominated academic circles from the 1930s to the 1960s.

This view is also popular within the US judicial system from the Supreme Court down to the lower courts. There is less concern today to seek what the authors of the Constitution and the nation that voted for it meant by the words found in it and its subsequent amendments. Instead, the Constitution and its amendments are seen as a “living,” “growing,” and “changing” document. Thus what the Constitution meant only fifteen years ago can change. This does not mean that an earlier ruling of the court was wrong and that the new ruling is the correct one. Rather, it is claimed that the Constitution *has changed*. (See the dissent written by Justice Scalia in *Roper v. Simmons* 543 U.S. [2005], p. 1.) The use of such terms as “living,” “growing,” and “changing” to describe the Constitution is unfortunate. The fact is that everything known to science is done to make sure that the original copies of the Constitution do not “live,” “grow,” and “change.” These terms obviously are being used metaphorically, but exactly what they are intended to mean is unfortunately unclear. We should also note that these terms are not necessarily positive and need not imply improvement for the better. In certain contexts “growth” can serve as a synonym for cancer, and “living” and “changing” can describe something decaying and rotting. Traditionally at least, the Constitution has not been understood as “changing” by itself, but rather by the addition of amendments such as the repeal of slavery (thirteenth amendment), Prohibition (eighteenth), the right of women to vote (nineteenth), and the repeal of Prohibition (twenty-first). Thomas Jefferson argued strongly that it should not be by judicial decree that the Constitution was to “keep pace with the advance of the age of science and experience” but rather “by amendments.”

The New Criticism brought several helpful insights and emphases to the study of texts. Its focus on the text itself avoided the previous preoccupation with psychoanalytical investigation of the mental experiences of the alleged author, the search for his or her sources, and the historical investigation of the text’s subject matter. Instead, it focused on the close reading of the present text and the text as a whole. It helped point out the artistry and literary qualities of texts and focused on the final form of the text—a known entity that the reader possessed—rather than on such things as the hypothetical sources and stages of development that the text experienced. In the New Criticism formalistic critics discussed the real and actual texts, not the hypothetical and imaginary stages that led up to these texts.

Perhaps the biggest problem with this view, that the text itself is the determiner of meaning, involves what a “text” is and what “meaning” is. A written text is simply a collection of letters or symbols. Those symbols can vary. They can be English or Hebrew letters, Chinese symbols, or

Egyptian hieroglyphics. They may proceed right to left, left to right, up or down. They can be written on papyrus, animal skins, paper, stone, or metal. Yet both the letters and the material upon which they are written are inanimate objects. Meaning, on the other hand, is a product of reasoning and thought. It is something only people can produce. Whereas a text can convey meaning and emotions, it cannot “mean” or “emote,” because it is an inanimate object. Only the authors and readers of texts can think. Thus, whereas a text can convey meaning, the production of meaning can only come from either the author in the writing of the text or the reader in the reading of the text.

The Reader (i.e., the Player) as the Determiner of Meaning

Some interpreters claim that the meaning of a text is determined by the reader. (In literary analysis this reader is sometimes called the “implied reader,” the “competent reader,” the “intended reader,” the “ideal reader,” the “real reader,” etc.) The person who reads the text is seen as giving it its meaning and “actualizing” it. This should not be confused with thinking that the reader learns/deciphers/discovers/ascertains the meaning the text possesses in and of itself (the view described above). Nor should it be confused with the view that the meaning is determined by what the author meant when he or she wrote the text (the view described below). On the contrary, this view maintains that all written texts are essentially dead, or at least in hibernation. It is only through the reader that a text is actualized and comes to life as he or she breathes meaning into it. Each individual that reads the text creates the meaning. Reading a text does not involve the decoding of the original author’s creative intention but rather a rewriting of the text, in which the reader now becomes the author and possesses authority over the text. Consequently, the meaning given to the text is a manifestation of the interpreter’s own beliefs and desires. It is interesting to note that this view became very popular during the Vietnam War years, when there was a widespread revolt against authority in general. This new approach permitted the rejection of any authority over the reader in the area of interpretation. Readers did not have to submit to the authority of the text or its author as the determiner of meaning but rather claimed personal authority over both. Associated with this was a new worldview. Whereas the Ptolemaic, earth-centered understanding of the universe had been replaced by Copernicus’s heliocentric understanding, now Copernicus’s heliocentric understanding was replaced by an egocentric one. Now the individual saw himself or herself as the center of the universe and the

determiner of its meaning. Thus it was not the Creator/Author of the universe who determined its meaning but the observer/reader.

According to this view (sometimes called “reception theory,” “reception aesthetics,” “reader-response or reader-centered criticism,” “affective criticism,” etc.), if different readers arrive at different meanings, this is because different readers respond to a text in different ways. Often these reader-centered meanings reflect to a great extent the readers’ own values, likes, and dislikes. Readers in fact are encouraged to interpret texts in such a manner, for in so doing, more vibrant and relevant meanings are given to the text. Thus, for example, we come across Marxist, liberationist, postcolonial, feminist, egalitarian, complimentary, green or ecological, homosexual, social-scientific, Calvinist, and Arminian “readings” or interpretations of a text. This does not necessarily mean that the reader has actually found in the particular text something that favors a Marxist, liberationist, feminist, or complimentary interpretation. Rather, it means that the reader has chosen to read the words of the text in a particular way, apart from or even contrary to what the author may have meant. This view assumes that there are many legitimate meanings of a text, for each interpreter contributes his or her meaning to the text and in so doing actualizes it. The text functions somewhat like an inkblot onto which the reader projects his or her own meaning. Sometimes, in popular usage, we hear people say something like “What this biblical text means to me is . . .” or “This passage may mean something different to you but for me it means . . .” As we shall see later, in some instances such statements may describe different implications that readers see flowing out of the author’s intended meaning. For those who hold to a reader-centered hermeneutic, however, this usually describes the meaning they choose to give to the text quite apart from and possibly even contradicting what the original author may have intended.

Reader-centered interpretation has contributed a number of insights into the study of texts. For one, it has emphasized the reader’s contribution to the interpretive process. It has pointed out powerfully that readers do not approach texts with a mental *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, each reader brings to the reading of a text a preunderstanding consisting of their own interests and biases. This may bring distortion, a misreading of the text, and even a reading against the text, but it often brings passion and excitement to the investigation as well. In contrast to some author- and text-centered approaches, in which the reader appears to be a disinterested bystander, reader-centered interpretations are often practiced by people who have causes.

For many moderate reader-centered interpreters the presence of different and contradictory readings of a text is a serious concern. Unwilling to accept interpretative anarchy, they have sought certain restraints for the interpretation of texts. Thus they have raised the questions of how one can determine what kind of a reading is “richer,” more “valuable” or “plausible.” Perhaps the best known criterion is that of Stanley Fish, who appeals to the limitations that exist over readers by their “constraining community.” Through the consensus of this community, various reader-oriented interpretations can be judged to be more valuable than others. Wolfgang Iser has suggested that the implied reader assumed by the text enables the present reader to arrive at the more plausible reading. In general, however, reader-centered interpretations oppose the pursuit of a single determinative meaning for a text and warn against any slavery to the text.

The Author (i.e., the Creator of the Game) as the Determiner of Meaning

In contrast to the preceding approach, which sees a text as a mirror by which readers seek to facilitate their own illumination and understanding, the more traditional approach to the study of the Bible, or any text, is to see it as a window through which the reader is able to see another world, the world of the author. Here the goal is to arrive at the creative intention of the original author contained in the words of the text. According to this view, the meaning of a text is what the author consciously intended to say by his text. Thus, the meaning of Romans is what Paul intended to communicate to his readers in Rome when he wrote his letter. This view argues that if Paul were alive and told us what he meant to convey in writing Romans, the issue would be settled. The text means what Paul just told us he meant. This is why in seeking to understand Romans it is more helpful to read Galatians, which Paul also wrote, than to read Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Homer’s *Iliad*. The reason for this is that the writer of Galatians thinks more like the writer of Romans than Hemingway does and uses the Greek language more like Paul in Romans than Homer does. Similarly, in seeking to understand the meaning of the Gospel of Luke, it is more helpful to read the book of Acts than the writings of Shakespeare or Charles Dickens.

This view argues that the Bible and other great works of literature are not to be treated as unique works of art possessing distinct rules supposedly appropriate only to art. On the contrary, they are to be interpreted in the same way that we normally interpret other forms of written or verbal

communication. This is essentially the common sense approach to communication. All normal conversation assumes that the goal of interpretation is to understand the communicative intent of the speaker or writer contained in the words he or she has provided. We cannot even argue against this view without at the same time agreeing with it, for we must seek to understand what writers (or speakers) mean by their words in order to engage in conversation with them. For instance, in your attempt to understand this paragraph, are you not seeking to understand what I wanted to communicate by it?

This issue has become a major concern with respect to constitutional law. The basic issue at stake in recent Supreme Court nominations has not involved so much whether the nominees were liberal or conservative or their particular views on certain issues. It has involved a far more fundamental issue, for the issue of whether a nominee is liberal or conservative already assumes a particular understanding of who or what determines the meaning of the Constitution they will swear to uphold. It assumes that for a Supreme Court justice the determining factor in interpreting the Constitution will be their personal views (whether liberal, conservative, or other) on, for example, social, moral, and political issues, rather than what the framers of the Constitution meant by the words found in this precious document. An author-oriented approach seeks to decipher and understand what the framers meant by the words of the Constitution and judges all other laws and practices in light of this meaning. Thus, whether a Supreme Court justice is liberal or conservative is, at least theoretically, irrelevant, for the oath such a Supreme Court justice has taken is not “I swear to uphold the personal meaning that I choose to give to the words of the Constitution independently of what the original framers of the Constitution may have meant by it [i.e., reader-centered].” It is rather that, as the oath states, they swear to “administer justice without respect to persons . . . and . . . faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all duties incumbent upon me as [*title*] under the Constitution and laws of the United States. So help me God.” The American people over the years have believed that in this oath the justices swear to uphold what the framers of the Constitution meant by the words contained in this foundational document of the nation—whether they agree with that meaning or not. This is an author-oriented hermeneutic. Thus the personal views of a Supreme Court justices should be essentially irrelevant. Far more important is whether they are good exegetes and can understand the meaning of the framers of the Constitution and whether they are committed to accepting their meaning as authoritative.

Recently, a Supreme Court justice stated that the desire to follow the original intent of the framers of the Constitution is “arrogance cloaked as

humility” and that “it is arrogant to pretend that from our vantage we can gauge accurately the intent of the framers . . . to specific, contemporary questions.” Far more important for him was the need to understand what the Constitution “mean[s] to us in our time,” in light of the “overarching principle to changes of social circumstances.” Yet the Federalist Papers are a rich source for understanding how the founders of the Constitution thought. If a justice cannot understand the intent of the framers of the Constitution, he or she is not demonstrating so much a lack of clarity in the Constitution itself as a disinterest in what the framers meant. Long ago James Madison argued that if “the sense in which the Constitution was accepted and ratified by the nation be not the guide in expounding it, there can be no security . . . for a faithful exercise of its power.” And Thomas Jefferson argued, “Our peculiar security is in possession of a written Constitution. Let us not make it a blank paper by construction” (letter to William Cary Nicholas, September 7, 1803).

Ultimately, the question is whether the nation possesses in the Constitution a birthright offering protection and security, a document whose meaning is singular and rooted in history, or whether it possesses nine Supreme Court justices whose decisions are not necessarily rooted in what the original founders and citizens of the nation meant by it but rather in the wishes and desires (whether well-intentioned or not) and moral and social values of these nine Supreme Court justices, of whom only five need to agree. The infrequency with which Supreme Court justices say, “I do not agree with nor like what the Constitution says on this issue, but what it says is the law of the land and must be obeyed,” as Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes often did, suggests that all too often their interpretations of the Constitution may reflect the meaning that they choose to give to it. In a baseball game, should umpires call balls and strikes based on whose fans are the loudest? In empathy for a hitter in a slump, should an umpire narrow the strike zone? If the pitcher is in a slump, should he widen it? What if both are in a slump? Or should an umpire call balls and strikes according to what the authors of the baseball handbook meant? Similarly, should judges, and especially justices of the Supreme Court, make decisions according to what the authors of their handbook, the US Constitution, meant?

It has been argued that literature is to be interpreted differently from all other forms of written communication. In other written works, as well as in general communication, we are to seek the author’s intended meaning, but when a work becomes literature, it is no longer to be treated in this manner. Literature does not fall under the rules of written communication

but of art. As a result, the author's willed intention, what he or she meant when writing, is to be rejected or ignored, and meaning is to be determined either by the text itself or by the interpreter. Yet the idea that art is to be interpreted independently of the artist's intended purpose is belied by the fact that the artists, even those who create art for this purpose, usually not only place their names on their art but also give titles to assist viewers in understanding what they are seeking to portray. This indicates a desire to steer the viewers' interpretation of their work in a particular direction. A good example of whether art is to be interpreted according to the artist's intent or the viewers' can be seen in the renovation of the Sistine Chapel. These world-famous frescoes painted by Michelangelo in 1508–12 were in a serious state of disrepair when the Vatican began a multimillion dollar restoration process lasting twelve years. This involved some of the world's greatest restorers, art historians, conservationists, and cleaners. When the finished work was revealed to the public in 1992, there was an immediate outcry of horror. Numerous art critics protested that Michelangelo's great work had not been restored but radically changed. The new and brighter colors of the frescoes, they believed, no longer represented the original dark and more somber tones of Michelangelo's original work. The debate continues and will likely continue for many years. But does it matter if the readers (i.e., the interpreters/restorers/cleaners) of the text (the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel) changed the darker and more somber tones (the willed intention) of the author (the artist/Michelangelo) to lighter ones?

If one believes that the brighter tones of the restoration of the Sistine Chapel do not represent Michelangelo's original colors and that the restorers should not have changed them, it should be noted that we are then in fact attributing to the interpretation of art a more author-oriented interpretive approach than most reader-centered interpretations apply to the interpretation of literature. We would be condemning the unintentional (but mistaken) act of the restorers of the Sistine Chapel for changing the author's willed intention. Yet a reader-response approach discourages the pursuit of an author's consciously willed meaning, assuming that this is beyond our reach and of lesser importance. Instead, it favors rewriting (repainting?) the work of the author.

Yet who determines what is literature? There is no rule, law, or consensus that can be used to determine what is literature and what is not. (If, for example, we say that a work of literature is one that has been acknowledged over a period of time, then there is no such thing as late twentieth-century literature. If, on the other hand, we say that a work becomes literature when it has gained great popularity, then John Grisham is perhaps the greatest

writer of English literature in the world!) The very fact that the classification of a work as “literature” is quite arbitrary indicates that interpreting such a work differently from all other written forms of communication is based on a debatable classification from the start.

Additionally, no one has yet been able to prove that “literature” should be interpreted by a different set of rules than other writings. There is no convincing answer to the question Why should this writing be interpreted differently from other writings? Surely the burden of proof lies with those who argue that a particular written work (arbitrarily called literature) should be interpreted differently from how all other works (nonliterature) should be interpreted. Yet such a proof has not been demonstrated.

To deny that the author determines the text’s meaning also raises an ethical question. Such an approach appears to rob the author of his or her creation. To treat a text in complete isolation from its author’s intended purpose is like stealing a patent from its inventor or a child from the parent who gave it birth. If we list a work under the name of its author, we are at least tacitly admitting that it belongs to its author. He or she owns this work. To take it and impose upon it our own meaning is a kind of plagiarism. There is a sense in which we have stolen what belongs to someone else. A text is like a will the author leaves for his or her heirs. For an executor to ignore what the author intended by his or her will is criminal and violates everyone’s sense of fairness. For an interpreter to do the same with an author’s literary work likewise seems unethical and disrespectful of the willed legacy of the author.

Objections to the Author as the Determiner of Meaning

Several objections have been raised against the view that the meaning of a text is determined by the author and that in seeking the meaning of a text we should try to understand what an author like Paul consciously willed to communicate by his text. One of the most famous of these objections is called the intentional fallacy. Made famous by William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, it argues that it is impossible to climb into the mind of an author, such as Paul, and experience everything that was going through his mind when he wrote. A reader can never relive the experiences of an author. The innermost emotions, feelings, and motives Paul had as he wrote are simply not accessible to the reader, unless he chose to reveal them in his text. As a result of such considerations, it is argued that the meaning Paul willed is inaccessible.

But when reading a Pauline text, the primary goal is not to experience or reduplicate Paul's mental and emotional experiences when he wrote. It is not to get into the mind of Paul. Rather, the goal is to understand what Paul "meant," what he consciously sought to communicate to his readers by what he wrote. This objection confuses two different aspects of communication. The first involves the mental and emotional acts experienced by Paul in writing; the second involves what Paul wanted to communicate by his text. A careful distinction must be made between what Paul wished to convey in his text and his mental, emotional, and psychological experiences while writing. What Paul sought to convey by his text is in the public realm, for he purposely made this available to the reader in the text itself. On the other hand, the inner mental and emotional experiences of Paul, his mental acts, are private and not accessible to the reader unless Paul explicitly revealed them in his text. We do not have access to them (see the discussion of mental acts on pp. 47–49).

The intentional fallacy has also argued that an author at times may intend to convey a particular meaning but be incapable of adequately expressing this. The author may be linguistically incompetent. All of us at some time or other have realized that we may not have expressed adequately what we wished to communicate. Even very capable communicators can at times fail to express correctly or accurately what they meant. It is therefore quite possible that an author could fail to express in an understandable way what he or she sought to communicate. Authors could even mislead the reader by a poor or wrong choice of words. This objection, however, tends to be more hypothetical than real. Most writers, such as Paul, possess sufficient literary competence to express their thoughts adequately, so that their intended meaning is sufficiently perspicuous for the average reader to understand. In fact, those who write articles outlining this problem and drawing it to their readers' attention usually think that they are sufficiently competent to express their thoughts quite adequately. Otherwise, why would they write? Why then deny this competence to other writers?

For the Christian, an additional factor comes into play at this point. The belief that the Bible is inspired introduces a component of divine enabling into the situation. If in the writing of Scripture the authors were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21), then it would appear that the authors of the Bible were given a divine competence in writing. This competence enabled them to express adequately the revelatory matters they sought to communicate (see chapter 3).

Another objection to the view that the reader should seek the authorial meaning of the text involves the psychological differences between the

author and the reader. Since the psychological makeup of each individual is unique, it is argued that a reader cannot understand the thoughts, emotions, and feelings the author possessed when he or she wrote. The reader is simply too different psychologically. As a result, a reader can never understand what an author truly meant by his or her text.

A related objection is the view that a modern reader is not able to understand the meaning of an ancient author such as Paul. The radical difference between the situation of the present reader and that of the ancient author does not permit this. How can the modern-day reader, familiar with computers and megabytes, iPods, jet airplanes and international travel, television, heart transplants, human cloning, lunar landings, and nuclear power, understand an author writing thousands of years ago in a time of sandals, togas, and animal sacrifices? According to this view, the cultural distance between the author and the reader is so vast that it is impossible for a present-day reader to understand what an ancient writer meant. The author and reader live too many centuries, even millennia, apart.

These objections are well taken and should not be minimized. Not long ago I was watching a public television program in which an anthropologist related his experience of living for a number of years among a stone-age tribe of aborigines in New Guinea. He began by saying that it is impossible to understand how these people live and think because of the great cultural distance between them and us. Having said this, he then went on to explain to his viewers for the next fifty-five minutes how they live and think. The differences between the time and thought-world of an ancient author and the modern reader, as well as of developed and primitive cultures today in the example above, are very real. Far too often we tend to modernize ancient writers and assume that they thought exactly like twenty-first-century Americans. Consequently we misunderstand them. On the other hand, we can also overemphasize these differences. After all, we are not trying to understand the thoughts of worms or toads. The common humanity we share with the authors of the past and the fact that we both have been created in the image of God facilitate bridging this gap of time. The basic needs for food, clothing, warmth, security, love, forgiveness, and hope of life after death that the ancients had are still the basic needs we have today. Thus, while difficult, understanding an ancient author is not impossible. In a similar fashion the common possession of the image of God assists in overcoming the psychological differences between authors and readers as well.

One final objection that can be raised with regard to the interpretation of the Bible involves those texts in which an author appeals to a faith

experience. One wonders how an atheist or unbeliever can “understand” the meaning of the psalmist when he states,

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. (Ps. 32:1–4a)

Whereas a believer may be able to understand the experience of faith that the author is talking about, how can an atheist? We must distinguish here between cognitively understanding what the psalmist meant by these words and actually experiencing the subject matter he is discussing. An atheist can acquire a correct mental grasp of what the psalmist is talking about concerning the joy of being forgiven by the LORD and the personal agony that preceded this. On the other hand, an atheist cannot understand the experience—that is, the subject matter—of which the psalmist is speaking. He or she may in fact seek to explain that subject matter via Freudian psychology because of not being able to accept the divine element involved in it. Yet an atheist can understand what the psalmist means by his discussion of this issue: the psalmist is speaking of the agony of guilt before a holy God and the joy of forgiveness. An atheist, however, cannot understand the truth of the experience of which the psalmist speaks (for further discussion, see pp. 60–66).



The Role of the Author

Texts do not simply appear in history. They do not evolve from trees or from papyrus plants or from animal skins. An ancient text did not come into existence because some animal lost its skin or some papyrus plant shed

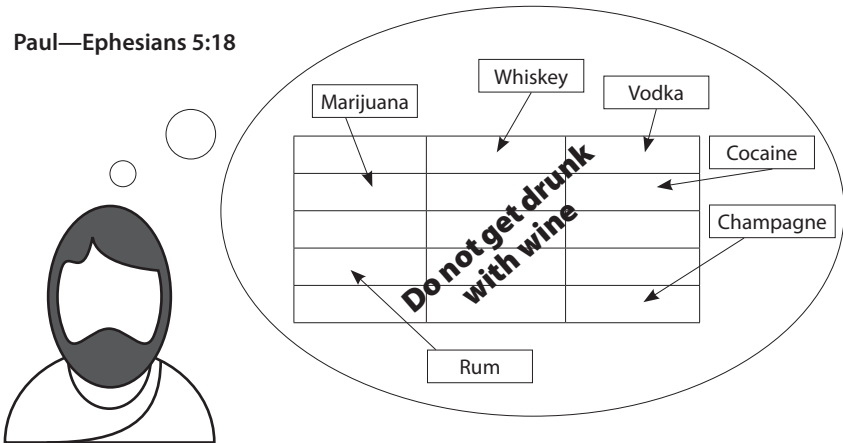
its bark and written symbols miraculously appeared on them. Someone, sometime, somewhere wanted to write these texts. Someone, sometime, somewhere willed to write something and have others read it. If this were not true, these texts would never have appeared. A thinking person consciously willed to write a text for the purpose of communicating something meaningful to a reader. Since this took place in past time, what the author willed to convey by the linguistic symbols used (whether the symbols were Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, or Chinese is immaterial) possesses a meaning that can never change. What a biblical author willed by his text is anchored in history. It was composed in the past, and being part of the past, what the author willed to communicate back then can never change. What a text meant when it was written, it will always mean. It can no more change than any other event of the past can change, because its meaning is forever anchored in history.

Yet what an author such as Paul consciously willed to say in the past also has implications of which he was not necessarily aware, and those implications are part of the meaning of the text. For instance, when Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:18, “Do not get drunk with wine,” he consciously meant that the Ephesian Christians should not become intoxicated with the mixture of water and wine (usually two or three parts water to one part wine) that they called “wine.” This saying, however, has unforeseen implications that go beyond what Paul was consciously thinking. In this command Paul gives a principle or pattern of meaning that also has implications about not becoming drunk with beer, whiskey, rum, vodka, or champagne. If asked, Paul would state that although he was not consciously thinking of these other alcoholic beverages, he meant for Christians not to become drunk by using them as well. Certainly no one in Ephesus would have thought, “Paul in his letter forbids our becoming drunk with wine, but I guess it would not be wrong to become drunk with beer.” Paul’s text has implications that go beyond his own particular conscious meaning at the time. These implications do not conflict with his original meaning. On the contrary, they are included in and are part of the principle he sought to communicate. It is true that they go beyond his conscious thinking when he wrote, but they nevertheless are included in the principle Paul wished to communicate in this verse. Thus, what an author of Scripture stated in the past frequently has implications with respect to things he has not stated (beer) or that did not even exist at the time the text was written (whiskey, rum, vodka, champagne).

The purpose of biblical interpretation involves understanding not just the specific conscious meaning of the author but also the principle he sought

to communicate. If Paul did in fact prohibit becoming drunk with whiskey and modern-day alcoholic beverages, does he also forbid in Ephesians 5:18 the unnecessary use and abuse of narcotics? Other statements of Scripture clearly forbid the abuse of the human body in such a manner. But does this specific passage forbid their use? If we understand Paul’s command as involving a pattern of meaning, then the principle behind this command would be something like, “Do not take into your body substances like wine that cause you to lose control of your senses and natural inhibitions.” If this is true, then the use of narcotics is likewise prohibited by this verse. If we were able to ask Paul about this latter instance, would he not reply, “I was not consciously thinking of narcotics when I wrote, but that’s exactly the kind of thing I meant”? The fact is that every text has implications or inferences of which its author was unaware but that are nevertheless contained within the meaning willed in the text. Often the main concern of interpretation is to understand the legitimate, present-day implications of an author’s meaning.

Paul—Ephesians 5:18



Is it possible that Jesus was thinking along these lines when he said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder. . . .’ But I say to you . . .” or “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you . . .” (Matt. 5:21–48)? It appears that Jesus here describes what is involved in the higher righteousness referred to in Matthew 5:20 by bringing out the implications of several of Moses’s commandments. Whether Moses was consciously thinking of these implications when he wrote these commandments is immaterial. They are legitimate implications of the principles he wished to convey by them.

At this point someone might raise the following objection: But isn't God the author of Scripture? This sounds devout and pious, but Scripture does not claim God as its immediate author. Paul's letters do not begin, "God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the church at Rome, Galatia, and so on." No book of the Bible claims God as its immediate author. Christians believe that behind the books of the Bible stands the living God, who inspired his servants in the writing of these works. But the Scriptures were physically written by men, not God. As a result, to understand the meaning of the biblical texts we must understand what their human authors consciously willed to convey by their texts. The divine meaning of the biblical texts is the conscious, willed meaning of God's inspired prophets and apostles. (For the role of the Holy Spirit in writing and interpreting the Bible, see chapter 3.) To understand the divine meaning of Scripture, then, is to understand the conscious meaning of God's inspired servants who wrote it. It is in, not behind or beyond, the meaning the biblical author wished to share that we find the divine voice of God in the Scriptures. (The instances in which a biblical author may not have understood the meaning of what he wrote—perhaps in describing a vision or writing down a prophecy—are quite rare.)

The term "conscious" has been used on several occasions with respect to the willed meaning of the author. Although this may seem awkward, it is intentional. The reason for this is to avoid two errors. One involves those interpreters who argue that myths are present throughout the Bible. According to this view, the miracle stories found in Scripture are to be understood not as historical accounts but as fictional stories or myths. The meanings of these myths, it is argued, involve subconscious truths and values that were at play in the subconsciousness of the early church and the Christian writers. Thus the meanings of these myths are not found in what the authors of Scripture consciously sought to express in what they wrote. On the contrary, the meaning of these myths was totally unknown to them and is independent of any conscious meaning they wished to convey. The meaning lies in their subconsciousness, which gave rise to these myths. They, however, were completely unaware of this. Attributing the meaning of a text to the conscious willed meaning of the author avoids this error.

The term "subconsciousness" must not be confused with what is referred to as the "unconscious" meaning of the text. An unconscious meaning or implication is indeed unknown to the author, but it falls within his conscious, willed meaning. The subconscious meaning sought in this mythical approach, however, has nothing to do with what the author consciously wished to convey. In fact, it is usually quite opposed to the author's willed

meaning, because the author believed in the facticity of the events he was reporting and wished to share the meaning of those events with his readers. (This will be discussed at greater length in chapter 2, under “Implications.”)

The second error that reference to the conscious meaning of the author seeks to avoid involves the opposite claim that the Bible should be interpreted literally at all times. This too is an error, for it loses sight of the fact that the biblical writers used various literary forms in their works, such as proverbs, poetry, hyperbole, and parables. They never intended that their readers should interpret such passages literalistically. They intended for them to be interpreted according to the literary rules associated with such forms. What the Reformers meant when they argued that the Bible should be interpreted literally was not that it should be interpreted literalistically but that it should be interpreted according to the original, grammatical meaning of the authors. Thus, the conscious willed meaning of Luke when he quoted Jesus’s words, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26), is not that Jesus’s followers must literally hate their parents. It means rather that to be a follower of Jesus one must place him before everything and everyone else. The meaning of Luke 14:26 is therefore what Luke consciously sought to communicate by these words and not the literal meaning of the words without regard to the literary form (exaggeration) in which it is found. Similarly, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is to be interpreted as a parable and thus according to the rules governing the interpretation of parables. It is not to be interpreted as a historical account. (Luke reveals this by the introduction “A certain man . . . ,” which he uses throughout his Gospel to introduce parables [cf. Luke 10:30; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12]. This is clearer in the Greek text than in most translations.)

The danger of unknowingly reading one’s own biases and prejudices into texts is a continual problem in an author-oriented as well as a reader-response hermeneutic. In the former, however, this is done unwittingly. In the latter it is done knowingly and willingly. When discovered in an author-oriented approach, it results in embarrassment and, hopefully, recantation. In a reader-response approach, it is boldly acknowledged and defended. For those following an author-oriented approach to interpretation, the following advice applies: (1) Be aware of this danger. The greater your awareness of the danger of reading your biases and prejudices into the author’s meaning, the less likely you will be to do this. (2) Be aware of your biases and prejudices. If you find them in your understanding of a

text, double-check that they are really there. (3) Master the world of the author. Know his emphases, vocabulary, and grammar. Know how the intended audience would (or should) have understood what the author meant. The better we understand the world and mind of an author, the better our chance is of understanding that author's creation. (4) Pursue with single-mindedness the goal of understanding what the author consciously wanted to say by the text. Do not let your focus shift from the pursuit of the author's meaning to the various subject matters discussed in the text until after you have come to understand the meaning of the text.

There are several benefits to an author-centered hermeneutic. For one, it coincides with the basic aim of most communication. In such communication we seek to ascertain information such as, What does the person speaking seek to communicate by his or her words? What does the writer of this letter seek to convey to me by it? What does the president of this company seek to tell me by this report? What does the radiologist seek to inform me of by this report? Second, this approach respectfully recognizes the rightful ownership of the author over his or her text. Third, it provides the best, if not the only, objective basis for judging the validity of an interpretation. Attempts to judge the validity of an interpretation in a text-centered or reader-centered hermeneutic are far more subjective. In fact, many practitioners of text-centered and reader-centered interpretation deny that there is a single meaning latent in a text, and others, while not denying this possibility, deny that such a meaning is accessible to the reader.



The Role of the Text

A text consists of a collection of shareable symbols. These symbols can be various kinds of letters, punctuation marks, accents (Greek), vowel pointings (Hebrew), and so on. A biblical author could have used any symbols he wanted to write his text. In fact, he could have invented a language that only he, and those whom he chose, knew. Special codes are created for this purpose. A secret code is a text whose meaning the author wants to keep hidden from others and to be understandable only to those who know the code. In times of war such codes are especially important. When others break that code, as US naval intelligence did in World War II at the Battle

of Midway, this may have disastrous consequences for those assuming that only their side (the Japanese navy) understands the code.

However, if authors wish to convey their meaning to as many people as possible, as the biblical authors usually did, they will choose a code (a collection of verbal symbols) that their readers will understand. This code will involve consonants, vowels, punctuation, words, idioms, and grammar that the author and readers share in common. In writing, an author therefore creates a text that possesses shareability. Shareability is the common understanding of a text's words and grammar possessed by both author and reader. Apart from this a reader cannot understand what an author wills to say. As a result, an author purposely submits himself or herself to the conventions and understanding of language possessed by the readers. Thus, if we understand how the author's intended audience would have understood the text (or should have understood it, for at times the original audience misunderstood what the biblical author meant, cf. 2 Thessalonians and 2 Corinthians), we, as readers today, can also understand the meaning of that same text. Because we can learn how a contemporary of Paul would have understood the Greek words (vocabulary), grammatical construction (syntax), and context of the text, we can also understand Paul's meaning, for the apostle purposely confined himself to the semantic range of possible meanings allowed by the language of his readers.

Because of the need for shareability, an author will abide by the rules of the language he is using and use the words and grammar in a way understandable to his audience. If he uses a word in an unfamiliar way, a good author will explain this in some way to his reader. (Cf. how the author of Hebrews explains in 5:14b what he means by "mature" in 5:14a; how John explains in 2:21 what Jesus meant by "temple" in 2:19–20, and in 7:39 what he meant by 7:37–38.) Within the semantic range of a language, however, words can possess a range of possible meanings. We can discover this range of meanings in a dictionary or lexicon. When an author uses his words, he is aware that they must possess one of these meanings, and when he uses these words, he provides a context that assists readers in narrowing down the possible meanings to just one: the specific meaning found in the statement itself (see below, pp. 52–54).

For example, the word *love* can mean a number of things. It can mean such things as profoundly tender, passionate affection; warm personal attachment; sexual intercourse; strong predilection or liking; a score of zero in tennis; and a salutation in a letter. In the sentence "He lost six to love," however, it can only mean a score of zero in tennis. The sentence "Let us love one another," on the other hand, is quite ambiguous. It can mean one

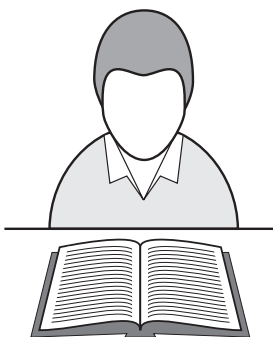
thing when found in the context of Jesus's teachings and quite another thing in the context of a pornographic movie. Authors reveal the specific meanings of their words through the specific context that they provide for their verbal symbols—the sentence in which these symbols occur, the paragraph in which they are found, the chapter in which they are placed, the book in which they occur. Linguists sometimes use the French word *langue* to describe the semantic range of possible meanings that a word possesses within a language and the French word *parole* to describe the specific meaning of the word as it is used within the sentence.

Because of the shareability of the verbal symbols the biblical author uses, a text can communicate his meaning. A text, however, can communicate a great deal more. A text can open up to the reader vast areas of information. By reading a text, a reader may learn all sorts of historical, psychological, sociological, cultural, and geographical information. A text can be a storehouse of information or subject matter, and a reader can investigate a text to acquire such information. We can read the Gospel of Mark, for instance, to learn about the historical Jesus, about the shape and form of the Jesus traditions before they were written down, about the Markan literary style. We can study the book of Joshua to learn about the geography of Palestine or second-millennium military strategy. We can study the book of Psalms to learn about ancient Hebrew poetry or Israelite worship. All this is both possible and frequently worthwhile, but when this is done, we should always be aware of the fact that this does not involve the central focus and intention of the text. The meaning or communicative intention found in those texts is what the authors of Mark, Joshua, and the Psalms willed to teach their readers by recounting such history, traditions, geography, or poetic forms.

As a result, when investigating an account such as Jesus calming the sea (Mark 4:35–41), we must be careful to focus our attention on the meaning of the account rather than on its various subject matters. The purpose of this account is not to help the reader acquire information concerning the topography of the Sea of Galilee (a lake surrounded by a ring of high hills) and how this makes it prone to sudden, violent storms (4:37). Nor is it primarily about the lack of faith on the part of the disciples (4:40) or the shape and size of boats on the Sea of Galilee in the first century (4:37). On the contrary, Mark has revealed in the opening verse of his Gospel that this work is about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This account, therefore, should be interpreted in light of this. The meaning that Mark sought to convey is also clear from the account itself. The account reaches its culmination in the concluding statement, “Who then is this,

that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41). The meaning of this account, the communicative intention of Mark, is therefore that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God. He is the Lord, and even nature itself is subject to his voice.

Perhaps the greatest need in reading the Bible is to distinguish the vast amount of information that we can learn from the biblical texts, especially those involving biblical narrative, from the meaning the authors sought to convey through this information. This will be dealt with at greater length in succeeding chapters (see esp. pp. 41–43).

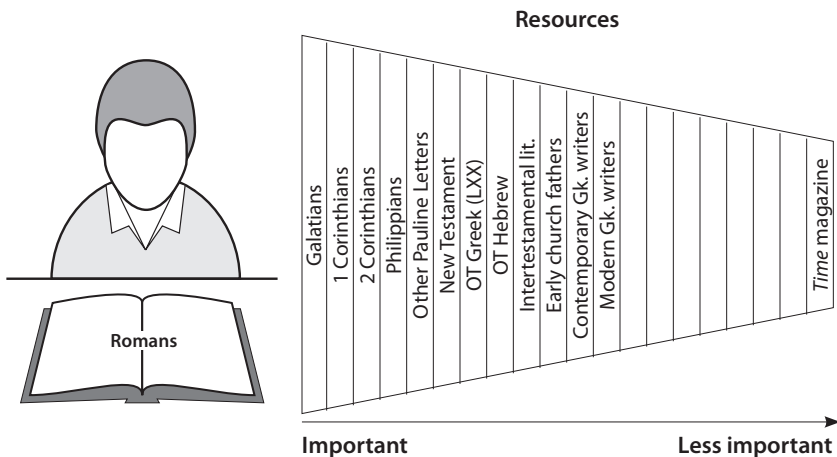


The Role of the Reader

Using the verbal symbols of the author (i.e., the text), the reader seeks to understand what the author meant by these symbols. Knowing that the author intentionally used shareable symbols, the reader begins with the knowledge that the individual building blocks of the text, the words, fit within the semantic range of possibilities that the language of the original readers permitted. This means that when reading the works of Shakespeare, we must use a seventeenth-century English dictionary rather than a twenty-first-century English one. This also means that when reading the Greek NT, we must use a Koine Greek lexicon rather than a classical Greek one. Seeing how the words are used in phrases and sentences, how the sentences are used within paragraphs, how paragraphs are used in chapters, and how chapters are used in the work, the reader seeks to understand the author's communicative intent in writing this work. This process is called the hermeneutical circle. This expression refers to the fact that the whole text helps the reader understand each individual word or part of the text; in turn, the individual words and parts help us understand the meaning of the text as a whole. This sounds more confusing than it really is, for all

of this goes on simultaneously in the mind of the interpreter. The mind is able to switch back and forth from the part to the whole without great difficulty. It is like the task that is completed by a parallel computer, where many individual processors continuously share and communicate information in order to complete a shared task. Similarly, the mind switches back and forth from the meaning of the individual words and the general understanding of the whole text until it comes to a successful resolution of the text's meaning.

Because the reader is interested in what a biblical author meant by his text, he or she is interested in his other writings as well, for these are especially helpful in providing clues to the specific meaning of the words and phrases in the text. Other works written by people of similar conviction and language are also helpful, especially if they were written at the same time. The writings of people who had different convictions but lived at the same time may also be helpful, but less so, in revealing the rules of the language under which the author worked. As a result, to understand what Paul means in a particular verse in Romans, we should look at the context he provides for us, beginning with the immediate context and proceeding to the more distant. Thus we seek help from what Paul says in the verses surrounding that text, in the neighboring chapters, in the rest of Romans, then in Galatians (which is the Pauline writing most like Romans), then in 1 and 2 Corinthians, and then in the other Pauline writings. After having worked through the Pauline materials, the reader can also look elsewhere. Probably the order of importance after the Pauline materials would be the rest of the NT, the OT, the intertestamental literature, the rabbinic literature, the early church fathers, and then contemporary Greek writers.



This order is determined by which of the other sources best reflects the way Paul thought. In a similar way, a verse in the Gospel of Luke is best interpreted by the verses surrounding it, the paragraphs and chapters surrounding that verse, the rest of the Gospel of Luke, and then the book of Acts. Acts reveals how Luke thought better than Matthew, Mark, or John does, but other Gospels are more useful than the Epistles, which in turn are more useful than Isaiah, which in turn is more useful than Josephus (a Jewish historian of the first century), and so on.

It is also important for the reader to understand the particular literary form being used by the author, for different forms of literature are governed by different rules. If the author has expressed his willed meaning in the form of a proverb, we must interpret that proverb by the rules governing this literary form. If he has used a parable, we must interpret the parable in light of the rules associated with parables. The careful argumentation of Paul in Romans must be interpreted differently from the poetic form in which the psalmist has expressed his meaning. What is common in the interpretation of every literary form, however, is that in each instance we are seeking to understand the meaning the author willed. Furthermore, since he sought to share that meaning with his readers, we can assume that he was abiding by the common rules associated with the particular literary form he was using. The second part of this book (chapters 5–14) addresses such rules for interpreting the various literary genres found in the Bible.

Once we know the meaning of the author, we will need to seek out those implications of that meaning that are especially relevant (see pp. 33–38). If the principle Paul willed when he wrote Ephesians 5:18 is “Do not take into your body substances like wine that cause you to lose control of your senses and natural inhibitions,” what implications arising out of this principle are most relevant for the reader? Paul’s text has far-reaching unforeseen implications of which he was not aware. Although the meaning of a text never changes because it is locked in past history, the recognition of its various implications is always growing. This is why some people claim that the Scriptures have different meanings. Yet a text does not have different meanings, for an author like Paul willed a single specific pattern of meaning when he wrote. (The instances in which an author willed a double-meaning pun are quite rare.) A text, however, has different *implications* for different readers. For example, the words of Jesus, “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), have a single meaning. Luke sought to share with his reader that Jesus wanted the message of the gospel to be spread throughout the entire world. Yet the relevant implications will no

doubt vary for each reader. For me, it has involved teaching in a theological seminary; for my daughter and son-in-law, it involves going overseas to a foreign land to share the good news with an unreached people; for my sons and their wives, it involves working in their local church and sharing the good news with neighbors and friends. For others, it may involve working in a rural church or in the inner city or witnessing about Christ at work. For a non-Christian, it no doubt would involve a rejection of the meaning. There is one meaning to a text, that meaning consciously willed by the author, but the particular way that meaning affects the readers—its specific implications—may be quite different.

Questions

1. Is there such a thing as “the meaning” of a text? If so, where is this meaning to be found? Who or what determines it?
2. How can we determine what constitutes a good translation of the Bible? Does this have any bearing on what is discussed in this chapter?
3. Why do people learn Greek and Hebrew (and Aramaic) in order to study the Bible? What does this say about where a text’s meaning is to be found?
4. In the desire to communicate their message, how do writers restrict themselves? How does this restriction aid us in interpreting the Bible?