

PRIMA SCRIPTURA

AN INTRODUCTION

to

NEW TESTAMENT
INTERPRETATION

N. CLAYTON CROY



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Preface

A Complex and Contested Enterprise

In January 2005 the Executive Council of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the largest professional association of teachers and scholars of the Bible, faced a dilemma. The council had received a resolution from a group of members responding to the recent U.S. election in November 2004. The resolution observed that “values,” sometimes specifically called “Christian values” or “biblical values,” had emerged in the campaign as a key political issue. The group contended that the values “most commonly identified in public debates were the issues of gay marriage, abortion, and stem-cell research.”

The resolution went on to argue that these values “are not major concerns in the Bible, and in fact are not even directly addressed in the Bible. Rather, they tend to reflect the underlying problems of homophobia, misogyny, control of reproductive rights, and restraint of expression (including scientific research) in U.S. society today.” The proponents of the resolution asserted that “the moral issues dominating the biblical texts focus instead on concerns such as the well-being of individuals, the integrity of community, care for the powerless and the vulnerable, economic justice, the establishment of peace, and the stewardship of the environment.” They concluded that the Society should work toward securing these goals and values.

The Executive Council had at least three alternatives:

1. to reject the resolution out of hand;
2. to endorse the resolution as an official statement of the Society; or
3. to refer the resolution to the membership for responses and comments.

The council wisely chose the third course. The resolution was sent electronically to 5,585 members, asking them to vote “agree” or “disagree” and inviting comments. The response was quantitatively strong (35 percent of those receiving the resolution) and qualitatively vigorous (thoughtful and spirited comments were given by 46 percent of the respondents). When the dust settled, the vote was 56 percent in agreement with the resolution, 44 percent in disagreement. The vote was unscientific since participation was voluntary, but the response was large enough to indicate a deep divide on the issues raised by the resolution.

There are several lessons in this controversy. The Society of Biblical Literature is a diverse group. The Bible is regarded as relevant, by one group or another, to a wide range of public policy issues, including social justice issues traditionally, and stereotypically, identified as “liberal” concerns, as well as “family values” similarly identified as “conservative.” Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, the response to the resolution indicates that biblical interpretation is a complex and contested enterprise. The SBL is a professional organization of scholarly experts, most of whom hold doctorates or are student members in the process of earning them. When trained experts disagree so sharply, what hope of consensus can be entertained by laypersons (in either the ecclesial or academic sense)?

The status quo need not be wholly discouraging, however. As Brevard S. Childs observes about the general state of contemporary biblical scholarship, “The very intensity of the conflicting voices serves to confirm the impression that the problem of biblical interpretation does not arise from apathy. . . . Cannot one draw the implication that in spite of confusion and conflict in respect to biblical interpretation, there is an unexpressed consensus that the Bible still possesses a seriousness of content and an evocative power for raising basic questions which offers hope in a search for its renewed understanding in the twenty-first century?” (Childs, foreword to Bartholomew, 2000: xv). While Childs rightly observes that indifference to the Bible is seldom a problem, nevertheless, complex and sometimes contradictory visions emerge from its study.

Several factors complicate the interpretation of the Bible (Porter, 1997a: 11–15; Hayes and Holladay, 2007: 12–16). Some of them have to do with the Bible itself, its distance from us, and its foreignness. Other factors have to do with the interpreters, the modern readers of the text, their limitations, biases, skills, and perspectives. Both kinds deserve some elaboration.

1. *Our outsider status.* All modern readers are outsiders to the original communicative act of Scripture. In this sense, the Bible was not written for us. Our common humanity, the providence of God, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit enable the Bible to continue to speak to persons today, but they neither erase its foreign qualities nor provide a quick and easy bridge to a critical understanding of its message. Most of the writings of the Bible are more aptly described as having a timely message than a timeless one. Their assumptions, modes of thought, teachings, exhortations, laments, and

exultations are rooted in another era and are addressed to circumstances that prevailed in the two millennia prior to the birth of Jesus and in the first century CE, not the twenty-first century CE. Among the New Testament writings our outsider status is especially evident with respect to epistolary literature. The old quip has an element of truth: when we read Paul's Letters, we are reading someone else's mail (Hayes and Holladay, 2007: 12). The other side of this coin, however, is that Christian readers of Scripture often feel directly addressed by its words, sometimes to their comfort, sometimes to their dismay (Green, 2007b: 50–59).

2. *Language.* Modern English translations make most passages of Scripture fairly intelligible, and we should be grateful for the generations of scholars who have toiled over manuscripts, lexicons, and manuals of style to make the Scriptures available in the vernacular. But the ease of reading such works belies the fact that they are the product of countless hours of intense study, debate, and decision making. We have learned much over the centuries about Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek lexicography, syntax, idiom, and style, but difficult decisions remain in which even highly trained experts are compelled to make their best guesses. Translations by necessity do not reveal the difficulty of those decisions. Neither is it a transparent fact to all readers that translation involves interpretation. Although the goal of translation is to convey the meaning of the original text into the target language and not to modify it, differences between the original language and the target language often require translators to choose among possible nuances of a word or alternative construals of grammatical phenomena. A person only needs to read a few English translations of the same passage to see how slight, and sometimes significant, differences emerge in the process of translation.

3. *History.* Almost two thousand years separate us from the writings of the New Testament. One need not read much of the biblical text for that distance to become apparent. Medicine was primitive, infant mortality was common, and physical ailments were sometimes attributed to evil spirits. Roman rule was sometimes brutal. Democracy at best was a Greek institution of centuries past, only traces of which existed during the Roman Republic, and human rights as a concept lay a millennium and a half in the future. The economy was chiefly agricultural, slavery was a given, and lifestyles were modest for the vast majority of people. Transportation was slow; mail service was limited to official correspondence. Religious traditions were often polytheistic, and deities were frequently conceived in anthropomorphic terms. Animal sacrifices were commonplace.

4. *Cultural assumptions.* The ancient Mediterranean world differed markedly from the modern Western world in its cultural assumptions (Achtmeier, Green, and Thompson, 2001: 284–88). Novelty was viewed with suspicion rather than favor, and old ways were assumed to be superior to innovation. Religion and politics were thoroughly intertwined rather than kept separate

from one another. Political decisions were seldom made without first seeking divine guidance by auspices and omens. Our modern practice of beginning sessions of Congress with prayer pales by comparison to the intermingling of religion and politics in the Roman Empire. In contrast to modern American misgivings, people in antiquity generally would have had scruples about *not* mixing the two. Finally, both households and society at large were hierarchically structured and patriarchal. The modern Western world, of course, has unfinished business in this regard, but in the first-century Mediterranean world this assumption was commonplace, and there were few voices of protest against it.

5. *Differences in readers' perspectives.* Interpretation is also complicated by the great disparity among interpreters. We come to the text from different places socially, economically, politically, religiously, and ethnically. We have different understandings about what is possible, what is reasonable, what is just, and what is useful. Even differences in personality type can influence how one hears the biblical text. Ben Meyer correctly points out that the foundational commitments held by various interpreters account for the most vexing controversies in biblical interpretation: "The root of our deepest divisions is not lack of evidence. It is the fact of opposed horizons and, above all, of irreducibly opposed horizons, as a moment's reflection on public controversies will suggest and as sustained reflection will confirm. Irreducibly opposed horizons are a massive human reality labyrinthine in its consequences, leading some sincerely to champion as true and good what others with equal sincerity repudiate as false and evil" (1989: 81). Such fundamental distinctions in personal "horizons" were evident in the disparate responses to the resolution proposed to the Society of Biblical Literature.

6. *Differences in readers' abilities.* Interpreters of Scripture have different levels of linguistic skill, historical awareness, spiritual insight, and common sense. As Georg Lichtenberg, the eighteenth-century aphorist, observed, "A book is a mirror: if an ape looks into it, an apostle is hardly likely to look out" (2000: 71). While we might prefer to refrain from likening readers to primates, whether of the simian or episcopal variety, Lichtenberg has a point: the quality of an interpretation is, in part, a function of the interpreter, and it will usually not be more erudite, creative, or faithful than the interpreter is. Other things being equal, a trained and sensitive interpreter has an advantage over an untrained and insensitive one. In short, the better the reader, the better the reading.

The good news, however, is that less-skilled readers can become more skilled through intellectual and spiritual discipline. On the one hand, the interpretation of the New Testament as a literary work from antiquity demands intellectual skills that can be acquired through study and practice. On the other hand, the New Testament as a religious text rewards readers who have spiritual sensitivities, and the best academic training does not necessarily confer them. Ben Meyer refers to this disposition as "being attuned to the text," and he correctly

notes that our culture and our institutions do not necessarily facilitate it. “In view of the devastating alienations of our time, this being in tune cannot be presupposed as standard equipment among interpreters. Graduate schools do not pledge to confer or cultivate it and may never so much as mention it” (1989: 90). Faith and devotion that are nurtured by Christian community can, however, cultivate this disposition, and such qualities, combined with rigorous academic training, represent the ideal hermeneutical resources for grasping the theological meaning of the New Testament.

The perspectives and abilities of an interpreter are thus the product of many things: accidents of birth, physical and psychological characteristics, education, socialization, religious upbringing, theological commitments, life experiences, and so forth. Any of these factors may impede or enhance one’s ability to interpret Scripture. Because of their critical importance, they will receive further attention in chapter 1.

Despite these complexities about how to interpret and apply the Bible, millions of people still look to this collection of writings for spiritual guidance in personal and public life. Indeed, it is the religious value of Scripture, more than its historical or literary qualities (without denigrating the latter), that accounts for its historical and cultural impact. As one introductory text on the New Testament asserts, “The most distinctive characteristic of the New Testament documents is surely their function as Scripture within the Christian church.” “Most people who read the New Testament do so . . . because they share the conviction that this collection of documents, together with the Old Testament, comprise the Scriptures of the church, its normative witness to the work of God in the world through Jesus Christ” (Achtmeier, Green, and Thompson, 2001: 1, 9).

It is to this audience that this book is primarily directed, to persons who regard the Bible as an authoritative and revelatory text, or more precisely, a collection or canon of texts. I am primarily addressing confessional readers, those who belong to communities of faith that affirm the authority of Scripture and the faith of the classic creeds. This readership is intentionally broad and thus able to encompass Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox expressions of Christianity. My hope is that the book will serve communities who regard the Bible as more than an edifying story but less than divine dictation. That describes a fairly wide swath of Christendom.

The book’s subtitle indicates that it has an (almost) exclusive focus on the interpretation of the New Testament. This restriction does not imply a devaluation of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. The church rejected that option when it excommunicated Marcion, the second-century heretic who discarded the Old Testament as the product of a lesser deity. Contra Marcion, the Hebrew Scriptures are *Christian* Scriptures, no less essential, no less revelatory than the New Testament. The reasons for my focus on the New Testament are professional and practical. My professional expertise is in

the New Testament, and so I am better able to address its interpretation than that of the Hebrew Bible. Practically, I suspect that most, but by no means all, college, university, and seminary courses that deal with biblical interpretation will focus on one Testament or the other. There is not an entirely different set of interpretive principles for the Old Testament, and much of what is put forward in this book is applicable to the interpretation of either Testament, but when one turns to contextual issues, literary forms, linguistic tools, and specific textual examples, as this book will do frequently, it becomes cumbersome to treat both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament.

So the aim of this book is to propose a way for leaders of Christian communities methodically to study and reflect on Scripture, particularly the New Testament, with a view to informing and shaping the life of faith. The latter is by no means limited to matters of public policy, as was the resolution of the Society of Biblical Literature. The Bible has a variety of functions in confessional contexts. It shapes Christian identity. It provides resources for the church's worship life. It supplies the raw material of our proclamation. It informs our theology. It guides personal piety and communal polity. And, yes, it also contains a vision for the larger society, with implications for both social justice issues and family values. In sum, the Bible shapes not only one's personal devotion and discipleship but also informs larger matters of culture, politics, philosophy, theology, and ethics (Wright, 2005: 5–18). But before we launch into a description and demonstration of interpretive method, it will be helpful to define some key terms, to discuss a few theoretical issues, and to sketch the journey ahead. Those are the goals of the introduction.

Introduction

Definitions, Theoretical Issues, and Preview of the Method

The most striking characteristic of biblical interpretation during the last several decades is an explosion of interpretive methods. Fifty years ago it would have been much easier to outline the steps in exegetical method or describe what hermeneutics entails. During the last half of the twentieth century, the landscape of biblical scholarship underwent as many shifts and divisions as the map of Eastern Europe.

The interpretive smorgasbord nowadays includes historical, literary, rhetorical, canonical, narrative, reader-response, social-scientific, anthropological, structuralist, and a host of ideological methods (liberationist, feminist, womanist, African, African-American, Latino/a, Asian, postcolonial, gay/queer, and so forth). Unlike a food smorgasbord, however, there is no consensus about basic food groups or what constitutes the ideal diet.

The effect of this methodological explosion is twofold. On the one hand, interpretation is potentially enriched by the wide variety of lenses through which texts may be read. The new interpretations or “readings” resulting from these methods can be complementary: different but not disparate. On the other hand, chaos and confusion may result from the proliferation of interpretive methods. This is particularly so for interpreters who do not have the luxury of leisurely, abstract musing in multiple modes. Those who interpret Scripture in confessional contexts for personal or congregational guidance often have more practical and pressing goals. When one studies Scripture with a view to proclamation, teaching, and shaping Christian discipleship, one can easily feel overwhelmed by a dozen options rather than enriched. In the smorgasbord image, these interpreters are looking for meat and potatoes that will nourish life more so than exotic foods that tantalize the eye and pique the palate.

Let me clarify my perspective, lest I appear dismissive of newer interpretive methods. *Both* enrichment *and* confusion have resulted. The new insights that have been gleaned from strategies such as rhetorical, sociological, narrative, and feminist criticism—just to name some of the most fruitful techniques—are to be received gratefully. But the welter of methods leaves some interpreters, especially beginners, confused. Sandra Schneiders rightly observes, “The new voices, until recently peripheral, are establishing themselves inside the camp. Increasingly the question of the coherence of the project of biblical interpretation, given the plurality of methods and the validity of multiple interpretations, is emerging as urgent” (1991: 24). In the chaos it is easy to lose sight of the fact that these methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They have common features that can be gleaned and incorporated into a basic eclectic method that will serve the practical needs of ministers, teachers, and students.

That is the aim of this book: to provide a starting point or foundation, not the final word. I do not, however, imagine that an eclectic approach can possibly incorporate all the benefits of the new methods that have arisen in the last few decades. Explicit and rigorous rhetorical, sociological, narrative, and feminist readings will open perspectives on texts that the method described in the succeeding chapters will only suggest indirectly. Nevertheless, a basic method of interpretation with a finite number of discrete steps still has much value. When Sunday is looming and a preaching text or a Bible study lesson plan is staring you down, a practical, methodical approach to biblical interpretation is needed. This is true for both newcomers and seasoned exegetes. A trusty cookbook with a step-by-step method serves both beginners who are learning the culinary arts as well as master chefs, whose skill derives from a well-honed habit of attention to details. Far from stifling creativity, mastering a basic methodology enables creativity by providing it with discipline and direction.

Several preliminary issues and matters of definition need attention. Some of these are ancient cruxes; others have arisen in the theoretical debates of the last several decades. Needless to say, volumes have been written about each of the following questions. The treatment here makes no pretense of being comprehensive, but rather seeks to orient beginners to the journey ahead. Before one embarks on a lengthy voyage, it is wise to learn something about the history of seafaring and the prevailing ocean currents.

What Is the Meaning of “Meaning”?

If the interpretation of Scripture has something to do with deriving its meaning, an appropriate starting point is to inquire as to what we mean by “meaning.” The answer to this question is neither simple nor self-evident. Indeed, there are several meanings for the word “meaning,” and the occasional conflation

of these meanings has, according to some theorists, worked much mischief in the field of hermeneutics.

The basic meaning of “meaning” is referential. A word is a linguistic sign that “means” that thing to which it refers. Thus the meaning of “book” is that bound collection of printed pages that you have before you. The meaning of “eyes” is the pair of ocular organs you are using to read this sentence. Referential meaning applies most obviously to physical things. This kind of meaning can easily be grasped by the mind when the referent can be grasped by the hand. It is less apparent what the referential meaning of a highly abstract word would be, such as “abstraction.” Referential meaning is also inadequate for complex sentences, metaphor, or interjections. For example, the referential meaning of “rats” may be a certain genus of rodent, but that meaning scarcely applies in the sentence “Rats! The library is closed.”

An alternative theory that avoids these weaknesses is the ideational theory of meaning. According to this theory, meaning inheres in the ideas and concepts that lie behind language. For some philosophers this was a way to preserve meaning from the limitations of language. By this view, language is finite, able to convey thought only imperfectly. The inability to find words to express one’s thoughts is a common experience, but one could argue that in such cases the thought itself is unformed. Does thought truly exist apart from language? Ideational theories have the opposite problem from referential theories; they are inadequate for physical things. The meaning of “elephant” as a mental concept is quite different from an actual elephant. If there is an elephant in your living room, most people would want it to be of the ideational variety.

A third theory of meaning connects it with human intention. The meaning of a word is that which the speaker or writer intends by it. This theory has certain advantages. It relates meanings to minds, human consciousness. Surely all expressions of meaning and construals of meanings involve human minds. This theory also accounts for the fact that the same linguistic symbols may not in all cases convey the same meaning. The meaning of “flat” in the utterance “I’m mad about my flat” has a very different meaning if uttered by an angry American motorist stranded on the roadside or an enthusiastic Londoner moving into a new apartment (Caird, 1980: 50). In either case, the meaning is that which the speaker intends. Critics of this theory point out that an author’s intention is often accessible only through the words of the text. If the words are ambiguous, how does one get behind them to the author’s intent? In addition, what does one do with ancient texts whose authors are unknown (e.g., Hebrews) or pseudonymous (e.g., 2 Peter)? Authorial intention is not to be dismissed, but in the case of ancient authors, usually the most one can hope for is a reasonable understanding of the author’s *communicative intention*: what the author intended to say and succeeded in expressing in the text. *Why* an ancient author wrote a certain thing, that is, the author’s *motive*, is often beyond our ability to ascertain (Fowl, 2000: 74).

A fourth theory equates meaning with significance. The meaning of an utterance or a text is the importance, relevance, and impact that it has. This definition of “meaning” is especially seen in the adjectival form “meaningful.” Speech or writing is meaningful when it has consequences for the hearer or reader. It may arouse interest, inspire action, or evoke awe. Meaning as significance is the sense normally elicited when we add a short prepositional phrase to the question “What does this mean . . . *to you?*” Mark Allan Powell has conducted an informal experiment showing that professional interpreters in particular (in this case, Christian ministers), when presented with a biblical text, respond differently to the question “What does this mean?” as over against “What does this mean *to you?*” (2001: 28–56, esp. 51–53). This experiment highlights the difference between meaning as human intention and meaning as significance, for which Powell uses the roughly equivalent language “meaning as message” versus “meaning as effect” (2001: 22–27). By either set of terms, the latter sense of meaning clearly transcends the former. Readers frequently find meanings in texts (= significance or effect) that go beyond the author’s meaning (= intention or message).

Finally, semantic theories of meaning stress the author’s choice of certain words from a large stock of linguistic options and the author’s placement of those words in certain syntactical relationships. The meaning of a word in an utterance and the meaning of the utterance itself are determined by those contextual relationships.

This brief discussion by no means exhausts the possibilities. Indeed, one standard work on the subject delineates sixteen different meanings of “meaning” (Ogden and Richards, 1989: 185–208). But the above remarks should be sufficient to give the reader a sense of the philosophical questions that lie behind the act of interpretation. The most important distinction among the meanings of “meaning” is the one between the intention of the writer and the significance of the writing to the readers. Clarity on this point will lessen the confusion when we come to consider and evaluate diverse interpretations.

What Is Meant by “Exegesis” and “Hermeneutics”?

Both of these terms come directly from Greek words. *Exēgēsis* first referred to a detailed narrative or description and then came to mean a detailed explanation or interpretation. The meaning of the English is similar: an explanation or exposition; especially, an interpretation of a literary text. Etymologically the Greek word derives from a verb meaning “to lead forth, to draw out.” Although etymology does not determine meaning, a relationship can be seen in the idea that exegesis involves a “drawing out” of the text’s meaning. (As we will see later in this chapter, some practitioners take issue with that implication.) *Hermēneia* referred first to an utterance or expression of thought, then to an interpretation, either in the sense of a translation from one language to

another, or in the sense of an explanation of the meaning of a text or statement. (The Greek word is related to the god Hermes, who served as the bearer of messages between the gods and mortals.) In English, “hermeneutics” refers to the study of methods or principles of interpretation.

Clearly the semantic fields of both the Greek and English words are overlapping. The usage of the English words in biblical scholarship has been somewhat fluid, but attempts are often made to distinguish hermeneutics from exegesis. Sometimes a rather simple distinction is offered: exegesis pertains to what the text *meant*; hermeneutics pertains to what the text *means* (Stendahl, 1962: 419–20; R. Brown, 1981: 23–44). But this is not the most helpful way to frame the matter. The meaning of a text does not automatically change simply by the passage of time. This way of distinguishing the terms conflates meaning with significance. What an ancient text “means” in modern times is really a matter of the *relationship* between the historical meaning and the modern readers and their context. This “meaning to someone,” especially someone far removed from the original act of communication, is more properly a matter of the text’s significance.

A more helpful way to distinguish exegesis from hermeneutics is to see the latter as the broader, more theoretical term, concerned especially with philosophical notions of meaning, language, and understanding, and with the formulation of interpretive principles. Exegesis would then refer to the practical application of those principles in interpreting specific texts. In short, hermeneutics is theory; exegesis is practice.

Another way of saying this is that exegesis has as its object a text to be interpreted, whereas hermeneutics takes a step back and reflects on the very process of interpretation. As Ben Meyer puts it, “If the object of interpretation [or exegesis] is to understand the text, the object of hermeneutics is to understand the understanding of texts” (1989: 88). Hermeneutics is, in effect, the philosophy of interpretation, and discussions of it by its leading theorists tend to be very theoretical. In contrast, discussions of exegesis often read like a how-to book.

This book is concerned with both hermeneutics and exegesis. The large central portion of the book (chapter 2) has a how-to section on exegetical method. Surrounding that center, chapters 1, 3, and 4 take up pre- and postexegetical matters, though that language is somewhat artificial since all the chapters address a unified interpretive process. There is a logical sequence to the exegetical steps in chapter 2 and to all the chapters in the plan of the book, but the real-life practice of interpretation may unfold differently or shift emphases according to the particulars of the interpreter, the text, and the hermeneutical context.

Where Is Meaning to Be Sought?

Northrop Frye, a prominent twentieth-century literary critic, once wrote: “It has been said of [the German religious mystic Jakob] Boehme that his

books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception” (1962: 427–28). Some scholars would take strong exception to such a sweeping statement, but it forcefully articulates a point of view that became popular in the latter half of the twentieth century. The question can be stated simply: Where is meaning to be sought? Or perhaps, who or what determines meaning? Ben Meyer calls this the most basic hermeneutical issue: “Do *texts* mediate meaning *to us*, or do *we* lend meaning to *texts*?” (1994: 2) When readers read, do they discover meaning or generate it? Do they construe it or construct it? Northrop Frye clearly thought that the reader was the primary supplier of meaning, but at least three different answers have been given to the question of the source of meaning. These three answers also outline the major phases in literary theory. It would not be exaggerating to call them paradigm shifts.

1. *Meaning as located in the author’s intention.* The traditional view was that meaning was inextricably linked to the author. Obviously this view draws upon the understanding of meaning as authorial intention: the text means what the author intended it to mean. For most people this theory has the aura of common sense. Anyone who has ever said, written, or thought, “That’s not what I meant!” is a believer in the importance of authorial intent. This view of the locus of meaning prevailed from the early eighteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century. It received its definitive statement, however, in the book *Validity in Interpretation*, by E. D. Hirsch (1967; see also Juhl, 1980; Knapp and Michaels, 1982; and F. Watson, 1997: 95–126). Hirsch argues that meaning is rooted in the author’s consciousness, specifically in the desire to convey a certain understanding by means of a sequence of linguistic symbols. Hirsch distinguishes “meaning” from “significance,” the latter being the importance, relevance, or value of a particular meaning.

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable. (Hirsch, 1967: 8)

If the author and the interpreter are competent, Hirsch insists, this meaning is accessible and repeatable: it can be conveyed from author to interpreter. Indeed, interpretation is “re-cognition,” that is, rethinking the author’s thought. Hirsch stresses the distinction between meaning and significance because he views meaning as stable and determinate. In other words, the meaning of a text does not change willy-nilly, from one year to the next, or from one context to the next. Suppose an older reader says, “This text means something completely different to me now from when I read it as a young adult.” Hirsch

would argue that the meaning of the text did not change but that its significance to the reader did.

Hirsch and his notion of authorial intention have come under criticism from various angles (Beardsley, 1968; Dowling, 1983; Eagleton, 1983: 67–71; Fowl, 2000; Iseminger, 1992; Meyer, 1989: 36–41; Vanhoozer, 1998: 225). In particular, critics have objected that the author’s consciousness cannot serve as a guide to textual meaning since it is not publicly available, whereas the author’s words are. In the case of living authors, an interpreter could presumably contact the writer and ask, “What exactly did you mean when you wrote such-and-such?” In the case of ancient authors, this strategy has little utility unless the interpreter is gifted at conducting séances. Moreover, there were other objections against the emphasis on authorial intention, and the first volley was fired approximately a quarter of a century before Hirsch.

2. *Meaning as located in the text.* By the middle of the twentieth century, some literary scholars began to challenge the idea that the author’s intent was the key to meaning. In its place came a focus on the text itself. In an encyclopedia article in 1942 and then in a longer essay in 1954, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley coined the term “intentional fallacy.” The author’s intent, they argue, is *not* the key to textual meaning. It is a fallacy to think that the critic must delve into psychology (the author’s consciousness) or biography (the author’s life and times) in order to interpret literature. The author’s intention “is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (1954: 3). The author’s intention may be the *cause* of a poem, but it is not the *standard* by which interpretations of the poem are to be judged.

Wimsatt and Beardsley were reacting to a mode of interpretation that had shifted the focal point of literary study away from the texts to something external to them. The new school of thought that they represented came to be known, appropriately, as “New Criticism.” This school stressed that a literary text, particularly a poem, is “a self-contained unit of meaning which does not have to be explained in terms of its author’s personality or biography, or in terms of historical and social factors” (Macey, 2000: 268–69). The meaning of a poem is to be found solely in the work itself, by a careful analysis of its language, syntax, structure, style, and so forth.

For our purposes, we should note that New Criticism eventually had an impact on biblical interpretation. Various modes of biblical criticism that focused primarily on the world of the author, that is, the world *behind* the text, prevailed from the Enlightenment to the mid-twentieth century. In the latter half of the twentieth century, literary methods arose that focused primarily on the text. Rather than investigating sources, forms, redaction, and tradition history, scholars were more concerned about the final form of the text. One could now interpret the Bible by a careful analysis of the text alone.

We should note, however, that a subtle shift occurred when New Criticism sidled over from the English department to religious studies. The chief objection of Wimsatt, Beardsley, and others was the use of authorial intent as the standard for judging *poetry*. Whether this objection applies equally to the narrative prose and epistles of the New Testament is not clear. Indeed, in their classic essay, Wimsatt and Beardsley acknowledge that “poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention” (1954: 5). New Criticism’s critique of early twentieth-century poetic interpretation should be applied cautiously to the literary genres of the New Testament.

3. *Meaning as located in the reader(s)*. As I indicated earlier, the history of modern literary theory can be divided into three periods: a preoccupation with the author (eighteenth through early twentieth century), a focus on the text itself (ca. 1930–80), finally giving way to a shift of attention to the reader during the last few decades (Eagleton, 1983: 74). Thus the current phase of literary criticism emphasizes the reader’s role in the production of meaning. The school of thought most often associated with this development is reader-response theory, and it comes in both moderate and more radical versions (Vanhoozer, 1998: 151–52).

Proponents of more moderate versions ascribe roles to both the text and the reader in the production of meaning. Readers fill in “gaps” left by the author as they strive to make sense of the text (Iser, 1978). Moderate reader-response theorists usually acknowledge that there are some controls or limits on interpretation, although they would not likely appeal to authorial intent as the touchstone of a “normative reading.” Augustine anticipated such controls on interpretation in arguing that, when the author’s intent is unknown, interpretations must be congruent with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. In particular, they should foster the love of God and neighbor (Vanhoozer, 1998: 117). Another limit, particularly for New Testament interpretation, might be general coherence with the ethos of the gospel.

The leading representative of the more radical variety of reader-response theory is Stanley Fish (1980). According to Fish, meaning is not inherent in the text, lying there inert, waiting to be discovered by the reader like a pottery shard in an archaeological dig. Meaning is rather created in the act of reading. Questions naturally arise: If this is so, how does one distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations? Could there not be as many meanings as there are readers? This is not quite the case for Fish, but very nearly so. Fish would locate interpretive authority in the community of readers:

Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine

the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (1980: 14)

Carrying this theory to its logical conclusion, Fish argues that the variety of interpretations is limited only by the availability of interpretive communities: “The fact that it remains easy to think of a reading that most of us would dismiss out of hand does not mean that the text excludes it but that there is as yet no elaborated interpretive procedure for producing that text. . . . It follows, then, that no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one” (1980: 345, 347). Fish’s brand of reader-response theory represents a seismic shift in the locus of meaning from the text to the reader. The text virtually becomes a Rorschach inkblot, whose meaning owes its genesis to the reader, not the author.

In its most extreme forms, reader-response criticism confuses reading with writing, activities that are best kept distinct from one another (Vanhoozer, 1998: 153). If your passion is to *construct your own meaning*, put your book down and take up paper and pen. If you want to *construe another’s meaning*, then read. As Francis Watson says bluntly (and controversially), “Readers can only *receive* meaning, they cannot *create* it” (1997: 104, with original emphasis). This should not be taken to mean that reading is a passive activity; it demands active engagement with and construal of another’s meaning. Moreover, Watson adds, “Once they have received meaning, readers may engage in various creative activities: they may draw implications from it, apply it to their own circumstances, formulate counter-arguments or questions, link it to what is said elsewhere, and so on” (1997: 125n5).

Augustine relates his conversion experience when he overheard a child’s voice in a garden saying, “Tolle et lege! [Pick it up and read!]” (*Confessions* 8.12). Augustine immediately took up a book of Paul’s Epistles, read the first passage on which his eyes fell, and experienced a religious transformation. Paul (and I would say, God) spoke to Augustine through the medium of the text. “Tolle et lege” are words to heed when you want to hear a voice *outside* your own head. When your chief concern is to give expression to the voice (hopefully singular) *inside* your head, then listen instead to the scribal muse: “Pone et scribe! [Put (the book) down and write!]”

Ultimately, the ground of textual meaning is authorial intention *as expressed in the author’s communicative activity*, not the author’s consciousness (Vanhoozer, 1998: 225). Meaning would not “be there” if the author had not intended it. The text did not come into being by accident; its meaning came “out of a head, not out of a hat” (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954: 4). But meaning is encountered *through the text*, not in mystical communion with the author. Thus Francis Watson rightly insists that authorial intent “is to be understood not as some subjective occurrence lying behind the text but as the principle of the text’s intelligibility” (1997: 112).

It was not so much a fallacy for E. D. Hirsch to emphasize authorial intention as it was for him to emphasize it exclusively. For most ancient texts, the author's intention is accessible only through the text itself. (Partial exceptions would be when other writings by the same author might elucidate the text under consideration or when general knowledge of the historical circumstances makes a particular theory of authorial intent more or less likely.) The intended sense is intrinsic to the text. Ben Meyer notes that "Hirsch might have successfully fielded all objections if he had defined the object of interpretation as the sense that the author *both intended and managed to encode or express in the text*" (1989: 40, with added emphasis). The meaning that is sought in exegesis, then, is the meaning intended by the author and conveyed by the text (Dunn, 2003b: 122; R. Brown, 1994: 6–9).

Exegesis is only one stage in the entire process of interpretation that I propose in this book, and confessional interpreters will rightly insist on moving beyond strict exegetical meanings. But the earnest pursuit of the authorial/textual meaning is a necessary application of the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31) to biblical interpretation: we respect the texts of others and represent them as fairly as possible, since this is what we want others to do with our texts (Vanhoozer in Adam et al., 2006: 59–60).

Is the Meaning of a Text Determinate?

The advent of reader-response theory and the possibility of unlimited readings acutely raise a question that has always bubbled beneath the surface of hermeneutics: is textual meaning determinate? A determinate meaning is one that has defined limits, not necessarily so precisely defined as to be singular and exclusive of all other meanings, but defined within a finite range. A determinate meaning may not be determinable with exactitude, but it is not infinitely elastic. Needless to say, even a determinate meaning can be expressed in a variety of ways.

Closely related to the question of determinate meaning is the issue of controls or criteria for meaning. If, as most writers assume, it is not the case that a text can mean anything the reader wants it to mean, then what controls meaning, or what criteria may be employed to distinguish valid interpretations from invalid ones? The control that Stanley Fish offers is minimal. If one is dissatisfied with the apparent meaning of a text, one need only find a new interpretive community. For Fish, the meaning that one's community constructs *is* the meaning of the text, at least for that community (1980: 14). As another scholar put it bluntly, "Texts, like dead men and women, have no rights, no aims, no interests. They can be used in whatever way readers or interpreters choose" (Morgan and Barton, 1988: 7).

The movement known as deconstruction is also characterized by an emphasis on the instability of textual meaning. Deconstruction is notoriously

difficult to define. As one critic aptly puts it, deconstruction extends a greasy palm to the one who would grasp it (Moore, 1989: 132). It is a kind of undoing of meaning. Deconstruction expands on the observation of linguists that words have no intrinsic connection with their referents. In other words, it is a purely human convention that the word “book” refers to, and thus means, a collection of printed pages bound together as one volume. Nothing about the appearance or the sound of the word “book” connects it with its referent. If meaning depends on signifiers that are ultimately arbitrary, deconstructionists argue, then meaning is inherently unstable. One harsh critic of deconstruction describes it as “an approach characterized by doctrinaire skepticism and infatuation with the thought that language is always so compromised by metaphor and ulterior motives that a text never means what it appears to mean” (Kimball, 1998: 122).

But deconstruction is much more than simply a way to analyze literary texts.

Deconstruction is a painstaking taking-apart, a peeling away of the various layers—historical, rhetorical, ideological—of distinctions, concepts, texts, and whole philosophies, whose aim is to expose the arbitrary linguistic nature of their original construction. Deconstruction is an intense analytical method, occasionally perversely so, that results in the collapse from within of all that it touches. (Vanhoozer, 1998: 52)

The authors of *The Postmodern Bible* articulate succinctly the deconstructionist view of textual meaning: “Deconstruction rejects all ‘container’ theories of meaning. Meaning is not in the text but is brought to it and imposed upon it. The understanding of the author or of the original audience is not decisive; it is merely one reading among many. Texts may lend themselves more to some readings than to others, but the results of any reading have more to do with the reader’s interests than with the text itself” (Eichele et al., 1995: 130–31).

Many readers of Scripture will be understandably wary of such extreme indeterminacy of meaning. Whether one locates meaning in the author, the text, or some combination thereof, meaning must have some degree of determinacy; otherwise communication cannot occur.

Language is in essence a medium of communication. If the hearer takes words in a sense not intended by the speaker, that is not an enlargement of meaning but a breakdown of communication. This claim applies to all uses of language, but it is especially apposite where a claim of revelation is involved. Certainly anyone, when reading a text of Scripture, may have a bright idea which is independent of the author’s intention, but which comes upon the reader with all the force and persuasiveness of revealed truth. But when that happens it is the reader’s idea, not the meaning of what he or she was reading; and any authority which we may attach to the text is irrelevant to the question of the truth or validity of the reader’s idea. (Caird, 1994: 423)

Authors normally assume that their intended meaning is communicable, and they expect that readers will receive something close to the message that they, the authors, intend to convey. Even reader-response theorists and deconstructionists do not like their words to be misinterpreted (Powell, 2001: 4–5). Moreover, a text is not just a single signifier, but a sequence of signifiers with a semantic integrity that ought to be respected. As Michael Root notes,

A text may be interpreted many ways, but most texts do have a specificity that excludes some interpretations. Many interpretations of an ambiguous text, such as *Moby Dick*, might fall within the limits of the credible, but *Moby Dick* is not about numerical patterns in the 1983 Columbia, South Carolina, phonebook. The text limits the bounds of acceptable interpretation. (1984: 155)

The examples of indeterminate meaning adduced by Fish involve terse or intentionally ambiguous texts (1980: 305–10, 322–29). It goes without saying that the meaning of a verbal snippet, ripped from its context, or of a list of words with no syntactical connection to one another will be hard to determine. Different kinds of discourse have meanings with different degrees of determinacy. For example, poetry is generally less determinate in meaning than prose since the former is more evocative, emotional, and imaginative. Hence, many of the literary theories developed in relation to poetry may not be fully or easily applicable to prose writings. Shorter utterances are less determinate than longer ones. A sequence of five signifiers (“I’m mad about my flat”) will obviously be more ambiguous than a sequence of fifty signifiers (“I’m mad about my flat. I just purchased this tire last week, and I’ve driven very carefully,” etc.). Careless writing is less determinate than precise writing. (The meaning of a text may be indeterminate because the author is a nincompoop. Generally speaking, the more skilled the author, the clearer the meaning of the text.) Finally, some authors may aim to be ambiguous, and so the meaning of their texts is intentionally indeterminate. Such authors seek to confound rather than communicate (Vanhoozer, 1998: 333).

Ultimately, deconstructionists deny the possibility of what countless readers do every time they pick up a book: they read, hoping to discover the meaning that the author intended to convey. These critics are a bit like the scientist who insists that the bumblebee’s weight to wing-area ratio makes its flight impossible. Meanwhile, the bumblebee, untutored in aerodynamics, goes about the business of flying. Likewise, average readers who do not have the advantage of deconstructive insight continue flitting from one text to another, busily engaged in what is, from all appearances, interpretation of “what is there.” Oblivious to the philosophers’ objections, they continue to gather the nectar of textual meaning under the assumption that they are getting the message the author intended.

Deconstructionists tend to absolutize the problems of interpretation and indeterminacy. Kevin Vanhoozer notes that Jacques Derrida, whose name

is virtually synonymous with deconstruction, made a mistake “to conclude that, because there are no certain foundations for determining the author’s intention, there is neither knowledge nor meaning. In other words, Derrida asks us to choose between the alternatives of absolute certainty or utter skepticism” (Vanhoozer, 1998: 211). But Hirsch rightly observes that “it is a logical mistake to confuse the impossibility of certainty in understanding with the impossibility of understanding” (1967: 17). If the assurance of certainty were a prerequisite, human beings would be paralyzed in all sorts of investigations. When it comes to literary knowledge (meaning derived from texts), as well as scientific knowledge (meaning derived from experimentation), good data and sound methodology take us as far as probable conclusions, and we live with probability all the time.

Interpretation is like throwing hand grenades: close is often good enough. Our grasp of textual meaning is neither absolutely certain nor hopelessly inconclusive. It is usually sufficient, and with training and practice it can improve. Human knowledge, whether historical, scientific, or literary, is always provisional and subject to correction, but the very concept of correction presupposes a normative meaning toward which interpreters are tending. To seek to understand the meaning intended by the author and conveyed by the author’s words is not a hopeless cause. The linguistic, historical, and cultural obstacles that were described in the introduction can be sufficiently overcome so as to gain an adequate understanding for forming and informing Christian faith and practice.

Interpretation, particularly communal acts of interpretation that are done by the church for the church, should not sever the link between biblical text and biblical author. To do so would undermine continuity between the church’s life and the revelatory process that is rooted in, though not limited to, divine inspiration of the writers of Scripture. Ben Meyer does not exaggerate when he says that “the maintenance of authentic Christian identity is the ultimate theological rationale of insistence on the intended sense of scriptural texts” (1989: 33). Individual believers sometimes read the Bible in idiosyncratic ways and yet remain faithful in their discipleship, but this is an inadequate model for Christian communities. All interpretations of Scripture, whether individual or communal, should strive at a minimum to “do no harm.” But formal interpretation that guides the faith and practice of Christian communities must go beyond this minimum and provide faithful and sound teaching that maintains continuity with sacred Scripture and the church through the ages.

Mark Allan Powell notes that Christianity is much more than doctrine, but for the sake of orthodox faith, “theological doctrine needs to be grounded in interpretation of scripture as understood in light of the historical intentions of the Bible’s original authors. Christian dogma should be expressive of the message of scripture, and that message is best determined with exegetical methods derived from an author-oriented hermeneutic” (2001: 56).

When I was in grade school, tetherball was a popular playground activity. A long, slender rope connected a volleyball-sized sphere to the top of a pole, and two players tried to wrap the rope completely around the pole by striking the ball in opposite directions. Several techniques were involved in this simple sport: serving, bumping, striking, blocking, tipping, and so forth; so the game could vary considerably in duration, strategy, skill, and number of personal injuries. But despite this variety, a few basic, immutable rules governed the game. A tetherball could not be untied from its pole, taken elsewhere, and used to play kickball. That would fundamentally alter the game such that one would no longer be playing tetherball. Similarly, valid interpretation embraces diverse methods and diverse expressions of textual meaning, but if interpreters sever meaning from the author by disregarding authorial intent and its textual expression, then the players are no longer interpreting but only playing kickball with the text.

To use the metaphor of geometry, we should not conceive of meaning as an exact geometric point with an absolutely precise location, but rather as a circle with dimensions. (The size of the circle will vary with the genre of the text and the skill and purposes of the author.) The desideratum of an interpreter is not a single, correct interpretation that admits of no variation whatsoever. There is, however, a center at which the interpreter aims. Interpretations that do not hit the exact center may still have value, but their value decreases the further they deviate from it. As Paul Ricoeur suggests, “Perhaps we should say that a text is a finite space of interpretations: there is not just one interpretation, but, on the other hand, there is not an infinite number of them. A text is a space of variations that has its own constraints” (1991: 496).

Is It Possible to Be Objective?

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, biblical research was usually conducted under the assumptions of the school of thought known as positivism. Associated with the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), positivism viewed theology and metaphysics as early, primitive modes of human existence. Humankind evolved through these imperfect modes to reach positivism, a state in which human beings seek “to discover the immutable universal laws that govern the universe by using observation, experimentation and calculation” (Macey, 2000: 303). Positivism owed much to the scientific method and in turn provided it with a philosophical history. Positivism was also a theory of knowledge or an epistemology. One gained knowledge by the objective, methodical analysis of data. This analysis involved two poles:

At one pole was the object to be known, which once posited, remained substantially identical with itself and epistemologically “stationary” through successive

acts of knowing to which it was subjected. At the other pole was the knowing subject, who, by scientific method, could operate cognitively upon the object without influencing it. In other words, through the rigorous use of method the knower could approach the free-standing object with a mind that was virtually [a] *tabula rasa* in regard to the object and could come to know it “as it is” without contaminating or distorting objective knowledge (the scientific ideal) with “subjectivity.” (Schneiders, 1991: 159)

Positivism had a natural affinity to the physical sciences. The subject/object polarity seemed accurately to describe the scientist hunched over a specimen in a petri dish. But its inadequacy became evident in the latter half of the twentieth century as philosophers realized that absolute objectivity was a myth. Scientists cannot escape their subjectivity, and that subjectivity has the potential to affect the process and results of scientific research. This is seen not just in cases of fraudulent or flagrantly biased research but also in subtle ways that may go undetected.

What is true in the physical sciences is all the more true in the humanities. The object of study in biblical interpretation is not quite analogous to a specimen in a petri dish. True, the Bible is an object for study, but it is an object with which we have a long relationship. This text is ingrained in our consciousness, our culture, and our deepest commitments. History, society, and we ourselves are profoundly shaped by it. So we can no longer claim to occupy a neutral, purely objective position from which to interpret Scripture.

This fact was recognized by Rudolf Bultmann in his celebrated essay “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” Bultmann asserted that this question was to be answered in the affirmative, if by “without presuppositions” one meant “without presupposing the results of exegesis.” “No exegesis that is guided by dogmatic prejudices hears what the text says but lets it say only what the exegete wants to hear” (1984: 145–46). Interpreters must not prejudge the matter under investigation, whether motivated by religious dogma, cultural prejudice, or rationalistic bias. (Bultmann himself sometimes fell prey to the latter.) But if by “without presuppositions” one means that the exegete has no interests, concerns, or “preunderstandings,” then such an approach is neither possible nor desirable.

Bultmann understood that biblical exegesis, which he saw as a form of historical criticism,

is possible only for one who does not stand over against it as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator but also stands within it and shares responsibility for it. . . . This existential relation to history is the basic presupposition for understanding it. This does not mean that understanding history is “subjective” in the sense that it depends on the personal preference of the historian and thereby loses all objective significance. On the contrary, it means that history can be understood precisely in its objective content only by a subject who is existentially concerned

and alive. It means that the scheme of subject and object that has validity for natural science is not valid for historical understanding. (1984: 150)

The claim about the natural sciences in the last sentence was a common assumption in 1957, when Bultmann wrote the German original of this essay, but as I noted above, scientists as well as historians in the postmodern world recognize the problematic nature of claiming absolute objectivity.

So all researchers must contend with the fact of their subjectivity: their personalities, biases, prejudices, idiosyncrasies, commitments, and so forth. Subjectivity, in essence, refers to the fact that all of us must “process” reality through physical perception, emotions, and rational analysis. But perception, emotions, and reason involve individual variability. One person sees a situation as threatening; another does not. One person sees a text as oppressive; another thinks it is rather benign. One person finds a solution to a problem to be reasonable; another regards it as folly.

If our subjectivity is inescapable, what do we do with it? We have seen that an earlier generation of positivists simply denied the problem. That solution is no longer tenable. Should interpreters therefore revel in their subjectivity? Should we say, “Let your interpretive imagination run wild! Produce the reading that seems best to you. Just don’t regard your interpretation as normative for anyone else, not even for yourself in a different time or place”? Should we take philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s maxim “There are no facts, only interpretations” (1967: 267, §481; also 327, §§604–5) to be a declaration of independence rather than a counsel of despair? Alternatively, perhaps interpreters should suppress their subjectivity at all costs, stifling their individuality so as to become detached, scientist-like observers? This alternative assumes that objectivity is arrived at through the subtraction, or at least suppression, of subjectivity (Meyer, 1994: 109).

A mediate solution that acknowledges subjectivity without giving it *carte blanche* is found in the philosophical system known as critical realism (Meyer, 1989, 1994; Wright, 1992a: 32–37; Dunn, 2003b: 110–11). Critical realism is a theory of knowing. Like positivism, it affirms the independent existence of the object of study. There really is something there apart from our perception of it, whether a protozoan under a microscope or a text in the hands of a reader. The modern critical text of the Greek New Testament is an objective entity of study. But unlike positivism, critical realism acknowledges that our only access to that object is through our very human and individual perception, perception that must always be subject to critique. Interpreters must not only reflect on the text but also on the process of interpretation itself, acknowledging the potential for misperception and standing ready to engage in self-critique and to receive critique from other interpreters. The maxim of the critical realist is, “There really are facts to be interpreted, but interpretations are always provisional.”

Critical realism on the one hand responds to the error of positivism by its self-critical faculty, and on the other hand, to the errors of postmodern pluralism and indeterminacy of meaning by its insistence on the otherness of the data. Ben Meyer rightly stresses that “objectivity is not achieved by the flight from subjectivity nor by any and every cultivation of subjectivity, but by an intense and persevering effort to exercise subjectivity attentively, intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly” (1994: 4). In this way, objectivity is not to be confused with neutrality or disinterest (Green, 2007b: 74–75). Through the responsible exercise of (admittedly subjective) perception and reason, Christian interpreters of Scripture can achieve understanding, not perfect or final understanding, but sufficient for informed judgments about faith and practice.

In a sense, “complete objectivity” is a straw man whose refutation hardly advances the debate. James Barr offers the following bon mot: “It is true that complete objectivity is not attainable, but a high degree of objectivity is attainable, and a high degree of it is very much better than a low degree” (1980: 24; see also Stylianopoulos, 1997: 81; Marshall, 2004: 25). This statement is an island of common sense in a sea of hermeneutical confusion. We should not set the bar of objectivity so high that no one can attain it. Neither should we set the bar on the ground so that anyone can step over it without exertion. Absolute objectivity has rightly been demythologized, but if perfection is unattainable, it does not necessarily follow that excellence is too. We should resist all-or-none thinking vis-à-vis objectivity. A chastened and self-aware subjectivity can be combined with a humble commitment to the highest degree of objectivity that one can attain.

Is a Confessional Context Inherently Biased?

The Bible has a unique status in Christian communities, although it might be hard to give a detailed description of that status in terms that would be acknowledged by all such communities. Stanley Porter and Kent Clarke offer the following faith assumptions held by most Christians:

1. In some shape or form, the Bible is thought to record the word(s) of God.
2. More so than other writings, the Bible is considered to embody a truer or better reflection and more accurate representation of reality.
3. The degree of authority attached to the Bible by individuals and communities supersedes that of any other literary text. . . .
4. The Bible is ascribed a central role in informing and guiding the faith and practice of these individuals and communities. (Porter, 1997a: 15–16)

What is the difference between biblical interpretation in nonconfessional contexts, such as a public university, and confessional contexts? Among other things, the two approaches can be distinguished on the basis of their aims: descriptive versus prescriptive, respectively. Nonconfessional interpretation aims at describing the historical meaning of the text. The concern is what Mark, Luke, or Paul meant, not what existential relevance it might have for modern readers. The confessional approach is prescriptive, in that it seeks to determine the normative force of the text: its continuing significance in shaping the life of persons who stand under its authority. This distinction is useful so long as one bears in mind that a confessional approach by no means excludes description. Indeed, responsible interpretation in confessional contexts will first engage in thorough description before moving to the prescriptive phase. One must *understand* the meaning of the text before one can *stand under* the authority of the text.

So Christians claim that the biblical text is in some sense normative for faith and life, that it concerns matters that are transcendent and claims to which we are beholden. Indeed, many Christian interpreters would go beyond the claim of transcendence to an assertion of finality or ultimacy. Ben Meyer insists that the gospel cannot be reduced to one among many stories or “paradigms of transcendence” because of the particulars of its story: “The gospel cannot be reduced to one among many paradigms unless it can be shown that the story is essentially illusory: that the protagonist is not who the story says he is, that he does not do what the story says he does, that he has not been ‘raised from the dead,’ as the story says he has, and that he will not bring the story to the end that, in the story itself, he says he will” (1994: x). Thus the confessional context for New Testament interpretation entails significant assumptions concerning the transcendence, relevance, and uniqueness of the text’s message. Do such assumptions hopelessly bias the process of interpretation? Is the secular context superior by virtue of its freedom from or denial of such claims?

The possibility of prejudicial interpretation in confessional contexts cannot be denied. If we recall Bultmann’s influential essay on exegesis without presuppositions (1984), we will be chastened not to let faith predetermine the meaning of a passage. The text must be allowed to speak with its own voice and without the censorship of dogmatic convictions. But bias is not a necessary result of theological commitments. James Barr rightly asserts this and warns of bias from other quarters:

The idea . . . that objectivity in biblical study can be attained through the exclusion of theological interest should not be accepted; and, as theologians have often and rightly pointed out, where theological interest has been excluded it has often been only to make room for some secular or pseudo-theological ideology which is equally destructive of objectivity. (1980: 24–25)

As Barr goes on to say, the critical issue is the *quality* of one's theological attitude. If one's theology permits Scripture to be heard, and if the interpreter remains open to transformation, even of cherished theological commitments, then "strong theological conviction can coexist with and rejoice in a very high degree of objectivity" (1980: 24).

Faith then is by no means inherently inimical to rigorous and critical study of Scripture. Sandra Schneiders goes beyond this (rightly, I think) to claim that faith in some sense is necessary for the fullest understanding and appropriation of the biblical text. She does not mean that only Christians validly interpret the New Testament but rather that "openness to the transcendent" is necessary for the interpretation of classic, religious texts: "One who approaches [the Bible] with an a priori and nonnegotiable conviction that no such claims [bearing on religious reality] can be taken seriously because they are without exception false cannot validly interpret this text" (1991: 60; see also 89–90). Readers who bracket out existential and religious claims are missing the New Testament's *raison d'être*. "Without facing the inalienably transformative and self-involving demands that these ecclesial writings place on a serious reader, it is impossible to make significant sense of them—or to understand why they were written or how they survived" (Bockmuehl, 2006: 46).

The website of a major public university had the following statement concerning its program in religious studies: "The Program engages in the academic study of religion. Its fundamental premise is that everything we consider 'religious'—whether found in literature, history, or society—is entirely a human phenomenon." The description went on to speak of the interdisciplinary and interdepartmental nature of the program and the variety of analytical tools used nowadays in religious studies. None of this is controversial or unique. Nevertheless, the description of religion as "*entirely* a human phenomenon" strikes me as both unfortunate and unnecessary. Certainly all religious phenomena *can be approached* in human terms: texts written by human beings, institutions shaped by human beings, rituals and practices engaged in by human beings, and so forth. But the description goes beyond that to exclude any transcendent dimension: "entirely human" in the sense of having nothing to do with the divine in any real, ontological way. Obviously a public institution in the United States must, by law and by practical necessity, employ a secular approach to religious phenomena, but one can bracket out certain perspectives without denying their validity, and the statement seems to do the latter. If the New Testament is read in this way, one's study is constrained from the outset, for central to the truth claims of the New Testament (indeed, of most religious literature) is the assertion that its subject matter is *more than* a human phenomenon.

So again, far from being necessarily detrimental to responsible biblical interpretation, the confessional context is appropriate to it. The church is the body of those who have heard and responded to the Bible's message. In

particular, the New Testament is “indigenous” to the church, having originated in its social contexts and, in turn, having shaped its identity. If Christian interpreters remember that their understandings are always subject to correction and reform, the risk of faith’s distortion will be outweighed by the fruit of faith’s enrichment. Raymond Brown reaches a similar conclusion in the *New Jerome Bible Commentary*:

Since the biblical books were written by believers for believers, the believing community is a good (and not necessarily a prejudiced) context for interpretation, provided that this community enters into frank dialogue with its tradition. . . . One may acknowledge that at times, because of the weaknesses of those who constitute it, the church does not immediately or adequately respond to a meaning of Scripture that is patent to exegetes—whence the constant need of renewal and reform from within. But despite that, the church remains par excellence the place where Scripture is heard in its truest and fullest meaning. (R. Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, 1990: 1161, 1164)

Samuel Sandmel, a Jewish rabbi and scholar of early Christianity, makes a similar, if somewhat more modest, claim on the matter: “Objectivity is an ideal. No one truly attains it. One strives toward it, buoyed by extravagant hopes and discouraged by a recognition of personal shortcomings. But religiously committed Jews and Christians are no less capable of dealing objectively with historical material than are secular scholars” (1978: vii–viii).

What Claims Should Be Made for Scripture and Its Authority?

Volumes have been written on the topics of biblical authority, inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, and a host of other descriptions of the character and function of Scripture. I make no pretense to have mastered that literature or to offer a summary of it in this short space. My aim is simply to describe the position that I embrace and to commend it to the reader. I think it is important not to overstate the role of Scripture or to make excessive claims in its behalf. Doing so causes people to become bogged down in defending the Bible against a host of technical difficulties and, as a result, to be distracted from the primary tasks of interpreting and responding to Scripture as the Word of God. As John Stott urges, the most important thing in our relationship to the Bible is “not subscription but submission. That is, it is not whether we subscribe to an impeccable formula about the Bible but whether we live in practical submission to what the Bible teaches” (1999: 62).

In some Christian circles “inerrant” and “infallible” have become important words to describe the nature of Scripture. They are used almost interchangeably, but a slight distinction exists (Schneiders, 1991: 53–55). “Inerrant” means “free from error.” In the fundamentalist/modernist debates of the early twen-

tieth century, the inerrancy of Scripture was one of the key doctrines defining fundamentalism. “Infallible” is a bit more nuanced in its meanings. Though it can mean “incapable of error,” it may have a slightly more modest meaning: “not liable to deceive or mislead.” Moreover, in theological debates about Scripture, “infallible” may carry the implicit qualification “incapable of error in matters of doctrine or morals.”

In the comprehensive sense of “*wholly* incapable of error,” both “inerrant” and “infallible” are problematic terms. First, there are many practical challenges to the idea that Scripture is free from all errors. There are historical problems, internal discrepancies between parallel accounts, incorrect literary references, as well as theological and moral problems in the Bible. Persons who affirm a thoroughgoing version of inerrancy either have to dismiss the challenges of biblical criticism out of hand or engage in an endless series of critical skirmishes. The defense of inerrancy requires that these battles consistently be won or at least fought to a draw such that judgment may be suspended. Although the Bible should be defended against sweeping and unjustified claims of its being untrustworthy, the defense of absolute inerrancy is not time well spent. Second, there is a theological problem with this view of inerrancy in that it attributes to the Bible a level of perfection and authority that belongs to God alone. The Bible’s authority is a *derived* authority. As N. T. Wright says, “The phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture’” (2005: 23). The Bible is a product of both divine and human activity and, as the latter, it partakes of the limitations of human discourse and thought. If the Bible were wholly inerrant and intrinsically and unqualifiedly authoritative, it could only have been produced by an eclipse of the human authors. In such a case, thoroughgoing inerrancy has the same effect as the old “dictation theory” of inspiration, a view that is generally rejected even by inerrantists.

A more modest and defensible claim is that the teaching of Scripture is trustworthy in matters of faith and practice. When I was in graduate school at a major university, I was a teaching assistant for a professor who was a respected critical scholar as well as a practicing Catholic. One day after a session of the New Testament intro course, the professor was talking to a student who was a bit disturbed by remarks in the lecture about the nature of Scripture, particularly concerning such categories as “inerrancy,” “inspiration,” and so forth. I happened to be nearby, and the professor turned to me unexpectedly and said, “Well, Clayton, you believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, don’t you?” Suddenly I knew how Jesus felt when the Pharisees tried to trap him with a question to which there was no good answer. An unqualified “yes” would disregard my critical training. An unqualified “no” would further dismay a student who was already struggling. I’m not always mentally agile when put on the spot, but on that occasion I managed an answer that was both truth-

ful and pastoral. I said, “I believe that Scripture unerringly teaches the way of salvation.”

Indeed, I do believe that Scripture is inerrant in this respect, but because of the history and the ambiguity of the term, I prefer simply to speak of Scripture’s authority. (For reasons why even some evangelical Christians are uncomfortable with the word “inerrancy,” see Stott, 1999: 61–62.) Even 2 Timothy 3:16, the locus classicus for biblical inspiration, makes a relatively modest claim for “Scripture.” (By this term, the biblical author must have meant the sacred writings of that day, approximating our Old Testament, but perhaps more or less inclusive. The writings of the New Testament can be subsumed under this claim only by extension, as an implication of their canonical status.) What are the implied results of inspiration according to 2 Timothy 3:16? In short, they are practical and functional. Divinely inspired Scripture is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

This functional authority of Scripture is similar, therefore, to the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture (Vanhoozer, 2005: 730–31). This too is a modest and defensible claim. The sufficiency of Scripture asserts that what God reveals in and through Scripture is sufficient for salvation and for faithful Christian discipleship. Thus the doctrine implies that Scripture is sufficient in keeping with the purposes that God intended for it. It may not be God’s intent that Scripture be an inerrant science text, a book of precise genealogical records, or a journalistic report of historical events. Moreover, the sufficiency of Scripture is an ancient and enduring claim, having basis in both the patristic and medieval eras (Congar, 1967: 107–18; Stylianopoulos, 1997: 226; Ward, 2002).

So I offer the following definition of the inspiration of Scripture. What it lacks in succinctness it will hopefully make up for in soundness. *Inspiration is that influence of the Holy Spirit upon the human authors of the Bible that makes their writings sufficient, when taken as a whole and interpreted through the guidance of the same Spirit who inspired them, to reveal the nature and will of God, to lead persons to Christ and salvation, and to guide them in essential matters of faith and practice.*

What Is the Proper Disposition of the Interpreter?

Nowadays there is much discussion about whether suspicion or trust is the proper disposition of the interpreter of Scripture. Despite the revelatory power and transcendent subject matter of Scripture, it is still unmistakably written in human and thus finite language and is limited by human perspectives, particularly the cultural assumptions of the ancient Near East and the Hellenistic world. Modern readers will naturally find passages of Scripture that are peculiar, embarrassing, oppressive, or downright offensive. Issues that quickly come to mind include the justification or tacit acceptance of slavery

(Exod. 21:20–21; 1 Pet. 2:18), capital punishment for minor offenses (Exod. 21:17), the restriction of women’s roles (1 Cor. 14:33–35; 1 Tim. 2:11–15), and anti-Jewish sentiments (John 8:44; 1 Thess. 2:15–16). The reasons for approaching Scripture with suspicion are plentiful.

Problematic passages of Scripture, such as those just listed, are evidence of the fact that texts have ideologies, interests, and agendas, just as interpreters do. Neither texts nor readers are neutral. The ideologies of the text, along with the ideologies of the history of interpretation, point to the need for a critical and judicious approach to Scripture, one that is not naive about the potential that texts possess to distort and do harm. This approach is often dubbed the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” The term may have been coined by German New Testament scholar Ernst Fuchs (J. Robertson, 1979: 373n25), and as early as 1970 it was used by Paul Ricoeur (1970: 32–26), but feminist scholars, notably Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995: 1–22), have given it wide currency in the last three decades.

Although a certain suspicion about the text is useful in unmasking a potentially harmful ideology, any hermeneutical approach is itself subject to criticism. If by “hermeneutics of suspicion” one means a negative, defensive, or adversarial predisposition toward the text, then it is an unwise stance. Suspicion in this sense does not work well as a persistent worldview (Vanhoozer, 1998: 458; see also Bockmuehl, 2006: 55). It morphs too easily into cynicism, paranoia, or indifference. N. T. Wright warns that “suspicion is all very well; there is also such a thing as a hermeneutic of paranoia. Somebody says something; they must have motive; therefore they must have made it up. Just because we are rightly determined to avoid a hermeneutic of credulity, that does not mean there is no such thing as appropriate trust, or even readiness to suspend disbelief for a while, and see where it gets us” (Borg and Wright, 1999: 18).

A hermeneutics of suspicion may also exaggerate the problem that it addresses. The patriarchy of antiquity has tainted the Bible in varying degrees. Some texts are deeply imbued by its harmful ideology; in others patriarchy is a minor aspect of the cultural background; and in still others, thankfully, we see an argument contrary to the prevailing patriarchal assumption. If one regards the Scriptures as *pervasively* oppressive, there is a danger of magnifying the disease that one hopes to cure, as well as failing to recognize and avail oneself of benign texts. As Richard Hays queries, “If the Bible itself, the revelatory, identity-defining text of the Christian community, is portrayed as oppressive, on what basis do we know God or relate to God?” (Hays, 1997: 218)

By the hermeneutics of suspicion, then, I mean a sober assessment of (1) the historical context of Scripture’s production: the world of antiquity in which, among other things, men dominated nearly all power structures and the status quo of slavery was rarely questioned; and (2) the human context of Scripture’s interpretation: our fallen world, in which texts *may* be, but need not invariably be, composed and/or interpreted to establish or perpetuate systems of injustice.

As Ben Meyer writes, “Critical distance and ‘the hermeneutic of suspicion’ in the sense of attention to bias, to ideology, to rationalizing explanations, screening devices, etc., not only in the text but [also] in the [critics themselves], are indispensable to critique” (Meyer, 1989: 23).

As a counterpoint to the hermeneutics of suspicion, other scholars have emphasized the hermeneutics of trust, goodwill, or openness. Goodwill in hermeneutics “is neither sentimental affection nor guaranteed uncritical agreement.” On the contrary, “it is the willingness to take the other seriously, to allow our conversation partner’s questions to engage us personally as real questions, to let his or her concerns concern us. . . . Goodwill entertains the possibility that one’s own achievements and one’s own cultural assumptions may not be the highest point in human history” (J. Robertson, 1979: 376). Goodwill consists of openness and receptivity, but it need not entail reflexive capitulation to the text. Readers need not sell their souls, just open their minds.

A number of critics recommend openness or goodwill as the most appropriate disposition, not just when reading sacred Scripture, but also in reading literature generally. Genuine attention and sympathy are required because we are engaging and being engaged by another human being’s discourse. “Good will is an antecedent disposition of openness to the horizon, message, and tone of the text. The impersonal curiosity of the physicist is not enough for the interpreter” (Meyer, 1989: 92).

How then does one balance the respective merits of a hermeneutics of trust and a hermeneutics of suspicion? It is tempting to resort to a paradoxical both/and solution and say that the text must be approached with both trust and suspicion. In fact, this is the correct answer, but we can be more precise than this and thereby avoid most of the contradiction. Trust is necessary in the initial phase, when the text is interpreted and its meaning is discovered. Suspicion enters during the second phase, the evaluative or critical phase, when the significance of the text for the modern community of faith is discerned. Ben Meyer makes a similar distinction and assigns a different hermeneutical disposition to each stage:

The intrinsically appropriate stance of the interpreter is not doubt nor skepticism nor suspicion, but goodwill, empathy, the readiness to find truth, common understanding, agreement. . . . This initial stance does not foreclose critique. It supposes a distinction between understanding and critique, between their respective objects and requisites, and so between the stances appropriate to each. Finally, this view acknowledges accurate understanding as a *sine qua non* condition of valid critique. (1989: 22–23)

The latter sentence articulates an important principle: you cannot fairly critique a text that you have not first understood on its own terms. As Meir Sternberg remarks, “Even to judge against the text’s grain, you must first judge with

it: receptivity before resistance, competent reading before liberated counter-reading, poetics before politics” (1992: 473). This insight can be stated in a succinct, memorable maxim: *Suspicion must be suspended till the text is apprehended*. Vanhoozer makes a useful distinction between “letting the text have its say” and “letting the text have its way” (1998: 374–76). In the initial stage of interpretation, when trust and goodwill are primary, the reader must let the text have its say. In the latter stage, before letting the text have its way, a hermeneutics of suspicion critiques the text for any harmful ideology.

Thus both goodwill and suspicion are needed in the full task of hermeneutics. So Ricoeur wrote: “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by the double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience” (1970: 27). The combination of trust and suspicion is needed since, in addition to having respective merits, both dispositions have respective liabilities. The danger inherent in the hermeneutics of trust is naïveté about human fallenness; the danger inherent in the hermeneutics of suspicion is cynicism and contempt.

Even in the suspicion phase, however, trust is not excluded. Since the Scriptures have served the church over two millennia and have fundamentally shaped its faith and practice, our default posture throughout the hermeneutical task should be trust. Suspicion operates better as a radar than a rototiller, alerting the interpreter to the presence of a detrimental agenda more so than churning through the text in a deconstructive fashion. Suspicion guides the reader in identifying and, if possible, rehabilitating problematic texts. This immediately raises a key question: By what criteria does a text’s meaning become problematic? My personal experience? The experience of the oppressed? Some broad overarching principle? This is one of the most important questions in biblical interpretation, but it awaits a later section of the book.

Must Exegesis Be Done in the Original Languages?

The original language of the New Testament was not English, despite the quip about the devout old-timer who said, “If the King James Version was good enough for Paul, it’s good enough for me!” The New Testament’s language is a specimen of Koine (*Koinē*) Greek, the common dialect of the period following the conquests of Alexander the Great. A working knowledge of New Testament Greek is without question an advantage in the task of interpretation.

Yet this advantage should not be exaggerated. History is replete with persons who knew only vernacular translations and were used by God in powerful and effective ways. The ability to work with biblical languages is, therefore, not the litmus test of a faithful ministry. Recently I read the following claim by a Christian apologist: “Divinely inspired is precisely what Scripture is, and having a direct, unmediated encounter with the very words of God himself is the

promise held by learning the biblical languages” (Akin, 2004: 33). Though I am always sympathetic to an argument in favor of biblical languages, this statement tends in the direction of a dictation theory of inspiration. Moreover, it ignores the fact that even the original languages clothe the message of Scripture in human language, culture, and thought. We will have “a direct, unmediated encounter with the very words of God himself” when we meet God in heaven, not before. In the meantime, however, learning biblical languages does enable the interpreter to move one step closer to the words of the biblical authors and thus, in the providence of the self-revealing God, we trust that we are a step closer to the truths that God would have us know.

In essence the reason for studying the New Testament in Greek is that it yields all the benefits you derive from studying it in English, only much more so. Every aspect of understanding a literary text—semantics, rhetoric, allusions, idioms, metaphors, morphology, verbal aspect, syntax, discourse, and so forth—can be done with much greater precision, power, and proximity via the original language. A few tasks, such as establishing the text through textual criticism, can really *only* be done via the original. Christian teachers and preachers should want the closest possible contact with the thought of the biblical writers. Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your sweetheart through Saran Wrap. It’s better than nothing, but direct contact is always more exciting.

The benefits of original language study are numerous:

1. *The ability to evaluate English translations.* The welter of English translations can be confusing. The person trained in Greek is able to compare them to the original and evaluate their success in rendering the thought and language of the biblical authors.

2. *Semantic precision.* The old adage that “something gets lost in the translation” is true and well known to anyone who has struggled to render one language into another. Although the most recent, standard translations are generally the responsible work of trained scholars, they sometimes err and frequently are forced to choose one among various nuances of the original. Knowing Greek enables you to uncover the errors and to enter into and understand the debates.

3. *The discipline of textual criticism.* English translations sometimes have footnotes identifying variant readings based on different Greek manuscripts. Our smooth vernacular renditions depend on a critical Greek text, which is itself the product of immense labor: sifting manuscripts, judging different readings, applying criteria, and so forth. The production and transmission of books in antiquity knew nothing of the fixity of texts that modern printing makes possible. One can scarcely make sense of these issues and understand how textual decisions were made without some knowledge of Greek.

4. *The use of scholarly tools.* Although many dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, and monographs are usable by persons who do not know

biblical languages, the greatest benefit is gained by persons who are able to follow linguistic discussions and are not intimidated by the occasional excerpt in Greek or Hebrew. The more technical tools—Greek lexicons, theological dictionaries, grammars, Greek concordances, and so forth—require at least a working knowledge of the original language.

5. *The general benefit of attention to language.* It is a common experience among students that, in the course of their Greek study, they learn English. Nowadays students of the New Testament are often many years beyond their formal study of English grammar. They may begin Greek study while being a little fuzzy on predicate nominatives, the subjunctive mood, or even the basic parts of speech. Work in any language, particularly a highly inflected ancient language, forces one to recall the basic structures of language and the alternative ways of expression.

6. *The general benefit of slowing down.* Well-educated English readers breeze through most popular reading material (magazines, newspapers, fiction) with fluent ease. We can do the same with biblical narratives if we want to catch a quick overview, but if our purpose is careful study with a view to teaching or proclamation, then a slower, methodical pace is more appropriate. Working with the original languages guarantees this. We ponder sentence structure, word meanings, images, and phrases. Our attention is heightened, and our observations are more detailed. We see things in Greek that we do not see in English.

7. *Hearing the revelatory Word.* Finally, as the gestalt principle would assert, the whole of these benefits is greater than the sum of their parts. The result of a regular discipline of working with the original languages of the Bible is a heightened ability to hear in them the Word of God. God is revealed supremely in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, as well as through Scripture, the written Word. As human flesh constituted the earthly Jesus, so human language constitutes Scripture. Martin Luther recognized the biblical languages as a means to this lofty end: “The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out [Matt. 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments” (1962: 360).

In our culture generally and in education particularly, the trend of the last few decades has been pragmatic and utilitarian. We eschew learning that we deem to be for learning’s sake only. We prefer to invest time in things that have an immediate and apparent payoff. The division of the theological curriculum into “practical” disciplines and “classical” or “historical” disciplines has the unfortunate effect of implying that the latter are impractical. This implication is false, however, since rigorous study of the Bible, including study of its original languages, has great potential to enrich both the content and the dynamics of one’s interpretation and to transform the interpreter.

The amount of emphasis given to biblical languages in theological education varies widely among Christian denominations. Lutherans, Presbyterians, and some evangelical denominations often require a full course in Hebrew and/or Greek. Among Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and others, biblical language study is usually optional. Given that range of variation, the present book will employ Greek in transliteration in the hope that it will be usable both by persons with Greek language skill and by those without it, and in the hope that some of those without it might be moved to acquire it.

Exegetes have an impressive array of language tools on which to draw nowadays. In addition to the traditional hardcopy lexicons, grammars, parsing guides, and so forth, there are now several software programs with Hebrew and Greek texts, a wealth of translations, automatic identification of forms, and lexical assistance at the click of a mouse. These tools have made textual analysis much easier, and given that fact, there is no reason why serious interpreters of the New Testament should not have at least a lexical knowledge of Greek. The ability to read, translate, and do original exegesis of the Greek text is the ideal, but lacking that, the various computer tools available today enable the novice to make more intelligent use of the scholarly literature.

A Preview of the Method in This Book

An overview of the method presented in this book appears on page xlvii in the diagram titled “A Model for Biblical Interpretation.” No one can propose such a model without being deeply indebted to others: former professors, colleagues, and scholars in the areas of hermeneutical theory, practice, and pedagogy. What follows is no exception. In particular I must acknowledge a debt to Robert A. Traina’s *Methodical Bible Study* (2002), first published in 1952 and a classic in inductive Bible study method. Though the model presented here adapts, modifies, and supplements Traina, my indebtedness, especially in terminology, will be apparent to anyone familiar with that volume. The structure of the model is fourfold. In a sense the model moves in a circle, from the present time of the modern reader to the past of the ancient text, and eventually back to the modern reader’s context. The four stages are as follows:

1. *Analyzing and preparing the interpreter.* The place to begin the interpretive process is with interpreters themselves. Although theorists will continue to debate just how large the role of the reader is and should be in interpretation, few would deny that the identity of the reader has an influence. We all read from some “place,” and keen self-awareness about one’s own location can enhance the process of reading, making one alert to one’s own biases and sensitivities. Among the many things that one could reflect upon are one’s social location, theological identity, and life experiences. Self-reflection will

lead to better engagement with the text, and this is especially true when the text involved is one that contributes to the reader's self-understanding.

2. *Analyzing the text (exegesis)*. In this second stage we turn to the text proper. Regardless of the identity of the reader, the text still presents us with hard data. The text has an objective quality, even though our observation and analysis of it necessarily occur through our own subjectivity. In this stage several discrete, analytical steps are involved. If interpretation is both a science and an art, this stage is the most scientific. Textual analysis involves a cyclical process of observation and interrogation. The interpreter poses a question to the text and then through the observation of the text's content, structure, language, and so forth, tries to answer that question. This process often raises other questions, leading to further observation. The importance of detailed, astute observation and analysis of the text can hardly be overemphasized. From this process the interpreter synthesizes an interpretation or explication of the text. At this stage the chief focus is historical: seeking the meaning intended by the biblical author and conveyed by the words. This is not the end of interpretation, at least for confessional readers, but it is an extremely important mediate stage. Before one moves to evaluating and contemporizing the text, the biblical author/text should be understood as fairly and objectively as possible (acknowledging the impossibility of doing this perfectly).

3. *Evaluating and contemporizing the text (hermeneutics)*. The third stage is distinguished from exegesis not so much by differentiating "what the text meant" from "what the text means" (cf. Stendahl, 1962: 419–20), but rather by taking the textual meaning and simply asking, What does the contemporary Christian community do with this? How do we receive the meaning of the text? Can we receive it? What is its significance for us in the twenty-first century? Needless to say, this hermeneutical stage is one of the most crucial in the interpretive process. Sharp disagreements between Christians nowadays, especially on divisive matters of ethics and public policy, often hinge on how one adjudicates the results of the exegetical phase. At this point, other criteria are brought in, what one might call "hermeneutical adjuncts." For although the Bible is an authoritative source for the faith and practice of Christians, its authority does not operate in a vacuum. If it did do so, we could adopt the Reformation motto *sola scriptura* in the most absolute sense and largely do away with this third step. But in fact, nearly all Christian traditions employ one or more additional criteria such as tradition, reason, and experience. A more realistic motto, then, would be *prima scriptura*: Scripture as the primary authority, but in conjunction with and mediated by other authorities. Both revelation and reason are gifts from God; indeed, they are interrelated gifts, since one cannot grasp a written, historical revelation without the use of reason. From this stage a contemporary interpretation of the text emerges.

4. *Appropriating the text and transforming the community*. In confessional contexts the ultimate goal of biblical study is the transformation of the

readers, their faith communities, and the world in which they live. Appropriation involves responding faithfully to the interpreted word. In appropriating Scripture, we make it our own. We follow its mandate; we heed its guidance; we reshape our lives in its light. All of this assumes that the previous stages have been carried out judiciously. If confessional readers are diligent in their study, are led by the Holy Spirit, and respond with a faithful performance of Scripture, then the results of their interpretation will tend toward the fulfillment of Jesus's prayer that "God's will may be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (cf. Matt. 6:9–10).

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the structure of the method presented here is somewhat heuristic. By that I mean that the precise sequence of the four steps in the overall method or of the dozen steps in the exegetical section (chapter 2) is useful as an aid to learning even if artificial in some respects. Experienced interpreters may skip steps, recognizing almost intuitively that some steps are irrelevant to certain texts or certain inquiries. Such experts may perform steps out of the order given in this book. Particularly vis-à-vis the overall method, one could argue that the separation of historical exegesis and contemporary hermeneutics into discrete stages is artificial. This is a valid cautionary note. As Brevard Childs observes, "Proper interpretation does not consist of an initial stance of seeking a purely objective or neutral reading to which the element of faith is added subsequently, but rather, from the start, the Christian reader receives a particular point of standing from which to identify with the apostolic faith in awaiting a fresh word from God through the Spirit" (1995: 10). The real-life praxis of biblical interpretation is more dynamic than a static, four-stage method implies. Nevertheless I argue that (1) there is a basic logic to most parts of the sequence; (2) the presentation of the method in a book is by necessity sequential, even if the actual implementation of the method may be more fluid; and (3) beginning interpreters in particular do well to ground themselves in an orderly method.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the following modern example of a contested meaning. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech (1963) referred to King's longing for a day when people would "be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In mid-1997 these words from Dr. King were cited by several politicians and litigants who were involved in legal battles over employment and college admissions issues to argue that affirmative action violated the ideal of a color-blind society. Others protested that King's words were being taken out of the context of his speech and life, that he would have supported affirmative action, and that this line was an extemporaneous comment, not part of

his manuscript. Was this use of Dr. King's words valid? If it was *not* in accord with his intention, was it a misinterpretation? Is the distinction between meaning/intention and significance/effect/application helpful here?

2. The Declaration of Independence contains the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Since these words were written in 1776, what was originally meant by the final words: "All *men* are created equal"? If today we construe "men" generically to include men *and women* of all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels, have we violated the intent of the original authors?

For Further Reading

Many books, essays, and articles have been cited in the parenthetical notes in this chapter. In addition to those resources, one may turn to a variety of reference works containing articles on the issues that have been raised. Here I can only mention a few of these.

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, 1990) has major essays titled "Hermeneutics" and "Inspiration."

The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation (Hayes, 1999) has the brief entries "Eisegesis," "Exegesis," "Hermeneutics," and "Meaning," as well as entries on a variety of interpretive methods.

The massive *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Freedman, 1992) has lengthy articles titled "Biblical Criticism," "Exegesis," "Hermeneutics," "History of Interpretation," "Scriptural Authority," and "Word of God."

The assortment of technical vocabulary in biblical interpretation can be intimidating to the beginner. Helpful dictionaries include Coggins and Houlden (1990), Hayes (1999), and especially Tate (2006). For terminology related to general literary criticism, Macey (2000) is helpful. Finally, the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Vanhoozer, 2005) is an exceptionally rich resource for confessional interpreters. It has entries titled "Exegesis," "Hermeneutics," "Meaning," "Objectivity," and entries on a wide variety of interpretive methods, movements, and individuals.