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I express special appreciation to Dr. Leon Golden of the Department of Humanities, the Florida State University for his catalytic role in the development of my interest in literary criticism. I also express gratitude to Evangel University for providing released time to pursue this project, to Dr. William Griffin, who was gracious enough to develop a program for the indexing, and to Dr. Mark House of Hendrickson Publishers for his editorial assistance in updating both the content and format for this new edition.
Since the appearance of the 1997 revised edition of *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, the discipline of biblical studies has witnessed an explosion of critical praxes that have changed the face of hermeneutics so profoundly that a hermeneutics text without a discussion of these critical methodologies is severely limited in its vision. Over the last decade, biblical scholars have increasingly realized that interpretation always takes place within social locations that include interpretive methodologies which posture the reader before a text in particular ways by determining what kind of questions the reader asks of the text. Revisions that incorporate the developments in scholarship over the past decade are necessary for the book to have continuing relevance in the field of hermeneutics. For this reason, the third edition includes discussions of critical methodologies that I did not include in previous editions.

In response to students’ and scholars’ observations and recommendations, I have also made the following changes and additions:

1. Rather than placing descriptions (synopses) of critical methods exclusively in the last unit, I have included three of the most characteristic approaches pertaining to each of the three “worlds” of biblical interpretation at the end of each of the units where that world is discussed. Additional synopses related to each of the three worlds of interpretation can be found in the appendixes.

In this book I offer an approach to explicating texts that employs elements from a number of approaches from all three worlds: author, text, and reader. Since detailed treatment of these methods would make the book unwieldy as a text to be used in the classroom, I provide brief synopses that offer resources for further readings that reflect the current conditions of biblical hermeneutics. It has been my experience that most serious interpreters of texts are eclectic, either consciously or unconsciously borrowing insights and praxes from several interpretive methods. Although some interpreters focus on the text and its structures and strategies, they invariably find themselves employing historical data in their arguments. The intertextual critic is forced to know
something about the literary past if he or she is to make sense of
the literary allusions. Critics of the deconstructionist bent must
also engage the past in order to understand the manner in
which authors unconsciously inscribe marginalized elements of
their cultures. They also must become knowledgeable of the
history of interpretation. Rhetorical critics must examine the
relationship between ideology and rhetorical structures. Femi-
nist critics of all strands examine not only textual structures, but
the language, institutions, and ideologies as they are reflected in
the text in ways that marginalize segments of societies. Like
deconstructionists, they also examine the history of interpreta-
tion. My point is that while we group the methods according to
primary focus, readers should be aware that all critics find
themselves working in all three worlds of author, text, and
audience.

The fact is, however, that this is not a textbook on critical
methodologies, but an introductory text on doing hermeneutics.
I have not consciously adopted one single method, but think
that an informed student of hermeneutics should be familiar
with the options that the individual methods offer any inter-
ested reader. Once readers are familiar with the methods, they
are free to borrow from each and combine insights as they see fit.
I offer the synopses here to (a) introduce readers to the many
doors of access that the methods present, (b) encourage interest
in the methods and their potential roles in understanding texts
more fully, and (c) assist the reader in recognizing the scope of
biblical hermeneutics.

2. Given scholars’ recognition of the constitutive role that readers
and their presuppositions play in the interpretive enterprise, I
have made some minor changes to ch. 8: What the Reader Brings
to the Text.

3. I have added an index of subjects to make the book more user-
friendly.

4. All of the above changes and additions, as well as new develop-
ments in the field of biblical interpretation, have necessitated an
updated select bibliography.
Preface to the Revised Edition

I am more convinced than ever that the meaning of meaning is meaningless apart from the concept of intertextuality. By intertextuality I mean that human communication takes place within “con-texts.” An author is a complex of “texts”—social, religious, linguistic, etc. An author can no more free herself from the influences of these “texts” than a zebra can remove its stripes. It is reasonable, therefore, to retain as an integral part of the discipline of hermeneutics the focus on researching the world of the author. More informed readers make better readers.

When we get right down to it, however, we read not authors, but texts. We interpret texts, not authors. Hermeneutics is first and foremost a discipline concerned with how readers assemble understandings of texts. This means that the primary focus of hermeneutics is the relationship between the enabling structures of a text and the activities of a reader. Consequently, a responsible hermeneutic will give a large portion of its attention to the strategies and structures of texts.

But like an author, a reader is also a complex of “texts.” A reader can never stand outside these texts and examine a particular literary text from a position of Cartesian purity. Necessarily, then, hermeneutics has a third focus: that of the role of the reader. Readers read for a variety of purposes and under a variety of influences, and these purposes and influences are partially constitutive of understanding.

The focus of this revised edition has not changed. The focus on the three worlds remains intact. But I have attempted to place additional emphasis upon the relationship between text and reader by lengthening the discussion in ch. 7, “What Happens When We Read?”

A legitimate criticism has been that while talking about integrating the three worlds, I actually never did it. In response I have included an additional chapter on the Gospel of Mark in which I attempt to demonstrate the thesis that meaning really is the result of a conversation between a text and a reader, a conversation that is enhanced by attention to the world of the author.

A final word. Integrity demands that any hermeneutic should remain tentative. Indeed, included in any hermeneutic should be a place for conversation between those involved in the discipline. What I offer
in this text is an approach that seems to work well for me and my stu-
dents in our particular academic and religious contexts. I am, how-
ever, constantly in conversation with other approaches that differ
sharply from the one offered here. I do not think that it is a healthy
practice to engage in ideological warfare, but in a field of study where
it is extremely difficult to define “the reader” and “the genre,” we
should always attempt to inhabit that shadowy space between the
thinkable and the thing thought, always eschewing an either/or world
in favor of an “and + and” one. This encourages conversation, and the
very heart of hermeneutics is the conversation.
Preface

This is a book about interpretation, not a book of interpretations. It concerns the poetics of the discipline of hermeneutics. The book is not primarily prescriptive, but rather descriptive. In other words, I have not intentionally prescribed a hermeneutic, but I have offered a general description of the task of hermeneutics. Nonetheless, where there is thought there is also presupposition and thus an unavoidable prescriptive element. Presupposition is to thought as Sancho is to Don Quixote, a constant companion. First, therefore, I disclaim total objectivity as characterizing this work. To claim total objectivity for any activity communicated through the contextual and rhetorical nature of language is inexcusably presumptuous.

Second, as is to be expected of any introductory book, this work is not complete. Scholars have produced volumes on the various specialized areas of hermeneutics evidencing years of concentrated scholarly focus. In an introduction like this, limited treatment is necessarily the rule. It would be hoped, however, that this limited introduction to hermeneutics will have sufficient clarity and scope to hold the attention of its readers and be provocative enough to whet its readers’ intellectual appetites.

Finally, I do not make the claim for definitiveness. A discipline as fluid as hermeneutics simply does not lend itself to this claim. Yet, those “who have ears to hear” will recognize that I have attempted to give audience to the range of interpretive voices presently jockeying for pole position. The implication is that all these voices deserve audience because they have valuable contributions to make to the discipline. Another implication is that hermeneutics cannot become a private exercise in separably tied to systems of dogmas. Hermeneutics would become nothing more than individual hermeneutics of reduction. Part of hermeneutics is the art of conversation, a willingness to enter into a symposium of voices past and present. Hermeneutics in this sense becomes a hermeneutic of possibility, taking on the character of life itself, always adjusting itself to the fall of humankind into the solvency of time and history.
### Abbreviations

#### General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2d, 3d, 4th</td>
<td>second, third, fourth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.C.E.</td>
<td>before the Common Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.E.</td>
<td>Common Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca.</td>
<td>circa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>confer, compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ch(s).</td>
<td>chapter(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td>exempli gratia, for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ed(s).</td>
<td>editor(s), edited by, edition(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et al.</td>
<td>et alii, and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>et cetera, and the rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exp.</td>
<td>expanded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gen.</td>
<td>general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gk.</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e.</td>
<td>id est, that is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ibid.</td>
<td>ibidem, in the same place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version of the Bible (Authorized Version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lit.</td>
<td>literally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no.</td>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p(p).</td>
<td>page(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirqe 'Abot</td>
<td>The Sayings of the Fathers (Mishna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repr.</td>
<td>reprinted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rev.</td>
<td>revised (by)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trans.</td>
<td>translator, translated by; transitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v(v).</td>
<td>verse(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>vol(s).</td>
<td>volume(s)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Resources


*BTB* Biblical Theology Bulletin

*ER* Encyclopedia of Religion

*ExpT* Expository Times

*Int* Interpretation

*ISBE* International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

*JAAR* Journal of the American Academy of Religion

*JBL* Journal of Biblical Literature

*JSOT* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

*JSOTSup* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series

*NTS* New Testament Studies

*PMLA* Publication of the Modern Language Association

*SBLMS* Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series

*TDNT* Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

*VT* Vetus Testamentum

Biblical and Apocryphal Books

Gen Genesis

Exod Exodus

Lev Leviticus

Num Numbers

Deut Deuteronomy

Judg Judges

1–2 Sam 1–2 Samuel

1–2 Kgs 1–2 Kings

2 Chr 2 Chronicles

Esth Esther

Ps(s) Psalm(s)

Prov Proverbs

Song Song of Solomon

Isa Isaiah

Jer Jeremiah

Ezek Ezekiel

Dan Daniel
Abbreviations

Hos  Hosea
Jon  Jonah
Mic  Micah
Nah  Nahum
Zech Zechariah
Mal  Malachi
Bar  Baruch
Sir  Sirach
Wis  Wisdom of Solomon
Matt Matthew
Rom Romans
1–2 Cor 1–2 Corinthians
Gal Galatians
Eph Ephesians
Phil Philippians
Col Colossians
1 Thess 1 Thessalonians
1 Tim 1 Timothy
Phlm Philemon
Heb Hebrews
Jas James
1–2 Pet 1–2 Peter
Rev Revelation
A JOURNEY INTO THREE WORLDS

Hermeneutics has traditionally been defined as the study of the locus of meaning and the principles of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics, then, studies the locus of meaning and principles of biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics in the broad sense is bipolar: exegesis and interpretation. Exegesis is the process of examining a text to ascertain what its first readers would have understood it to mean. The varied set of activities which the hermeneut performs upon a text in order to make meaningful inferences is exegesis. Interpretation is the task of explaining or drawing out the implications of that understanding for contemporary readers and hearers. Thus, the transformation of these inferences into application or significance for the hermeneut's world is interpretation. Combine exegesis and interpretation with an examination of the hermeneut's presuppositional repertoire and we may speak of hermeneutics. The terms hermeneutics and interpretation, however, are often used interchangeably to refer to the process of determining the meaning and significance of a text. Through usage the term interpretation has become a comprehensive one. Not only does it refer to the applications inferred from exegesis, but it also refers to the entire process and poetics of hermeneutics. Since words mean what they mean through common usage, I use the terms hermeneutics and interpretation interchangeably, just as I do the two terms hermeneut and interpreter.

Carl Braaten sees hermeneutics as “the science of reflecting on how a word or an event in the past time and culture may be understood and become existentially meaningful in our present situation.”1 E. D. Hirsch Jr. assumes that hermeneutics involves explanation but is prefaced by understanding,2 while Gadamer and Ricoeur argue that interpretation of texts does not exhaust the responsibility of the hermeneutical enterprise. Hermeneutics assumes the responsibility to move beyond the scientific

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explication of the text's language to the search for ultimate truth that is incarnate in the language of the text. According to Gadamer and Ricoeur, the search for ultimate reality through the language of the text is the most important task of hermeneutics. Duncan Ferguson defines hermeneutics simply as “the task of hearing what an ancient text has to say.”

The common ground shared by these and most other definitions of hermeneutics is literary meaning. Whether reference is to explanation, exegesis, or understanding, the construction of literary meaning is absolutely central to hermeneutics. But where exactly is meaning to be found, and how is it to be actualized? In present scholarship, there are three different groups of theories regarding the locus and actualization of meaning: author-centered (with attention directed to the world behind the text), text-centered (with the focus on the world within the text, or the textual world), and reader-centered (where the spotlight is trained upon the world in front of the text, or the reader’s world). Since these three approaches are usually viewed as mutually exclusive in the articulation of meaning, and since one is often pitted against another, a brief canvas of each approach is not without value. (See ch. 9 for a more comprehensive discussion.)

Author-Centered Approaches to Meaning

Prior to the advent of New Criticism in the 1940s, hermeneutical interest converged on the author and the author’s world. Meaning was assumed to lie in the author’s intention, which was formulated in terms of the social, political, cultural, and ideological matrix of the author. Without an immersion into the author’s world and the occasion which prompted the text, one could not attain meaning with any acceptable degree of plausibility. The text was seen as a shell with many layers. If the layers were appropriately peeled away, the scholar could discover the core and its original setting. This was the locus of meaning. The historical-critical method with its three attending criticisms—source, form, and redaction—pose important questions for interpreters. What circumstances prompted the author to write? What sources were used? What was the geographical location of the author and the ecclesiastical tradition of that location? What was the history of the text’s devel-

opment? Some of the more recent methods focus on the author’s world as well as ask their own questions. What can we know about the psychological makeup of the author and how does this knowledge influence our understanding of the author’s text? What were the social conventions and taboos of the author’s world and how can we get at them? How were these social conventions and taboos reflected in rhetorical structures and strategies? These are the questions usually associated with social-scientific, socio-rhetorical, psychoanalytical, and tradition criticisms.

Several points argue against the purely historical approach and its locus of meaning. First, there is an inevitable gap between the originating moment in the author’s mind and the cultural specificity of the author’s language. In other words, can there ever be a complete guarantee that the author has successfully transferred authorial intention to the written page? Is the text a foolproof and undistorted mirror of the author’s mind? These types of questions led Wimsatt and Beardsley to formulate their famous statement of the “intentional fallacy.” Second, with the inordinate amount of attention given to the world behind the text, the text itself has suffered from too little attention. Historical criticism has relentlessly sought to focus its illuminating searchlight upon the world behind the text, the real historical world within which a work of literature was given birth. The understanding (i.e., an understanding with any degree of plausibility) of the literary work hinges precariously upon a reconstruction of the work’s historical milieu. It should be clear that the historical approach must ultimately lead to a view of the text as an artifact that can and must be understood by using the scientific tools of anthropology, archeology, and linguistics just as one would employ for any other artifact. But due to the historical method’s exclusive focus on the world behind the text, the world within the text has been unduly neglected.

Text-Centered Approaches to Meaning

Since the 1950s a reversal in the way interpreters approach the text has occurred. With the modern emphasis on the autonomy of the text and the role of the reader in the production of meaning, scholars have dislodged the text from its historical mooring and set it adrift in a sea
of relativity, where there are as many meanings of the text as there are waves of the sea. Rosenberg’s assessment of the situation is extremely insightful. In his evaluation of David Gunn’s belief in the text’s autonomy, he observes that the political (and by implication, the historical, social and theological) dimensions of the text are made to be an incidental bonus in its unfolding as art, just as the historical investigations of the story made its artistic brilliance an incidental bonus in its unfolding as history. This persistent blind spot shared by the two disciplines (historical and literary criticisms)—the absence of a sense of necessary connection between the story’s historical knowledge and its literary mode—is curious and interesting.5

Textual autonomy is the springboard for text-centered theories of meaning. This autonomy could not be stated more clearly than Abrams’s claim that the author’s “intention is irrelevant to the literary critic, because meaning and value reside within the text of the finished, free-standing, and public work of literature itself.”6 The renewed interest in the text itself instead of the world behind the text is the gift of what scholars today refer to as New Criticism and structuralism.

A text-centered approach is bittersweet. While it draws attention to the artistry of the text (New Criticism) and conventional literary codes (structuralism), the author (and to a great extent the reader) has been pronounced dead. But as I argue in unit I, although the meaning of a text may not be found in the author’s world, at least our understanding of the text improves when we immerse ourselves in its history.7

Reader-Centered Approaches to Meaning

Different readers interpret a text differently. The various and complex reasons for this tautology will be the concern of unit III. The reasons are, however, associated with what might be called the reader’s repertoire. The reader brings to the text a vast world of experience, presuppositions, methodologies, interests, and competencies. The reader must actualize the meaning that is only potential in the text. Most reader-oriented theories hold that a text means nothing until someone means something by it. More radical proponents of reader-response


criticism go further to say that the reader creates the meaning of the
text. Others, like Edgar V. McKnight, hold that meaning is produced
by the mutual interaction between the text and reader. According to
this view, the text engages the reader as the reader engages the text.
Meaning, then, is an invention by the reader in collaboration with the
text rather than the intention of the author. The reader is constrained by
the text, but is not divested of interests and presuppositions. The text is
re-contextualized through the multicolored lenses of the reader. The
fact is, however, that the hermeneutics of the world in front of the text
involve more than the dialogic relationship between a reader and a text.
In the last two decades scholars have introduced a number of issues
that should be central to hermeneutics—the social location of both au-
thor and reader, the ideologies of authors and interpreters, the nature
of language, the race, class, and gender of author and reader, the econ-
omics of author and reader, the textuality of history, and the historic-
ity of texts to mention only a few.

An Integrated Approach to Meaning

To this point we have seen that author-centered approaches to
meaning tend to neglect the world of the text and the world of the
reader. Text-centered approaches, in claiming textual autonomy, down-
play the boundaries imposed by the world of the author upon the text.
Now we observe that reader-centered approaches generally find mean-
ing in the interaction between the worlds of the text and the reader. The
best we have here is the marriage of two worlds—the reader’s and
the text’s or the author’s and the text’s. What I propose in this book is
that meaning results from a conversation between the world of the text
and the world of the reader, a conversation informed by the world of
the author. Reverberations of the basic communication model are not
accidental. Let me explain: In oral discourse, a speaker seeks to com-
municate some information to a hearer in such a way that it will be un-
derstandable. To accomplish this goal, the speaker makes primary use
of language, a language which is generally shared by both parties. But
there is another language which is also engaged, consisting of voice in-
flection, eye contact, physical gestures, etc. If for some reason the hearer
fails to comprehend all or part of the message, the hearer can request the

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speaker to repeat, elaborate, or modify the oral expression until the hearer's understanding matches the speaker's intent.

In written discourse, an author intends to convey meaning through the text to a reader. Enlisting vehicles such as sound, voice inflection, gestures, and oral dialogue, however, is not possible here. Consequently, the authors must arm themselves with a whole arsenal of literary devices through which they attempt to transfer the message in the intellect to the written page. These literary devices are the woof and warp by which the text communicates to the reader. Further, we may assume that the author has a particular type of reader or audience in mind, one at least familiar with the author’s language and world. Otherwise, to speak of communication is absurd. The assumption here is that in the biblical texts, the subjective intention and discourse meaning overlap; that is, what the author intends and what the text says interact but are not identical. While the author is not available for questioning, some aspects of the author’s world are. This assumption leaves sufficient room for the role of the reader in the production of meaning. Consequently, three realities converge: author's, text's, and reader's. We argue, therefore, that the locus of meaning is not to be found exclusively in either world or in a marriage of any two of the worlds, but in the interplay between all three worlds. Meaning resides in the conversation between the text and reader with the world behind the text informing that conversation. Interpretation is impaired when any world is given preeminence at the expense of neglecting the other two.

This model of communication sets the agenda for our discussion and for the basic structure of the book. Unit I is concerned with the world behind the text. Chapter 1 argues that the text is the result of an action performed by an author, and as such it is conditioned by the conventional codes that affect anything produced in that particular culture. This means not only that it is inseparably grounded in and influenced by that culture, but that it, in turn, influences its culture. I continue this argument in chs. 2 and 3 by discussing the indispensable adjunctive functions of grammatical, cultural, and ideological background studies within the discipline of hermeneutics.

Unit II deals with the world within the text. In ch. 4, I discuss the importance of genre and sub-genre. I define and illustrate several common sub-genres. Chapter 5 is limited to the broadest generic systems of the Hebrew Bible—narrative, poetry, and prophecy (apocalyptic is discussed in ch. 6). Chapter 6 presents an introduction to the generic systems of the New Testament, including gospel, letter, and apocalyptic. This unit argues that a plausible meaning is impossible without at least
some competence in the literary systems of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament literature.

If the discussion ceased at this point, this interpretive strategy might seem to place hermeneutics within parameters that would assure objective, definable, and communicable meaning. This is true as far as it goes, because as will be asserted in unit I, the text was birthed within a particular culture. I contend, therefore, that the text is an attempt to say something objective, definable, and communicable through conventions that reflect its culture. This recognizes, though, that interpretation has taken place over time, with each period influencing subsequent interpretations. In fact, any interpreter interprets a text over time. Time, however, is not static and neither are interpreters or their worlds. Both the interpreter and the interpreter’s world are constantly caught up in the continual flux of what John Caputo calls internal time. So any hermeneutical model must make allowances for a certain subjectivity, incompleteness, and open-endedness. Otherwise, how can we justify the ongoing, never-ending discipline of hermeneutics? Three chapters respond to this very question by addressing the role of the reader and the actual reading process. Thus unit III moves into the world in front of the text. In ch. 7, the reader is introduced to the dynamics of the reading process. The reader may come away with the notion that the process is so complex and has such a vast set of variables that meaning is ultimately unobtainable. However, if I have done my work well, the discussions in units I and II will have diminished this potential problem. In ch. 8, categories of presuppositions and preunderstandings are examined. These reader presuppositions are part of the reader's world and are just as constitutive of meaning as the presuppositions of the author. In unit IV, ch. 9 is a case study in Mark’s Gospel, and ch. 10 summarizes the important issues in doing hermeneutics.

Since the category of methodological presuppositions is extensive, and since one’s method dictates what questions will be put to the text, I have included at the end of each of the first three units a handful of synopses of critical methods that focus on the three worlds respectively. These synopses are illustrative of the manner in which methods govern how we appropriate texts. However, in the appendixes, I offer other synopses of critical methods that readers may find useful. Also in the appendixes, I offer additional synopses of methods that do not find a home in a single world, but seem to bleed into one or both of the other worlds.

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Unit I

THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT
WHY STUDY BACKGROUNDS? AN APOLOGY FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Exegesis must never be swallowed up in application, but must always precede it. The exegetical questions must be answered before questions of application may be legitimately asked. In light of this, one of the cardinal rules of exegesis is that the interpreter must always approach and analyze a text in part or in whole within contexts: historical, cultural, geographical, ecclesiastical, ideological, and literary. Exegesis is the spadework for interpretation. Exegesis without interpretation is similar to discovering a cure for the common cold and then not publicizing it. Exegesis alone has no power to produce change—the goal of interpretation. It is a heart without a beat. Interpretation that is uninformed by exegesis, however, has no foundation, like the house built upon the sand. In his discussion of the relationship between the text and the world behind the text, Clarence Walhout rightly observes that this relationship “forbids us to conceive of texts as linguistic objects cut loose from their mooring in an actual world and allowed to drift in some detached sea of aesthetic autonomy.”

The goal of this chapter is singular: to demonstrate that the pursuit of background studies (i.e., exegesis) is an indispensable prerequisite for the explication of plausible textual meaning; that is, historical, cultural, generic, grammatical, ideological, and even geographical studies are prerequisites for a successful interpretation of a text. While it is true that texts exist and are valued independently of their originating circumstances, a knowledge of those originating circumstances will inevitably increase the appreciation of a text. In the past few years, interpretive methodologies have focused on the text and the reader rather than on the author. This swing of the pendulum has produced some

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very healthy results, not least of which has been a renewed interest in the biblical texts and the role that the responses of readers play in the creation of meaning. However, this refocusing of attention has tempted some scholars to push the world within the text so far into the background that it becomes relatively unimportant in determining the meaning of a text. For example, Roland Barthes claims that “writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself; in the text, only the reader speaks.” While Donald Keesey rejects the idea of the meaning of a text, his is a less radical view than that of Barthes:

While we may agree that there is no complete, definitive, and absolutely correct interpretation of a poem, it does not necessarily follow that there are no better or worse interpretations, interpretations more or less complete, more or less accurate, more or less approximating a “best” reading.

It is our contention that the most plausible interpretation or reading of a text cannot be realized apart from a consideration of the world that gave birth to the text. If we recognize that a text is a historical phenomenon in the sense that it originates at a specific time and place, under certain cultural, linguistic, political, and religious conditions, the validity of the above statement becomes more obvious. Literary works may communicate or at least address universal concepts, but they do so within cultural limits and by cultural conventions. A familiarity with these limits and conventions can be helpful in ascertaining from the text that which is universally applicable. Texts reflect their culture, and to read them apart from that culture is to invite a basic level of misunderstanding.

The reader may have noticed that I have consistently made reference to “the meaning of the text” and not to “the meaning of the author.” This reference calls for some explanation, an explanation that will prevent an interpretive error. Most scholars today distinguish between authorial and textual meaning. Is the meaning of a literary work of art identical to what its creator meant in composing it? Without question an author purposes or intends to convey some message. Terry Eagleton observes that “every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written for: every

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work encodes within itself what Iser calls an ‘implied reader,’ intimates in its every gesture the kind of ‘addressee’ it anticipates.” Does the author successfully incarnate this intention within the text and communicate it to the audience? The answer to this question is rather complex.

From a phenomenological perspective, an author perceives an **object of consciousness** (the mental formulation of the text). This object is not synonymous with the text. The text is the concrete literary product of the author’s object of consciousness. For example, I have a perception of what the book you are reading should be. The perception is not the book; the perception is the intellectual or conscious origin of the book. For every literary text there must be an originating moment when the author conceives of the literary object and perceives it to be a certain way. On the one hand, since perception takes place through time (diachronically), the object of consciousness undergoes a perpetual redefinition from moment to moment. On the other hand, this object of consciousness (regardless of the author’s literary purpose) receives concrete expression at a particular time (synchronously) in the form of an inscription (i.e., the text). There is absolutely no way to guarantee a one-to-one correspondence between the ever-changing, **diachronic** object of consciousness and the permanent, **synchronic** linguistic representation of it. Indeed, it is probably futile to argue for a one-to-one correspondence between the original intentional object and the text, because there is no way to objectively demonstrate the truth for such a relationship. How is it possible to enter into the consciousness of another, especially when that consciousness is unavailable for questioning? Complete **authorial meaning** is unobtainable, since it is the product of the author’s individual consciousness; textual meaning is the cultural specificity of the author’s original object of consciousness. There is no way to determine definitively just how accurately the text represents the object of intention.

The **hermeneut** might argue, then, that the text exists as an autonomous object in no way dependent upon the authorial consciousness that gave birth to the text. But intentionality in this sense is not the same as what is usually referred to as authorial intent or purpose. The general reason for writing is to communicate. A logical assumption, consequently, might be that communication resides within the text itself. Nonetheless, we might reasonably inquire whether or to what extent the author was successful in communicating the intended message. Two disparate

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assumptions are possible here: (1) the author was not entirely successful in communicating intent but did communicate a message; or (2) the author was successful. In either case, it is presupposed that the author communicated some message to an audience through the medium of the written text. Since an author employs verbal symbols in communication, and since verbal symbols carry a wide semantic range of meaning, an author quite possibly (actually quite probably) communicates much more meaning than was consciously purposed. This possibility exists especially for writers who have unconsciously internalized symbols and concepts carrying unspoken, metaphorical usages that consequently have a tacit multivalence. By no stretch of the imagination may we classify this unconscious communication as authorially intended, but it is in the text. Therefore, a text does communicate; the author (consciously or unconsciously) communicates through the text, and the way readers actualize this communication is the primary concern of interpretation.

The above remarks bring us to the heart of the matter in this chapter: If the author’s consciousness is private and ultimately inaccessible, wherein lies the need for historical research? Why should the hermeneut be concerned with the world behind the text? The answer is twofold.

First, an author perceives the object of consciousness (e.g., in literature, the object of consciousness is the text; in music, the symphony) within the context of a particular historical moment. This perception has its basis in all the various points of the author’s culture and the author’s unique assimilation of that culture; i.e., the original object of consciousness is at the same time grasped by the individual within a particular culture at a particular historical moment within that culture and filtered through an individual psychology.

Second, the literary representation of the object of consciousness has historical grounding. How can authors express themselves concretely apart from their contemporary matrix and their understanding of it? Even Dadaism found significance within a preestablished system of perception and reality. On a generic level, a literary text has meaning only upon the recognition that the author and reader share a body of literary conventions. If the author seeks to transform or modify these conventions, written discourse is possible only as far as the author and reader share the knowledge of conventional norms. Regardless of how much the author subverts conventional norms, understanding is possible solely against the backdrop of the accepted norm. Subversion is subversion only to the degree that the norms are transformed. The world within the text is in the real world while being outside of it. We
define the world within the text exclusively in terms of the real world. Political satire, for instance, has no meaning apart from its contemporary political origin. Literature which makes a social statement loses its point if it is not interpreted within the light of those social issues being addressed. Therefore, we must approach the textual world in light of the real world in which it has its grounding. Without a sense of what the real world is like, it is impossible to imagine new ones. The same is also true for readers, even when the worlds presented to us are fictional ones. Clarence Walhout states this quite clearly:

They [texts] become meaningful to us because we are able to compare their fictional worlds with the world that is already familiar to us. . . . We compare Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer to boys that we have known in actual life even though we have no doubt whatsoever which of the boys are fictional and which are actual.5

We can imagine new possibilities only against the backdrop of what we already know, of what in the real world is familiar to us. Outside of this relationship, communication is utterly impossible. The same can be said of an author. A text may be autonomous in relationship to the original intentional object, but the concretization of that object (the text) is conditioned by the real world of the author. How else does an individual communicate except through contemporary social, cultural, or literary conventions? For us to think that authors are not at least unconsciously marked in their thoughts and characters by their experiences in the real world is simply untenable. Behind every literary text, there lies a view of life, a view which has been conditioned by the author’s real world. While an author may imagine a literary world with all sorts of new possibilities, the expression of such an imaginative world is impossible apart from the author’s real world. An author can imagine a world and express it textually only through the real historical, cultural, literary, and ideological setting. For this reason, historical considerations are at once validated as an important adjunct to hermeneutics.

Since the text is historical in origin, having its birth within a complex of social, literary, linguistic, and ideological systems, certain limits are automatically placed upon the reader of the text. While these systems do not constitute meaning, they do serve as controls upon authorial literary expression. How does the author use or adapt available sources? What are the levels of tradition recognizable within the writings? Who is the author and under what circumstances did he or she write? What

occasioned the writing and when? Because a text is historically conditioned, especially in its linguistic expression, these questions will continue to be appropriate. Consequently, any reading must be partially measured by the extent to which the reader shares the same worldview as the author. Louise Rosenblatt offers a similar view:

I am even ready to say that in most readings we seek the belief that a process of communication is going on, that one is participating in something that reflects the author’s intention. And especially if our experience has been vivid or stirring, we may wish to ascertain what manner of temperament, life-situation, social or intellectual or philosophic environment, gave rise to this work. Especially if it is a text of the past, we may wish to discover to what degree our experience differs from that of the author’s contemporaries. All of the approaches of the literary historian become potentially relevant—textual study, semantic history, literary, biographical, and other types of history. All these may aid the reader to limit himself to the horizon of the author and his time.6

Biblical prophecy is an example. Frequently “historical” details are ripped from their linguistic contexts and then applied to some contemporary situation or event in the reader’s age. We may read of a commentator’s claims that “the north” and “the east” in the prophecy of Ezekiel refer to the Soviet Union and China respectively. Observations of this kind are independent of any interest in or consideration of the original historical significance of such references. Regardless of the hermeneut’s religious tradition, interpretive methodology, or theological aims, there must be sufficient focus on the author’s historical frame of reference. Attention to the author’s historical circumstances supplies a valuable safeguard against arbitrary interpretations like the one above.

I am not suggesting that we substitute information about authors or their times for meaning. Meaning comes only through engaging the text. Historical knowledge of authors and their age enables readers to engage texts and to organize more plausibly the resulting experiences. Any non-aesthetic information (biographical, cultural, literary, religious, etc.) should be valued since it enhances the engagement experience. These areas of information about the originating world behind the text are heuristic adjuncts to the literary experience. In other words, understanding ancient texts requires a certain amount of historical spade-work. McKnight rightly observes:

There is no need for denial of the fact that certain states of affairs or developments operated in some sense as sources for biblical writings and that biblical writings now reflect those enabling conditions. But attention is to be paid to the realities behind the text (as far as they can be ascertained or imaged) in order to understand the text as a pattern of meaning that continues to have an effect on readers.\(^7\)

While it is true that readers usually value a literary text independently of its originating contexts, a fundamental knowledge of these contexts will certainly increase one’s appreciation and understanding of the text. The grounding of a text in its historical dimension is an important aspect of hermeneutics, because biblical texts (any text for that matter) reflect the enabling sources and originating conditions and circumstances. Consequently, the modern hermeneut should not shun the great bulk of information which those craftsmen of the **historical-critical method** have supplied. Speaking of the New Testament writings, Luke Johnson makes a similar observation:

> The NT came to birth among social structures and symbols different from our own. The writings are conditioned linguistically by that historical setting. Their linguistic code is not only alien but also only partially available to us. Precisely the “things that go without saying” are not available to us. Every responsible reading therefore demands historical adjustment. The writings are very much conditioned by the times and places of their origin, by the settings and intentions of their authors. The more we can reconstruct those settings and intentions, the better readers we are.\(^8\)

For example, an understanding of the debate concerning ritual cleanness between the two prominent Jewish rabbinic schools of Jesus’ day, the schools of Hillel and Shammai, is nothing less than essential to a plausible understanding of Matt 15:10–12. The historical reference places certain restrictions on the possibilities of interpretation.

Nevertheless, this is not to argue that meaning is the domain of historical studies, because meaning is a function of the textual world. But this does insist that knowledge (as far as it is possible) of the world behind the text illuminates the world within the text. For any single author, we may have little or no information about educational background, literary sources, or even personal religious convictions;

\(^7\)Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 175.

through historical research, however, we may discover a considerable amount of information about the educational systems of the author’s time, the literary conventions in use, the political institutions under which the author lived, and the nature of orthodox and unorthodox religious views.

Summary

A text is the product of an author, and the author is a product of an age. Arguing for such a background study, Joel Rosenberg observes that because of an undercurrent of commentary by Shakespeare on contemporary political life and institutions, some Shakespearean scholars are sent to the English constitutional histories of Maitland and Elton as a way into Henry IV, or Richard III or even Coriolanus and Julius Caesar. This is not to suggest that a Tudor or Stuart audience needed to read such histories in order to understand their poet, only that some members of those audiences possessed the political and institutional sophistication required to make full sense of Shakespeare’s political themes, and that such understanding was a principal ingredient of the literary delight they certainly experienced.⁹

This knowledge would have been readily available to many of the contemporary readers, but such is not the case for the modern one. The same is true for readers of the biblical texts. The author could assume a certain body of knowledge on the part of at least some of the contemporary readers, and much of this knowledge is accessible to modern readers only through historical research. Therefore, we should welcome any available background knowledge if it increases our ability to organize into a meaningful whole the various levels of materials that we encounter in the text. Hermeneutics should ideally result in the articulation of the most plausible meaning. But there can be no hermeneutical ideal without some measurably competent reading of the text. If background studies enhance our chances of attaining to the hermeneutical ideal, we should welcome such studies with open arms. These non-aesthetic studies should never become substitutes for the aesthetic experience of the text itself. They are precursors, not ends.

⁹Rosenberg, King and Kin, 108.
Background studies may be divided into two areas—**semantics** and **pragmatics**. Semantics is the study of the language of a text, while pragmatics is the study of the circumstances surrounding the individual linguistic expressions. Exegesis must give equal weight to both areas. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner suggest that semantics and pragmatics should be divided more conveniently into the categories of text, **co-text**, and context.¹⁰ *Text* refers to the study of the actual words of the text; *co-text* is concerned with the relationships between words in sentences, paragraphs, and chapters; and *context* focuses on the historical and sociological setting of the text. The first two areas are the concern of semantics, while the latter is the domain of pragmatics. This observation by Cotterell and Turner is based upon their distinction between a sentence and an utterance. A sentence may occur repeatedly, while an utterance (which is the sentence within a particular context) can never occur more than once. Therefore, exegesis must be concerned with the explication of utterances, not sentences. This means that pragmatics must be an integral part of exegesis. When we begin to explore any text, we confront utterances instead of contextless sentences. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he wrote within a particular context, a reconstruction of which yields a more informed reading of the text. In the remainder of unit I, I discuss the grammatical background (*text* and *co-text*) in ch. 2, and the *context* in ch. 3.

### REVIEW & STUDY

**Key Terms and Concepts**

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Study Questions

1. If an author’s work unconsciously reflects his or her world, in what ways might a familiarity with that world assist in the interpretation of a text?

2. Which do you feel is the final source of meaning, the author or the text? Why?

3. What advantage does oral discourse have over written discourse?

4. How does the distinction between “sentence” and “utterance” suggest the need for exegesis?

5. In what way might background studies inform interpretation even when the author of a text is anonymous?

6. What is the difference between authorial intention and textual meaning?

7. In what way do background studies offer a “check” on interpretation?

Suggestions for Further Reading


