

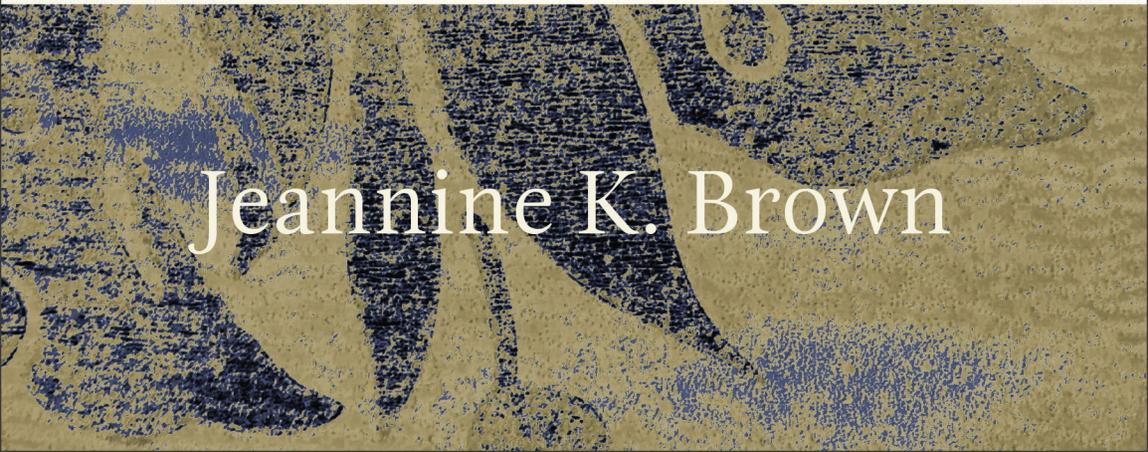


Second Edition

Scripture as  
Communication

*Introducing  
Biblical Hermeneutics*

Jeannine K. Brown



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Communication

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**B**  
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# Preface to the Second Edition

I appreciate the invitation from Baker Academic to revise *Scripture as Communication*. It has been gratifying to know that the first edition has been useful to pastors and leaders in their ministries and to faculty seeking a theoretical and practical introduction to biblical hermeneutics for their students.

Since 2007, there have been a significant number of contributions on the topic of biblical hermeneutics, including important offerings from non-Western perspectives. I've appreciated the opportunity to integrate these conversation partners into my own work in the book. In this revised edition I've been able to clarify further my communicative model for interpreting Scripture and have included even more examples from the Bible to put flesh on the theoretical ideas I explore. Given my natural comfort level in the New Testament, I've also been intentional about including more biblical examples from the Old Testament. Additionally, a glossary has been added, with the terms defined there set in boldface type in the text, usually on their first occurrence.

In this revision I have been grateful for the wise counsel and very detailed input from Dr. Mark Strauss, my Bethel Seminary colleague and good friend, who has regularly taught through *Scripture as Communication* with Bethel students. His advice for revision was invaluable. I am also grateful to Dr. Peter Vogt, who reviewed much of the newly added material from the Old Testament. This edition, as was the first, is dedicated to my parents, James and Carolyn Holmen, "who fostered in me the conviction that the Bible is relevant to all of life." Although my father is no longer with us, I am so grateful for the love and support he lavished on me and the rest of my family.

Some of my favorite student responses to the first edition of the book had to do with its unintended consequences. The emphasis in *Scripture as Communication* on listening well to the biblical authors—listening for their perspectives as we read their communication—has at times seemed to have an impact on how my students have listened to the people they serve in ministry. By becoming more aware of their own role in actively interpreting what someone else was saying, these students were led to listen more carefully and empathetically. My hope is that *Scripture as Communication* continues to call readers (and me) to a posture of respectful listening, a willingness to hear the other on their own terms, and a commitment to being doers as well as hearers of the Bible.

# Introduction

## *Scripture as Communicative Act*

Because God reveals himself in personal categories, divine revelation is analogous to human communication.

Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*

“Meaning” is the result of communicative action, of what an author has done in tending to certain words at a particular time in a specific manner.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*

Talking theology with my two daughters, Kate and Libby, is one of my great joys. But inevitably, their distinct personalities shape these conversations. Kate has always been an inquirer. Questions are her starting point. Questions about God, questions about the Bible, questions about people from other faith traditions—lots of questions. When she was four years old, she dropped a theological bomb that I thought I would not have to address with her until she was much older: “Mom, who did Jesus pray to when he lived on earth?” All my lofty ideals developed in seminary theology classes about not using the proverbial comparison of the Trinity to an egg went out the window as I struggled to communicate what I understand about the Triune God of Scripture to a four-year-old mind. Kate, even as a teenager, continued to ask questions as she explored who God is and what the Bible means.

My other daughter, Libby, in contrast, has never been one for asking questions or advice of her parents. As a child, she enjoyed a world of her own making—a world in which all her creative abilities, which are considerable, were focused on joyful play and free-flowing imagination. Early on, I discovered

that Libby's way of getting at a theological conversation is to make declarative statements that, on the surface, seem to be assertions about reality but that actually are intended to invite conversation and clarification. One such conversation between eight-year-old Libby and me went something like this:

"Mom, God doesn't exist, but we still believe in him."

I queried, "Do you mean that we can't *see* God?"

Libby responded matter-of-factly, "Yeah, God isn't real, but we believe in him anyway."

I again responded with a question, "Do you mean that God doesn't have a *body*?"

(We had recently had a conversation about John 4 and the affirmation that God is spirit.)

Libby agreed, "Yes," and then explained that she and a friend had been discussing God and Jesus, and the issue of bodies came up.

When she came to our conversation, Libby was exploring the truth of the immateriality of God in contrast with other ways of expressing who God is. She was implicitly asking questions. To be more precise, she was testing ideas by formulating them as statements.

In sharing these stories, my point goes beyond expressing from the onset that I come to the tasks of theology and **hermeneutics** (the study of the interpretation of texts) as a parent (of now-adult children) and a confessing Christian, as well as a New Testament scholar. I certainly approach Scripture and the task of reflection on Scripture from the merging of many such vantage points. Yet my primary purpose in beginning with these stories is to illustrate the complexity of the communication process. Kate routinely asked questions that were truly questions in her exploration of the nature of God and the world around her. Libby made statements about God and the world when she in fact was testing her ideas—an implicit sort of question-asking—although this purpose was not obvious on the surface of her sentences. The truth that Libby was requesting feedback to the ideas that she proposed was discernable only from attention to a number of factors. These included her previous patterns in communicating, the setting in which she made these declarations, and the flow of particular conversations, past and present. But not every one of the statements she made on a daily basis was a testing of ideas. To understand her ways of communicating with me, I learned to discern from these rather complex contextual factors which of her statements functioned as requests. This is the nature of the task of understanding human communication—it is the task of interpretation, and it is often more complex than we would like to admit. But interpreting is also something we do every day of our lives, with a relatively high rate of success.

Engaging in and interpreting communication is at the heart of what we are doing when we read the Bible. Christians have a long history of describing the Bible in language that evokes its communicative nature. When we speak of the Bible as the word of God, we are affirming that God speaks and that we should listen—we are using language of communication. The phrase “word of God” occurs throughout the Bible, more often than not in reference to God’s spoken word.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are places where its occurrence broadens to include the written word as the record of what God has spoken (e.g., Matt. 15:6). So opening the Bible can be likened to entering into a **communicative event**. Or, put another way, Scripture begins a conversation that is interpersonal and potentially life-changing, because it is God who initiates the dialogue.

The movement toward a communicative model of biblical interpretation can be seen in works of a number of theorists. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, has used the language of “authorial discourse” to express the communicative nature of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff centers his discussion on how we might understand Scripture to be “divine discourse.” Theologian Trevor Hart similarly expresses that the Bible is communication by encouraging its readers to “presume presence.” Hart introduces this phrase to indicate the presence of the human author (and, later in his essay, the divine author) in the experience of the text.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have introduced the concept of “address” to focus attention on the necessity of envisioning both authors and readers within the communicative process: “Language is always addressed to someone else, even if that someone is not immediately present or is actually unknown or imagined.”<sup>4</sup>

## Scripture as Communication

Understanding texts as authorial discourse or authorial presence and as addressed to readers serves to introduce the three domains of author, text, and reader. All three are implicit in the idea that Scripture is, at heart, communication. The author is the one who communicates; the text is the vehicle or act of communication; and the reader is the one who is addressed and who responds. Discussion of these three components is not new to the discussion of hermeneutics. All theories of textual interpretation must, and do, account for author, text, and reader and their involvement and influence in the reading

1. Similar to “word of the LORD” referenced in the Old Testament prophetic books.

2. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 132.

3. Hart, “Christian Approach to the Bible,” 194, 201.

4. Leith and Myerson, *Power of Address*, xii. The issue of language use as self-expression versus communication will be discussed in chap. 3. The focus here is language’s communicative uses.

process. In recent hermeneutical history these three constructs have endured an uneasy relationship. At this point, we might simply affirm that the way we understand the role of authors, texts, and readers in the task of interpretation largely depends on our view of the nature of texts (what texts intrinsically are), including whether they are communicative or expressive in nature, and whether they are stable or unstable.

Taking a quick look ahead, we see that the first two chapters of this book propose a communication model for interpreting the Bible. The rest of the book then draws on this model. In the earlier chapters, I elaborate the proposed communication model (chaps. 3–6), and, in the final chapters of the book, I apply the proposed model to various facets of the interpretive enterprise, such as genre, social setting, and issues related to contextualizing the biblical message (chaps. 7–12).

In a nutshell, the communication model that I propose is this: *Scripture's meaning can be understood as the communicative act of the author that has been inscribed in the text and addressed to the intended audience for purposes of engagement.* This definition places the author's text at the forefront of the communicative act. This preliminary definition also seeks to incorporate readers in a significant way by connecting them with the audience envisioned within the text. Scripture readily addresses contemporary readers precisely as they stand in continuity with the people of God, who comprised the original audience. A commitment to the Bible as Scripture means that "we are the people of God to whom these texts are addressed."<sup>5</sup> Such a confessional reading of the Bible is one in which the reader identifies with God's people who were first addressed by the text, even though that original address was made to particular cultural contexts, which will require our careful attention to discern. Even as we seek the author's communicative act, we will need to be aware of the importance of our own stance and responses as readers. As we will discover in chapter 3, there has been a tendency in the history of hermeneutical discussion to focus on one of the three domains of author, text, and reader, to the practical neglect of the other two. By incorporating all three quite intentionally into our understanding of written communication, we hope to avoid some of the imbalances that have characterized this history.

What are the advantages of a communication model? A few stand out as particularly helpful in the context of contemporary philosophical discussions. A major advantage of such a model is that communication is inherently interpersonal—it is something that occurs between two or more persons. And although as readers our direct interaction is with a person's *text* (what

5. J. Green, "The (Re-)Turn to Narrative," 23.

they have written), viewing textual interpretation as interpersonal can be illuminating. Adele Reinhartz has even suggested the metaphor of friendship to describe this relationship and has noted some distinct contributions that it offers. “As a metaphor for the reading experience, friendship is rich in possibilities. It expresses both the emotive and the cognitive aspects of reading, and connotes the pleasures, intimacies, comforts, and discomforts of entering and living within the [literary] world for a time.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, interpersonal categories are truer to an understanding of the Bible as Scripture and more useful than models that primarily emphasize the text as code (with the author as encoder and reader as decoder).<sup>7</sup> So when we speak of an author’s text as speech, as discourse, as communication, we are affirming that it derives from a person who desires to communicate and so initiates a conversation of sorts. The same framework, I believe, also honors the experience of readers who have the sense of being personally addressed as they read texts, and the Bible more specifically. Readers are “encountered” by texts.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, if texts are viewed from an interpersonal perspective, we might, in the end, be able to minimize the sometimes-proposed contrast between subject and object. The contrast goes something like this: I, as subject, come to study and interpret the written text, as object. Such a clear distinction can be used to support a dispassionate and even objective stance toward the text being studied. Yet reading conceived purely as subject-to-object lacks the dialogical interplay that characterizes personal communication. I do not construe an email from my husband as an object for my scrutiny as much as I experience it as a personal address from him (person-to-person rather than subject-to-object). An interpersonal view of texts does not bypass the need for interpretation in the reading process. Instead, a more interpersonal model of reading does justice to the dialogical nature of interpretation and **contextualization**.

There is another advantage to a communication model of the Bible and its interpretation. As communication is rarely limited to cognitive categories, so too our understanding of the text’s import must move beyond cognitive categories alone. For instance, we read in Psalm 147:1:

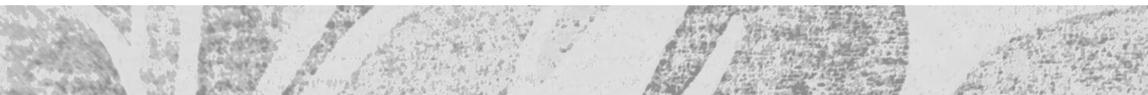
How good it is to sing praises to our God,  
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

6. Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, 18.

7. Gene Green notes that the code model downplays the role of the author in communication, since all that is needed to interpret is found in the text—that is, in the code. “Thus the code model opens the door for the suppression of authors since texts can stand on their own and, truly, are orphaned from the moment they are given birth” (“Relevance Theory,” 220).

8. Joel Green speaks of “a hermeneutic of relationship” (“The (Re-)Turn to Narrative,” 23).

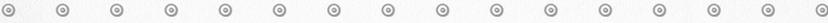
It would be a mistake to claim that there is no cognitive content being expressed here. The psalmist is certainly declaring the goodness and rightness of praising God. Yet the psalmist in his very words is also enacting praise to God—he is *doing something* in the offering up of his words. Additionally, given the context of the whole psalm, it is difficult to ignore the idea that the psalmist is also implicitly calling his audience to praise their God in 147:1 (and explicitly at 147:7, 12, 20). Affirming that texts do more than contain content does not denigrate the cognitive elements of a text’s message. Scripture does communicate what is often termed propositional truth. Yet we are not limited to an either-or choice between cognitive content and noncognitive purposes in texts. Noncognitive purposes also deserve a fair representation in our discussion of textual meaning. Biblical authors have intentions for the emotions and choices as well as the thinking of their readers. A communication model allows for this kind of holistic approach. As we explore Scripture as communication, we will find that this model helpfully expands an understanding of what the Bible is and how we interpret it.



*Part 1*



Theoretical Perspectives  
on Scripture  
as Communication



# One



## Terminology and Context for Hermeneutics

Concepts are not what we think about; they are what we think with.

Kathleen Callow, *Man and Message*

### The Importance of Conceptual Clarity

A helpful starting point for exploring the idea of Scripture as an act of communication involves the clarification of terminology. If, as Kathleen Callow contends, we think *with* concepts (and not only about them),<sup>1</sup> we will want to be as clear as possible about the concepts we use to engage issues of biblical interpretation. Robert Stein, in his book *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, emphasizes the importance of definitional work for thinking clearly about hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup> When I was a beginning seminary student in Stein's hermeneutics class, I was empowered to think more clearly about issues of interpretation by working through a number of terms that formed the basis for our class discussion. Since then, I have valued the gift of definitional clarity. With the goal of passing along this gift, I will introduce a few general terms and their definitions in this chapter. In chapter 2, we will take a look at some theoretical models for interpretation, and also I will introduce some additional terms more specifically focused on the goal of interpretation.

1. See Callow, *Man and Message*, chap. 5.

2. Stein, *Basic Guide*, 30.

After seminary, I experienced firsthand the value of definitional clarity when I was taking a hermeneutics course in my doctoral program. In an informal discussion outside of class one day, a fellow student and I were discussing biblical interpretation. During our conversation, I asked my classmate how she understood the concept of meaning (*What do you mean by “meaning”?*). She was taken aback by my question and proceeded to censure me just a bit for the attempt to define “meaning.” In the end, she did not provide an answer and made it clear that the question itself was essentially wrongheaded. As you might imagine, we could not proceed much further on the topic. Without at least a preliminary definition, there was no way to determine if there was any common ground between our viewpoints, or, for that matter, where we diverged. In fact, articulating a definition of a term, such as “meaning,” is not as much about setting it in stone as it is about clarifying how a concept fits with other proposed definitions of that same concept, as well as other terms. In other words, we are best able to compare concepts and conceptual frameworks if we have adequately defined our understanding of those concepts—if we have done some basic definitional work.

### **Hermeneutics**

To begin, what is hermeneutics? The short answer is that hermeneutics is the study of the activity of interpretation. In the realm of theory, the term refers to the discipline that analyzes interpretation—specifically, how texts communicate, how meaning is derived from texts and/or their authors, and what it is that people are doing when they interpret a text. In practical relation to biblical interpretation, people use “hermeneutics” to speak about either the act of bringing the meaning of the text to bear in one’s present context or the study of the whole movement involved in interpreting a text’s meaning and applying it today.<sup>3</sup> I follow the latter course, viewing hermeneutics as the analysis of what we do when we seek to understand the Bible, including its appropriation to the contemporary world. You might have noticed that in the process of defining hermeneutics, I also, by necessity, defined “interpretation” (seeking to understand the Bible). When we compare these two definitions, we notice that hermeneutics is a second-order task, which means that it involves thinking about thinking. In the case of hermeneutics, thinking and reflection are focused on the act of interpreting texts (which itself is more than a thinking activity but certainly not less).

For many, this definition might beg the question: Why is interpretation needed, let alone the analysis of interpretation? (To get down to it, why this

3. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart follow the former, Grant Osborne the latter. In relation to biblical hermeneutics, Osborne refers to these two stages as exegesis and contextualization (*Hermeneutical Spiral*, 21). See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 33.

book?) This is an honest and common enough question, especially in light of reflexive assumptions that would say *reading* rather than *interpreting* is what ought to happen when we come to the Bible. I am reminded of an advertisement I came across in a Christian magazine a while ago for a new English Bible version. The slogan read, “Now No Interpretation Needed.” The advertisers were implying that this particular Bible was so accurate and clear that simple reading of the text would suffice.

The matter is not so simple, however, given that all reading is interpretation. When I pick up a newspaper or go to an online news source to read, I am, more accurately, interpreting this material. I make a large number of reflexive determinations in order to read appropriately. For example, I know that I am to read an op-ed piece differently from a headlined news article. I implicitly understand that a satirical piece (like an article in *The Onion*) should not be interpreted as a straightforward news alert. In each case, I adjust my expectations accordingly. I also draw on a large pool of shared assumptions with the journalists I read, such as the identities of local sports teams (Go, Vikings!) and the general political and social situation of my city, state, nation, and world. But I do so without much conscious effort, given my familiarity with my own culture’s social context as well as our shared literary conventions (e.g., cartoons are not advertisements).

When enjoying a month-long stay in England a while ago, I had the experience of reading a newspaper in my own language but without fully sharing the cultural backdrop of its writers. There were many times when they referred to a name, place, or situation that would have been clearly understood by a local resident but was obscure to me. Additionally, a turn of phrase that was commonplace for a local reader would puzzle me. I felt the culture gap, even though I share the same language and live at the same time in history.

Imagine how the task of understanding grows more complex when reading ancient texts, including the Bible. This complexity is the reason why what is usually reflexive when reading documents in our native language and from the same cultural context necessarily needs to be more consciously addressed when reading ancient texts. There are significant gaps in our knowledge of the literary conventions, language, and social settings that surround and inhabit biblical texts. We live in a different time and place than the times and places in which and to which the Bible originally spoke. Deliberate attention to these issues and painstaking work at many junctures are required. This is the reason interpretation is not only necessary; it is also unavoidable.<sup>4</sup> And

4. Trevor Hart’s words are forceful in this regard: “The idea that it is possible to . . . achieve a pure reading of the text . . . is one which must be shown up for the self-deception that it is. . . .”

this is why biblical interpretation needs second-order reflection; it needs hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Meaning: A Preliminary Definition***

What is **meaning**? Meaning is what we are trying to grasp when we interpret. That is the short answer, and one on which there is general agreement. From there, definitions diverge sharply. Is meaning to be found by attending to authors and their intentions? Or is meaning a property of texts quite apart from their authors? How do readers intersect with meaning? Do they only discover or respond to meaning, or are they actually creators or cocreators of meaning? Our answers to these kinds of questions will significantly influence our definition of meaning.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, with the proviso that I am advancing a preliminary definition that will be expanded in chapter 2, I will refocus and briefly explain the definition of meaning already provided: *meaning is of the author, inscribed in the text, and addressed to the intended audience for purposes of engagement*. The author's communicative act when writing a text is an intentional one. Because the concept of **authorial intention** has been much maligned in recent years, I specify the kind of intention in view: not simply what an author hopes to communicate (intention as wish or motive), but what an author communicates intentionally in a text (**communicative intention**).<sup>7</sup> The latter is accessible to the reader of the text; the former is not. Meaning understood as an author's communicative intention tends to avoid the pitfalls historically associated with a broader view of authorial intentions. Once we have explored some theories of textual communication (chap. 2), we will be in a better position to expand this definition of meaning to express more carefully the relationship between author, text, and reader.

### ***Exegesis***

**Exegesis** is the task of carefully studying the Bible in order to determine as best as we can the author's meaning in the original context of writing. Or as

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Simple appeals to 'what the Bible says' are always the sign of (no doubt unconscious) subservience to an interpretative tradition, not liberation from it" (*Faith Thinking*, 167).

5. Sometimes you may see this term in its singular form: "hermeneutic." A person's particular view of hermeneutics (the specific way one thinks about interpretation) is part of their "hermeneutic." For example, my view that meaning is, at its core, an author's communicative act contributes to my hermeneutic.

6. For an exploration of how these questions have been answered in the recent history of hermeneutics, see chap. 3.

7. For this terminology, I draw on Mark Brett, who distinguishes between motives and communicative intentions ("Motives and Intentions," esp. 5). See also Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 170.

Moisés Silva puts it, “*Exegesis . . . is a fancy way of referring to interpretation.*”<sup>8</sup> These definitions make it clear that our understanding and practice of exegesis are very much dependent upon our definition of meaning, since how we understand meaning inevitably works itself out in our interpretive (exegetical) practices. For example, if one understands meaning to be a property of texts divorced from their authors, interpretation will not focus on *authorial* meaning or intention. There is an organic interdependence among our definitions of meaning, interpretation, and hermeneutics. The first definition for exegesis given above, which focuses on authorial meaning within the original context, emphasizes that exegesis focuses on the *then* of the text rather than the *now* of contextualized meaning.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, the exegetical process is, at its heart, a cross-cultural one. We are trying to understand the Bible in its original context. Doing so will necessarily involve bridging gaps of time and location, language and culture. Coming to study the Bible in its own context is rather like taking a trip to a foreign country. It is very exciting, but it also requires lots of energy! Even in our global age, crossing cultures is a rather strenuous activity. You likely need to navigate a different language, different customs, differing money systems, and a location of which you may have very little firsthand knowledge.

When we come to **exegete** the Bible,<sup>10</sup> there are a number of factors to pay attention to in order to bridge the cultural gap between the original settings and our own. Some of these factors simply involve good reading habits that we need to cultivate. Others are necessitated by Scripture’s cultural distance. We might call all of these *guidelines for reading at a distance*, and they include attention to **genre, literary context, and social setting**.<sup>11</sup>

## Genre

The genre of a biblical passage or book refers to its classification as a specific kind of literature. There are many types of literature in the Bible, including, but not limited to, narrative, poetry, epistle, legal texts, and apocalyptic literature. Each of these genres can, in turn, be subdivided into further

8. Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 19 (italics original).

9. The use of the term “original meaning” is not particularly popular in hermeneutical circles. The idea that we can separate original meaning from our appropriation of it is often seen as both quite naive and modernist. Nevertheless, while agreeing that in practice it is rather difficult to distinguish exegesis and contextualization, I find the distinction helpful for a theoretical exploration of interpretation. See comments under “Contextualization” below.

10. The word “exegete” can be used as a verb or as a noun. A person doing exegesis is called an exegete or, more rarely, an exegetist.

11. For a more complete list of exegetical guidelines for students of the English Bible, see appendix A.

generic (genre) categories. Poetry, for instance, is the primary genre found in Old Testament prophetic books (e.g., Micah and Jeremiah), and in its wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs and Job) and songs (e.g., Psalms and Song of Songs). It is important to identify the genre of a biblical book because we will need to familiarize ourselves with the conventions of that genre to read it rightly. As modern readers, we simply do not know everything we need to know about certain conventions of the genres of the Bible. For instance, while contemporary readers often feel fairly comfortable interpreting letters (modern or biblical), none of us encounters apocalyptic literature as a genre in our own culture (the genre of the book of Revelation). It is important, then, to understand the generic categories particular to the Bible and learn the conventions and contours that come along with that genre.<sup>12</sup>

### Literary Context

One reading skill that seems obvious for general reading, but sometimes is ignored when we approach the Bible, is reading individual texts in their literary context. Literary context refers to the written material surrounding a text in question. Initially, it specifies the material immediately surrounding a proposed passage of Scripture, as well as the wider section in which that passage is located. During much of the exegetical process, the most important literary unit to attend to when reading a specific text is the entire book of the Bible in which it is found. For exegesis to stay true to what an author has communicated, the whole book must remain in view, even when primary focus is on a single passage (as is often the case in sermons or exegetical papers).<sup>13</sup> There is a time, as well, for looking beyond the individual book to its connections within the whole of Scripture. This is the **canonical context**, with the **canon** referring to the entire Bible (for Protestants, sixty-six Old and New Testament books).<sup>14</sup>

### Social Setting

The gaps that seem most obvious to us as we read Scripture usually are related to the historical and cultural distances between our world and the worlds surrounding the Bible. We experience these gaps more potently in some texts than in others. For example, if you're reading through Genesis, when you arrive at chapter 14, you'd read this:

12. For more on genre, see chap. 7.

13. The focus on a single passage—for sermons or exegetical papers—is simply a matter of convention. We might want to consider studying and teaching larger sections of biblical text to help us and others see more of what an author is communicating. See J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*.

14. For discussion of literary and canonical contexts, see chap. 10.

Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar, four kings against five. Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. (Gen. 14:8–10 ESV)

Many readers will be more than a little geographically and historically challenged by this passage, not to mention linguistically stretched. (The meaning of a “bitumen pit” may be fuzzy, although it certainly doesn’t sound like a good thing!) Passages like this one remind us that the Bible was written in a different setting than the one in which we live. This is an important, good realization. It can heighten our awareness that we should be gracious visitors in this foreign land and get to know all we can about its cultural and historical setting—what we might refer to as its social world.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the “foreignness” of the biblical text can be a bit disconcerting for those of us who hold firmly to the relevance and authority of the Bible. Yet I would suggest that we can hold two truths in tension: (1) the significant distance of the social world of the Bible from our world, and (2) the nearness and relevance of the Scriptures to our lives and needs. There are times when we experience the Bible like a trip to a foreign country and times when we experience the Bible as an old and dear friend. It is my conviction that the foreign excursion will show itself to be relevant and meaningful to our contexts if we take the time to understand the gaps between the ancient and contemporary worlds.

### **Contextualization**

Contextualization is the task of bringing a biblical author’s meaning to bear in other times and cultures. To shift the emphasis a bit: to contextualize is to hear Scripture’s meaning speak in new contexts. The assumption behind this definition is that the Bible has something to say to us today because the Bible is Scripture, God’s word. This is not to say that readers who do not consider the Bible to be Scripture cannot find it meaningful or helpful. It is only to affirm that issues of contextualization will be most relevant to those who understand the text to be authoritative.

15. I will be using the term “social world” to refer broadly to historical, cultural, political, religious, and geographical issues that are relevant to meaning and so require our attention when interpreting an ancient text like the Bible.

Now, the very choice to distinguish contextualization from the exegetical process has implications for my view of hermeneutics—that is, my **hermeneutic**. In fact, I am tempted to include contextualization under the heading of exegesis (along with genre, context, etc.). The reason? In practice, the task of interpreting meaning will inevitably and naturally involve contextualization. The two tasks cannot easily be separated. They can, however, be distinguished theoretically. In fact, to do so is helpful for conceptualizing what we do when we interpret Scripture. So, for purposes of clarifying the two tasks, they will be separated in my discussions. In chapters 7 through 10, practical matters related to exegesis will be explored. But it will not always be so easy to keep contextualization at bay. Conversely, in the final two chapters of the book contextualization will receive our attention. But even there, we will consistently refer back to the exegetical process explored in earlier chapters.

## Setting a Context for the Theoretical Discussion

In chapter 2, I will be examining a number of theoretical models that either address interpretation from a communicative vantage point or include elements that help to conceptualize some part of the communicative process. Before beginning this discussion, I would like to outline the context for the many and varied theories on the subject of hermeneutics in recent scholarship. Why is there such disagreement on definitions of meaning and interpretation? What hermeneutical proposals have been made to clarify issues of meaning? By scouting out the theoretical landscape, we will be able to understand better the nature of texts and, as a result, (1) approach texts in a way that honors their inherent qualities and (2) approach Scripture in a way that hears what God, through human authors, has communicated.

We might say that “meaning” is at the center of the storm. Never has there been a concept so malleable. Meaning has been defined from a myriad of angles, and how it is defined determines how readers go about reading—that is, interpreting—texts. Traditionally, meaning was thought to rest with authors. When interpreting Scripture, readers believed that they were hearing from the human or the divine author. And it was not uncommon for those listening for the human author to hear something distinct from those listening for the divine author.<sup>16</sup> Yet it was the case that even when the author was the

16. Historical criticism in its early manifestations listened only for the human author and assumed all other kinds of listening to be improperly subjective. For more about historical criticism, see appendix B. I will be arguing that we should not try to separate the two: what the human author was communicating stands in for God’s communicative intent.

focus of interpretation, agreement was not guaranteed among interpreters on the meaning of specific biblical texts.

There came a time, however, when theorists became suspicious of the claim that authors could actually be accessed by reading their texts. Even if the interpreter could access the author's intention, some people questioned whether this would lead to successful interpretation. Consideration of texts as separate from their authors came into philosophical vogue: the text was seen as free from the author, free to shape the contemporary reader. In a more recent turn of events, it is the reader who has become the center of the interpretive process for many. As Trevor Hart describes, "Now we are advised that the question, What does the text mean? is insufficient, perhaps even entirely inappropriate. . . . Now the existence of meaning as in any sense an objective commodity is frequently called into question. Meaning is defined by some as what the reader creates, or brings with her to the text, or the effect the text produces in the reader, or what the reader chooses to do with the text."<sup>17</sup>

In the end, it comes down to the nature of texts. What are they intrinsically? If they are free-floating entities that shift and change with new readings and readers, then we won't be very concerned about authors and their intentions. But if texts are culturally located communicative acts, tied to a particular place and time (although with potential for speaking beyond that particularity), then questions of their authors and origins will be relevant for interpretation. In my view, it is *meaning as communicative act* that holds the most promise for doing justice to author, text, and reader without missing the distinctive ways each contributes to the communication process.

Each of the theories that we will be exploring in the next chapter offers valuable conceptual contributions to a model of Scripture as communication. I will be focusing on these specific contributions rather than providing a comprehensive introduction to each theory. The theories that I will be describing also reintroduce the author, or they focus on the historical particularity of communication, which almost inevitably invites a reengagement with the author. After an era in hermeneutical history described by E. D. Hirsch as the "banishment of the author," it seems that the time has come to welcome the author back to the hermeneutical table.<sup>18</sup>

So, if you're ready, take a deep breath, and we'll wax theoretical. . . .

17. Hart, "Christian Approach to the Bible," 193–94. Craig Bartholomew suggests that "post-modernism has exalted the reader over the author and the text" (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, 407).

18. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1. David Steinmetz vividly captures this notion of author banishment when he notes that "contemporary debunking of the author . . . has proceeded at such a pace that it seems at times as if literary criticism has become a jolly game of ripping out an author's shirttail and setting fire to it" (Steinmetz, "Pre-critical Exegesis," 36).