

3RD EDITION

Hermeneutics

Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation



Henry A. Virkler
Karelynn Gerber Ayayo

Henry A. Virkler & Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics*, 3rd Edition
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**Henry A. Virkler
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, MI
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Virkler, Henry A., 1948– author. | Ayayo, Karelynn Gerber, 1975– author.
Title: Hermeneutics : principles and processes of biblical interpretation / Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo.

Description: Third edition. | Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023009229 | ISBN 9781540964076 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540966896 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493443093 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493443109 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Hermeneutics.

Classification: LCC BS476 .V54 2023 | DDC 220.601—dc23/eng/20230419

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023009229>

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Mary,
whose love for God, for me, for our children and grandchildren
is an unceasing source of encouragement

To Michael,
who models devotion to the authoritative proclamation
of Scripture in word and deed

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the many people whose contributions have made this book better. We would especially like to thank Jim Kinney and the editorial team at Baker Academic for their fine editorial assistance.

Preface to the Third Edition

The process of writing this third edition of *Hermeneutics* offered an opportunity to reflect on the many changes in the field of hermeneutics in the decades since the publication of the first edition. Most notably, the field has moved in a philosophical and theoretical direction, becoming increasingly complex and specialized along the way. The shift has been so significant, in fact, that some question whether the word *hermeneutics* can still appropriately be used in a way that is synonymous with biblical interpretation.¹

It may very well be that a book like this one, if initially penned today, would be titled *The Interpreter's Toolbox* or *Steps to Understanding and Applying Scripture*. Either would be fitting and communicate our intent to provide readers with tools that enable them to become better interpreters of Scripture and by extension to live in ways that grow in fidelity to biblical teaching. Nonetheless, we have chosen to retain the title *Hermeneutics* for the sake of continuity with the previous editions. Although our intended meaning may have become less common, it is not obsolete.

Debates about nomenclature aside, we remain convinced that there is a place for a volume like this one that is designed to be faithful to the broadly evangelical tradition, accessible even to the beginning student, and practical. Those three characteristics have served as our rule in this revision.

We are evangelically minded Christians, albeit from different traditions (Henry is influenced by Arminian and charismatic views, Karelynn by Reformed Baptist perspectives). We recognize that our faith commitments

1. Porter, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 31.

inform our views of the biblical text and influence the interpretive practices that we adopt and the hermeneutical discussions we engage or omit. Although as members of the academy we feel pressure to incorporate details to demonstrate that we are aware of and conversant with all the latest critical theories from literary scholars to theologians, whether liberal, progressive, or evangelically minded, actually doing so is unlikely to serve our intended audience. For that reason we have chosen to engage only the most significant of these topics in the text and to do so in a way that is intended to build up the faith of the Christian reader. Other critical matters that warrant some mention are relegated to footnotes or addressed only with suggestions for further reading.

We have aimed this text at several possible readers: (1) the motivated and self-taught layperson who wants to learn to be a good interpreter, (2) the beginning ministerial student who seeks to become more skilled and confident in studying Scripture, and (3) the church leader, Christian counselor, or other individual whose work in some way involves teaching biblical truth to others. We hope that this intended audience values the balance we have sought between depth and brevity, between academically sound content and clarity, and between discussions of hermeneutical theory and actual interpretive practice. The presentation is intentionally simple while still planting seeds for further study for readers who wish to go deeper.

Finally, we have emphasized the practical and engaged the theoretical and philosophical grounding only to the extent that it serves the beginning student. Such an approach is common in many areas of life. For instance, recreational runners may learn to stand tall and take short, quick steps when running uphill. Experts could present the biomechanics and physics of why this form is recommended, but runners do not need to see the formulas to efficiently make their way to the summit.

During our years in higher education, we have discovered that in order to help someone learn a new skill we need to teach theory, but then we must translate that theory into practical steps and give students opportunities to practice their skills and receive feedback. People generally do not learn a skill by just reading about it. We think it is in those second and third areas that this book makes its best contribution.

Those who are familiar with this book will see that we have continued to use the same basic steps and substeps found in prior editions, though they are slightly regrouped. While preserving continuity with the first and second editions, we have integrated content that reflects some of the recent additions and controversies in hermeneutics that have emerged in the past forty years. In response to comments from readers who are reading this

text while not being in an academic program, we have included answers to select exercises. Additional resources for instructors are now available through the Baker Academic website (www.bakeracademic.com).

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Visit www.bakeracademic.com/professors to access study aids and instructor materials for this textbook.

ONE

Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics

After completing this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Define the terms *hermeneutics*, *general hermeneutics*, and *special hermeneutics*.
2. Describe various fields of biblical and theological study (study of the canon, textual criticism, historical criticism, exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, practical theology) and their relationship to hermeneutics.
3. Explain the theoretical and biblical basis for the need for hermeneutics.
4. Identify three basic views of the doctrine of inspiration and explain the implications of these views for hermeneutics.
5. Identify six controversial issues in contemporary hermeneutics and explain each issue in a few sentences.

Some Basic Definitions

The word *hermeneutics* is said to have its origin in the name Hermes, the Greek god who served as messenger for the gods, transmitting and interpreting their communications to their fortunate, or often unfortunate, recipients. By the first century, the verb form *hermēneuō* was used to mean “explain,” “interpret,” or “translate.” This verb appears three times in the New Testament, each time with the sense of translating from one language to another (John 1:42; 9:7; Heb. 7:2).

Traditionally, hermeneutics has been defined as *the science and art of interpretation, particularly of a written text like the Bible*.¹ Hermeneutics is considered a science because it has rules, and these rules can be classified in an orderly system. It is considered an art because communication is flexible, and therefore a mechanical and rigid application of rules will sometimes distort the true meaning of a communication.² To be a good interpreter of Scripture one must learn the rules of hermeneutics as well as the art of applying those rules and allowing biblical teaching to play a formative role in one's life.³

Hermeneutical theory is sometimes divided into two subcategories: general and special hermeneutics. General hermeneutics is the study of the process that governs interpretation of any and all texts. It includes historical-cultural, written contextual, and lexical-syntactical analyses. Special hermeneutics is the study of the additional interpretive guidelines that may apply only to a specific kind of writing. For instance, Scripture itself, when recognized as being the unique Word of God, merits theological analysis. Other genres found within the Bible that warrant special hermeneutics include narratives, epistles, parables, allegories, types, and prophetic writings. General hermeneutics is the focus of chapters 3 through 5, while special hermeneutics is the focus of chapters 6 through 8.

Relation of Hermeneutics to Other Fields of Study

Hermeneutics is not isolated from other fields of biblical and theological study. It is related to study of the canon, textual criticism, historical criticism, exegesis, and biblical, systematic, and practical theology.⁴

1. Anthony Thiselton explains that hermeneutics “explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts.” Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 1.

As mentioned in the preface, a broader definition of hermeneutics has emerged by which the word is used to speak of the entire field of study that explores whether and how understanding of anything is possible. The focus of this volume remains on biblical interpretation.

2. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 1.

3. In recent years, a growing number of evangelical theologians (e.g., Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*) have asserted that hermeneutics should also include a discussion of how a text's intended meaning may apply to the contemporary reader. Resources like the NIV Application Commentary series now attempt not only to explain the human author's intended meaning to the original audience but also how that intended meaning applies to believers' lives today. We will devote an entire chapter (chap. 9) to that discussion.

4. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 7–10. See also Muller, *Study of Theology*, for an argument for the unity of the disciplines.

Among these various fields is the study of canonicity—that is, the differentiation between those books that bear the stamp of divine inspiration and those that do not. The historical process by which certain books came to be identified as the canon of Christian Scripture and others did not is a long and interesting one and can be found elsewhere.⁵ Essentially, the process of canonization was a historical one in which the Holy Spirit guided the church to recognize that certain writings bear the impress of divine authority.

The field that is foundational to a study of any biblical writing is textual criticism, sometimes referred to as lower criticism.⁶ Textual criticism is the attempt to ascertain the original wording of a text. It is needed because no original autographs of the biblical writings remain, only many copies of the originals, and these copies have variations among them. By carefully comparing one manuscript with another, textual critics perform an invaluable service by providing a biblical text that closely approximates the original writings given to Old and New Testament believers.⁷ One of the world’s most renowned New Testament textual critics, Daniel Wallace, has said in this regard, “Of the 500,000 or so variants that we have, more than 99% of them make no difference at all. . . . [The Bible] we have today in all essentials is the very word of God. No essential Christian belief is jeopardized by any viable variant.”⁸

A third field of study is known as historical or higher criticism. Scholars in this field study the authorship and audience of a book, the date of its composition, the historical circumstances surrounding its composition, and its literary unity, and (sometimes) evaluate the authenticity of its contents.⁹

Scholars who engage in historical criticism approach their task from diverse starting points. While some begin with entirely naturalistic presuppositions

5. Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*; Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*; Kruger, *Canon Revisited*; Kruger, *Question of Canon*; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*; Lanier, *How We Got the Bible*; Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*; Steinmann, *Oracles of God*.

6. In such contexts the word *criticism* is a neutral one that refers to methods for investigating texts and the process of using such methods for analysis and evaluation. The critic does not necessarily find fault with the text.

7. The primary manuscripts for the Old Testament include the Masoretic Text, the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX), and the Dead Sea Scrolls. More than five thousand manuscripts exist recording the writings of the New Testament. Most English translations of Old and New Testament texts draw on the work of textual critics. It is noteworthy that KJV and NKJV differ from other English translations in this regard by following either the Ben Chayyim text or the Leningrad Manuscript B19a for the Old Testament and the Textus Receptus for the New Testament.

8. Wallace, “Is the New Testament Reliable?” Among other roles, Wallace serves as executive director of the Center for the Study of the New Testament Manuscripts. CSNTM.org is a virtual treasure of all things related to New Testament manuscript study. For further reading, see Bruce, *New Testament Documents*; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*.

9. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 9.

and reject the idea that Scripture is God’s inspired Word to humanity as well as the possibility of miracles and prophecy, others who engage in historical criticism¹⁰ aim to do so while upholding biblical authority. The introductions to each book of the Bible found in the *NIV Study Bible*, in the *ESV Study Bible*, and in many volumes within the Word Biblical Commentary series are but a few examples. Knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of a book provides a crucial background when investigating its meaning. Chapter 3 is devoted to this topic.

With this background the scholar is prepared to do exegesis. In exegesis the reader of Scripture applies the principles of hermeneutics to arrive at the most plausible understanding of the text. The prefix *ex* (“out of” or “from”) refers to the idea that the interpreter is attempting to derive understanding *from* the text rather than reading meaning *into* the text (eisegesis; the prefix *eis* means “in” or “into”).

Following exegesis are the twin fields of biblical theology and systematic theology.¹¹ Biblical theology is the study of divine revelation as it was given through the Old and New Testaments. It asks the question, How did this specific revelation add to the knowledge of God that God’s people already possessed at that time? It attempts to show the development of theological knowledge during the Old and New Testament eras.

In contrast to biblical theology, systematic theology organizes the biblical data in a logical rather than a chronological manner. It attempts to place all the information on a given topic (e.g., the nature of God, the nature of the afterlife, the ministry of angels) together to uncover the totality of God’s revelation on that topic. Biblical and systematic theology are complementary fields: together they provide greater understanding than either would alone.

The discipline of practical theology rounds out the fields of study related to hermeneutics.¹² Practical theology utilizes a process that first describes and analyzes contemporary situations and practices.¹³ With a deep description of

10. In some instances they may refer to their approach with a variant term such as historical-grammatical criticism.

11. Some prefer to divide theology into further categories; e.g., Paul Enns differentiates biblical, systematic, historical, dogmatic, and contemporary theology. See Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*.

12. Although it is technically not a field of biblical study, historical theology, the study of how Christian doctrines have developed throughout various periods of church history, is an additional discipline that can provide beneficial context for practical theology.

13. The field itself debates its primary focus. Some see its intent as the application of biblical and theological studies to the life and practice of the church for preaching, Christian education, counseling, etc. Others see practical theology as a field aligned more with the social sciences. For more extensive reading in this interdisciplinary field, see Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*; Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*; Browning, *Practical Theology*; Osmer, *Practical*

a particular situation in mind, practical theology dialogues with the work of the fields discussed above as well as with other social and natural sciences to arrive at a response to the contemporary situation. Practical theology completes its task by developing an effective strategy for Christian life and practice that speaks to the contemporary situation. Practical theology, as the final stage of the hermeneutical process, provides the necessary application of exegesis and theology to lived religious experience. This step may alternatively be called application or contextualization, and it is the focus of chapter 9.

The Need for Hermeneutics

When we hear someone recite or read a text, our understanding of what we hear or read is often spontaneous—we follow the rules by which we interpret meaning automatically and subconsciously. When something blocks that spontaneous understanding, we become more aware of the processes we use to understand (e.g., when translating from one language to another). Hermeneutics seeks to codify the processes we normally use at a subconscious level to understand the meaning of a communication. The more obstacles to spontaneous understanding, the more aware we must become of the process of interpretation and the need for hermeneutics.

When we interpret Scripture, we encounter several obstacles to a spontaneous understanding of the meaning of the message.¹⁴ The first is a historical gap caused by the time separating the original human writers and contemporary readers. Jonah's antipathy for the Ninevites, for example, takes on added meaning when we understand the extreme cruelty and sinfulness of the people of Nineveh in his time, details that were already familiar to the initial audience.

Second, a cultural gap results from the significant differences between the cultures of the ancient Hebrews or of the first-century Mediterranean world and our contemporary cultures. Harold Garfinkel, the UCLA sociologist and founder of ethnomethodology, suggests that it is impossible for an observer to be objective and dispassionate when studying a phenomenon (which in our case would be the study of Scripture). Each of us sees reality through eyes conditioned by our culture and a variety of other experiences. To use the classic analogy of Garfinkel: it is impossible to study people or phenomena as

Theology; Boff, *Theology and Praxis*; Cahalan and Mikoski, *Opening the Field*; Forrester, *Truthful Action*; Miller-McLemore, *Practical Theology*; Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*; Wolfteich, *Invitation to Practical Theology*. Related terms include *pastoral theology*, *public theology*, *moral theology*, and *contextual theology*.

14. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 4–7.

if we were looking at fish in a goldfish bowl from a detached position outside the bowl; each of us is inside a bowl ourselves.¹⁵

Applied to hermeneutics, the analogy suggests that we are goldfish in one bowl (our own time and culture) looking at goldfish in another bowl (biblical times and culture). Failure to recognize either that cultural environment or our own, or the differences between the two, can result in serious misunderstandings of the meaning of biblical communications.¹⁶ More will be said about this in chapters 3 and 9.

A third significant block is the philosophical or worldview gap. Views of life, of circumstances, and of the nature of the universe differ among cultures. To transmit a message successfully from one culture to another, a translator or reader must be aware of both the similarities and the contrasts in worldviews.

A fourth block to spontaneous understanding of the biblical message is the linguistic gap. The Bible was written in three languages: the Old Testament contains writings in Hebrew as well as portions in Aramaic, and the New Testament is in Greek. The vocabulary, word connotations, grammatical structures, and idioms of each of these three languages differ from one another as well as from our own language, and Bible translators must avoid many pitfalls. Consider the distortion in meaning that resulted, for example, when Pepsi's "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" ad campaign was rendered in Chinese in a way that suggested that Pepsi brings dead ancestors back from the grave. Clearly translation is a difficult task.

Hermeneutics is needed, then, because of the historical, cultural, philosophical, and linguistic gaps that block today's readers from a spontaneous, accurate understanding of God's Word.¹⁷

Exercise 1. To be an informed citizen, you regularly access online news sites. Are you typically aware of the hermeneutical process you utilize to understand the articles you read? Why or why not? Suppose you were to read Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, written in 1863. Are you likely to be more aware or less aware of your hermeneutical process? Consider the same question with regard to your reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Describe the additional barriers to understanding that exist for you when you read the Emancipation Proclamation and *Macbeth* that do not exist when you read the daily news.

15. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

16. Tyler, "Ethnomethodologist."

17. Two excellent books that engage the importance of becoming aware of the cultural blinders that may cause contemporary Western readers to misunderstand Scripture are Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, and Richards and James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*.

After you have attempted to develop an answer to Exercise 1 yourself, we encourage you to compare your answer with the suggested answer at the end of this chapter.

Alternative Views of Inspiration

The view of inspiration that a biblical interpreter holds has direct implications for hermeneutics. This section offers only a very simplified snapshot of three main views of inspiration. There are several excellent discussions of the topic available elsewhere.¹⁸

One position on inspiration is that the biblical writers were inspired naturally in somewhat the same sense as Shakespeare and other great writers were. What they recorded were ancient religious conceptions about God and his workings. This position emphasizes theories of how editors (called redactors) pieced the ancient manuscripts together from previous writings, and what these compilations reveal about the growing spiritual awareness of the compilers.

A second general position, one common among neoorthodox scholars, maintains that God revealed himself only in mighty acts, not in words. The words of Scripture attributed to God reflect a human understanding of the significance of God's action, and the biblical stories are the attempt to record an encounter with God in human, culturally meaningful words. The Bible *becomes* the Word of God when individuals read it and the words acquire personal, existential significance for them. This view emphasizes the process of demythologizing—that is, removing the mythological packaging that has been used to convey the existential truth, so that the reader may have a personal encounter with that truth.

A third view of inspiration, the one traditionally held by historic Christianity, is verbal plenary inspiration.¹⁹ This view proposes that God worked through the personalities of the biblical writers in such a way that, without suspending their personal styles of expression or freedom, the words that they produced were, in fact, “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16; Greek: *theopneustos*). The emphasis of the 2 Timothy text is that *Scripture itself*, not the writers

18. Henry, *Revelation and the Bible*; Packer, “Fundamentalism”; Packer, *God Has Spoken*; Packer, “Revelation”; Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*; Frame, “The Spirit and the Scriptures”; McGowan, *Divine Authenticity of Scripture*; Bloesch, *Holy Scriptures*.

19. The view of verbal plenary inspiration differs from limited inspiration, by which God is seen to inspire the thoughts but not necessarily the words of the biblical authors, and from verbal dictation, which suggests that the human authors always passively received and recorded words from God.

only, was inspired (“All Scripture is inspired by God,” NASB). If it were only the writers themselves who were inspired, then one might argue that their writings were contaminated by the interaction of the message with their own primitive and idiosyncratic conceptions. The teaching in 2 Timothy 3:16, however, is that God guided the scriptural authors in such a way that their *writings* bear the impress of divine “inspiration.”

Based on such verses as 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21, the traditional Christian view is that the Bible communicates objective, propositional truth.²⁰ Unlike the neoorthodox position, which conceives Scripture as *becoming* the Word of God when it acquires personal existential significance, the traditional position is that Scripture is and always will remain truth, whether or not the reader appropriates it personally. For those who hold this view of inspiration, then, hermeneutical skills possess great importance because they are the means for discovering more accurately the truths Scripture holds.

Controversial Issues in Contemporary Hermeneutics

Before looking at the history and the principles of biblical hermeneutics, we should first become acquainted with some of the pivotal yet controversial issues in hermeneutics. Just as the view of inspiration affects the reader’s approach to exegesis, so also do these six issues affect hermeneutics.

Validity in Interpretation

Perhaps the first and most basic questions in hermeneutics are, Is it possible to say what constitutes *the* valid meaning of a text? Or are there multiple valid meanings? If there are multiple meanings, are some more valid than others? In that case, what criteria can be used to distinguish more valid from less valid interpretations? To understand the important issues raised by these questions, consider the exercise below.

Exercise 2. The Naphtunkian’s Dilemma

Situation: You once wrote a letter to a close friend. En route to its destination, the message was lost, and it remained lost for the next two thousand years, amid numerous historical transitions. One day it was discovered and reclaimed. Three literary experts from the contemporary Naphtunkian

20. To say that Scripture communicates propositional truth need not imply that it communicates *only* propositional truth. At the same time it can communicate the power and presence of God in a personal way. For further discussion, see Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation?”; Vanhoozer, “Semantics of Biblical Literature.”

society each translated your letter and arrived at three interpretations. "What this means," said Tunky I, "is . . ." "I disagree," said Tunky II. "What this means is . . ." "You are both wrong," claimed Tunky III. "My interpretation is the correct one."

Resolution: As a dispassionate observer viewing the controversy from your celestial (we hope) perspective, what advice would you give the Tunkies to resolve their differences? We will assume that you are a fairly articulate writer.

- a. Is it possible that your letter has more than one valid meaning and all three Tunkies could be correct? If your answer is yes, go to (b). If no, go to (c).
- b. If your letter can have a variety of meanings, is there any limit on their number? If there is a limit, what criteria would you propose to differentiate between valid and invalid meanings?
- c. If your letter has only one valid meaning, what criteria would you use to discern whether Tunky I, II, or III has the best interpretation?

If you conclude that Tunky II's interpretation is superior, how would you justify this to Tunkies I and III?

In what way, if any, would your answers change if the text you had written was a poem rather than a letter? In what way, if any, would your answers change if the text you had written was a cherished family recipe for apple pie rather than a letter?

If you have not spent at least fifteen minutes trying to help the Tunkies resolve their problem, go back and see what you can do to help them. The problem they are wrestling with is probably the most crucial issue in all of hermeneutics. Once you have developed your answer, you can go to the end of this chapter and compare your answer with our suggested answer.

E. D. Hirsch, in his volume *Validity in Interpretation*, discusses the philosophy that has been gaining acceptance since the 1920s: the belief that "the meaning of a text is what it means to me." Whereas previously the prevailing belief had been that a text means what its author meant, T. S. Eliot and others contended that "the best poetry is impersonal, objective and autonomous; that it leads an afterlife of its own, totally cut off from the life of its author."²¹

Such a belief, fostered by the relativism of contemporary Western culture, soon influenced literary criticism in areas other than poetry. The study of

21. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," cited in Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1. The Hirsch volume is an excellent source for further discussion of this and other related topics.

“what a text says” became the study of “what it says to an individual critic.”²² Such a belief was not without its difficulties, as Hirsch cogently points out:

When critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place [as the determiner of meaning], and this led unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusions. Where before there had been but one author [one determiner of meaning], there now arose a multiplicity of them, each carrying as much authority as the next. To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation. . . . For if the meaning of a text is not the author’s, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning.²³

In the study of Scripture, the task of the exegete is to determine as closely as possible what God and the selected human author meant in a particular passage rather than “what it means to me.”²⁴ By accepting the view that the meaning of a text is what it means to me, God’s Word can have as many meanings as it does readers, and the reader, rather than God, stands in the position of authority. Such a view provides no basis for concluding that an orthodox interpretation of a passage is more valid than a heretical one; indeed, the distinction between orthodox and heretical interpretations is no longer meaningful.

At this juncture it may be helpful to distinguish between interpretation and application or, to use the terminology of Hirsch and others, between meaning and significance.²⁵ To say that a text has one valid interpretation (the *author’s* intended meaning) is not to say that the writing has only one possible application (significance for a reader in any given situation).²⁶ For example,

22. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 3.

23. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 5–6. Hirsch has since modified his definition of *meaning*, broadening its scope “to include exemplary future contents” (“Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” 216) that he would have previously categorized as *significance*. This change occurred as Hirsch considered the paradox that an author’s intended meaning may include future-directed intentions. Nonetheless, Hirsch maintains that “clarity will continue to be served by distinguishing between what stays the same and what changes in different interpretations” (210) and that “meaning can be stable [when] it has been stabilized by a historical intention” (216).

24. The benefits of such an author-centered hermeneutic will be argued more fully in chapter 2.

25. Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 41–44. Even this terminology is not without its critics: “Rather than speak of single intent or single meaning with multiple applications or significances, however, it seems to us better to speak of fixed meaning with varying significances. Kaiser’s language could wrongly suggest that certain passages originally intended to communicate only one idea when in fact several are present.” Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 609.

26. Article VII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics affirms this position: “WE AFFIRM that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. WE DENY

the command in Ephesians 4:26–27 (“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold”) has one meaning but can have multiple applications depending on whether the reader is angry with an employer, a spouse, or a child. Likewise the promise in Romans 8:39 that nothing can “separate us from the love of God” has one meaning but will have different applications (in this case, emotional significance) depending on the particular life situation a person is facing.

The position scholars take on the validity of interpretation influences their exegesis. It is thus a crucial issue in the study of hermeneutics.

Can Words Communicate Meaning?

Second, some philosophers and theologians argue that it is impossible to communicate propositional truth with words, but the biblical record itself challenges such a belief. Genesis 2:23 indicates that God created human beings with the ability to communicate ideas with words, and Genesis 3 demonstrates that God communicated with Adam and Eve in that manner and held them responsible for understanding and obeying his words.

Every society operates on the assumption that words can communicate definite meaning. Laws are written with the understanding that words have meaning and that citizens can be expected to obey that meaning.

Even those who advocate postmodernism and deconstructionism function as though their words are capable of communicating meaning. For instance, university professors design their course syllabi and tests on the assumption that words are able to communicate meaning effectively, and they evaluate their students on their ability to understand that meaning. As Grant Osborne insightfully explains, the deconstructionism movement ends up deconstructing itself.²⁷

Double Authorship and Sensus Plenior

A third controversy in biblical hermeneutics is the double author issue. The orthodox view of Scripture is one of confluent authorship; that is, the divine author and the human authors worked together (flowed together) to produce the inspired text. This issue raises these important questions: What meaning

that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.” See “Chicago Statement” in McKim, *Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, 21–26.

27. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 410–33, 488–89. For those interested, Osborne’s book is a very thorough critique of deconstructionism and a strong defense that while determining an ancient author’s original meaning can at times be difficult, it is generally possible and remains a viable goal.

did the human author intend? What meaning did the divine author intend? Did the intended meaning of the divine author ever exceed the meaning that was clearly intended by the human author?

The question of whether Scripture has a fuller sense (referred to as *sensus plenior*)²⁸ than that intended by the human author has been debated for centuries. Donald A. Hagner notes the following concerning this issue:

To be aware of *sensus plenior* is to realize that there is the possibility of more significance to an Old Testament passage than was consciously apparent to the original author, and more than can be gained by strict grammatico-historical exegesis. Such is the nature of divine inspiration that the authors of Scripture were themselves often not conscious of the fullest significance and final application of what they wrote. This fuller sense of the Old Testament can be seen only in retrospect and in the light of the New Testament fulfillment.²⁹

Several arguments are used to support a *sensus plenior* position: (1) Jesus and the New Testament authors seem to interpret some Old Testament texts in a way that suggests they have a fuller meaning, (2) the canon of Scripture creates the necessary context for interpretation of God's communication and must be considered as part of exegesis, (3) 1 Peter 1:10–12 seems to suggest that the Old Testament prophets did at times speak things they did not understand, (4) Daniel 12:8 seems to indicate that Daniel did not understand the meaning of all the prophetic visions that had been given to him, and (5) a number of prophecies seem unlikely to have had contemporaneous comprehension (e.g., Dan. 8:27; John 11:49–52).

Those who argue against a *sensus plenior* position make the following points: (1) accepting the idea of double meanings in Scripture may open the way for all sorts of eisegetical interpretations, (2) interpretations offered by Jesus and New Testament authors that appear to be fuller meanings are better understood as typology or as implications of the Old Testament, (3) examining the full canon of Scripture should be a step separate from exegesis so that it does not diminish attention paid to the text's meaning in its original historical context, (4) 1 Peter 1:10–12 can be understood to mean that the Old Testament prophets were ignorant only of the *time* of the fulfillment of their predictions but not of the *meaning* of their predictions, (5) in some instances prophets understood the meaning of their predictions but not their full implications (e.g., in John 11:50 Caiaphas *did* understand that it was

28. Some express this general concept with somewhat different terminology like “canonical *sensus plenior*” or “canonical process approach.” See Prince, “Canonical *Sensus Plenior*”; Waltke, “Canonical Process Approach,” 7.

29. Hagner, “Old Testament,” 92.

better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish, but did not understand the full implications of his prophecy), and (6) in some instances the prophets may have understood the meaning of their prophecy but not its historical referent.

More recently scholars such as Kevin Vanhoozer and Nicholas Wolterstorff have proposed that insights from speech act theory, a discipline that has spread from philosophy into many other fields of study, helpfully advance discussions about hermeneutics and *sensus plenior*. At its most basic level, speech act theory proposes that communicative acts include three elements: (1) the production of words (locutionary act), (2) the meaning the speaker or author intended to communicate (illocutionary act), (3) and that which is accomplished by the words (perlocutionary act). Speech act theory recognizes that language may be used for a great many purposes. By their words, authors may variously intend to assert a truth about the world, commit themselves to a particular action, direct their listeners to think or do something, actually accomplish something by virtue of the words themselves, reveal their view about some aspect of the world, and more.³⁰ The intent of any single speech act can be multifaceted.

Consider the words “don’t bother” (locution). Imagine you speak them kindly to the waitstaff at a restaurant following their offer of service (“Shall I refill your soda?”). The words may provide instruction (“Do not refill my soda”), but they could also express your opinion of the drink (“I did not like it”) or indicate your intent to soon leave the restaurant (illocutions). When pronounced more harshly in another setting, these same words may intend to express the futility of some proposed course of action (“May I redo my homework for a higher mark?”). Or when posted on a sign on a professor’s door, they may indicate that work is in process and should not be interrupted, directing anyone outside the door to return at another time. Their placement on the door may simultaneously serve as the means by which the professor commits herself to finish grading a pile of papers before leaving the office.

There is no guarantee that the effect of the words (perlocution) will align with that which was intended. In response to the final example, a considerate colleague might read the sign and determine that she should return at another time. Restless children could see the words as an indication that they will have to bang loudly without ceasing on the door until they get their mother’s attention. The professor herself, despite her best intentions, may find herself distracted and unable to finish marking all the assignments.

30. See Searle, *Expression and Meaning*.

With regard to biblical interpretation, speech act theory may provide greater clarity and precision of language to discuss the extent to which God and the human author share illocutions for any given speech act. Nonetheless, the *sensus plenior* controversy is one of those issues not likely to be settled this side of eternity. Perhaps a guideline on which the majority of those on both sides of the issue can agree is that any passage that seems to have a fuller meaning than is likely to have been comprehended by the human author should be so interpreted only when God has expressly declared the nature of his fuller meaning through later revelation.³¹ The interpretation of prophecy, the biblical genre in which questions of *sensus plenior* most frequently arise,³² will be discussed more fully in chapter 7. A list of resources with many of the important writings on this subject can be found at the end of this chapter.

Literal, Figurative, and Symbolic Interpretations of Scripture

A fourth controversial issue in contemporary hermeneutics involves the literalness with which we understand the words, sentences, or even larger literary units of Scripture. As Bernard Ramm points out, conservative Christians are sometimes accused of being “wooden-headed literalists” in their interpretations,³³ while others may claim that incidents such as the fall, the flood, and the story of Jonah’s undersea adventure should be understood as metaphors, symbols, and allegories rather than as actual historical events. Since all words are symbols representing ideas, they suggest that we should not seek to read these words in a strictly literal sense.

It is true that authors may use words in literal, figurative, or symbolic senses. The following three sentences exemplify this point:

- *Literal*: “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink” (Exod. 17:6).
- *Figurative*: “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge” (Ps. 18:2).
- *Symbolic*: “They drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4).

31. Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 5; Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 210. As Protestants we would limit this to revelation in the biblical canon. Roman Catholic theologians may allow space for the inclusion of church tradition. See Brown, *Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*.

32. For arguments that *sensus plenior* is a factor to be considered in genres other than prophecy, see Barker, “Speech Act Theory,” 232–39.

33. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 122, 146.