

# Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation

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OLD TESTAMENT ANSWERS

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# 1

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## What Is Involved in Understanding a Passage from the Bible?

In one sense, understanding is a quite straightforward task, one that we fulfill successfully all the time as we read newspapers or novels, watch plays or advertisements, and listen to confidences or weather forecasts or sermons or jokes. At the same time, it is a task that periodically catches us out. We can't see the point of the novel or the play, or we mishear the confidence and hurt the one who shared it. Further, beneath that recurrent experience of failure to understand lies something of a mystery: what is this thing called understanding, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it? How is it that communication takes place?<sup>1</sup>

Understanding Scripture is a particular instance of the general task of understanding. It, too, is in one sense a straightforward enterprise that quite ordinary people accomplish as effortlessly as they understand newspapers, television, or each other. It, too, however, catches them out periodically (partly because of the cultural differences that separate most modern readers from the Bible): they make little sense of ritual instructions in Leviticus or visionary material in Revelation, they are unsure (or are too sure) of what we are supposed to learn from stories in the Gospels or Acts, or they read Genesis 1–3 as more parabolic (or more historical) than it actually is. It, too, raises questions of baffling depth: what do we mean by understanding

1. First published in *Anvil* 1 (1984): 153–62, 261–81; it contains the seed thoughts for my *Models for the Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995; Toronto: Clements, 2004).

Scripture, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it? How can I hear what these human authors were saying in God's name to their hearers? How can I hear what God wants to say to me through Scripture?

Another question arises out of the element of mystery about the task of interpretation, the mystery of which we are reminded when we have difficulty in understanding a text or when an interpretation that is compelling to us is unconvincing to someone else. Who knows whether we miss whole aspects of the meaning of particular texts, or fundamentally misconstrue them, even when we do not feel uncertain about their meaning or do not find our understanding contradicted by someone else? Texts, after all, cannot answer back ("No, I didn't mean that") as people can. If we feel we have grounds for being confident about the meaning of Scripture, we can obey and preach that meaning with confidence; but we cannot at the same time be open to being coaxed towards some other understanding of it. Openness to new understanding demands the willingness to yield old convictions.

The task of understanding can rightly be considered in the abstract, but discussion of it can then become rather rarified. Here I forego discussing the task in its "neat" or theoretical form and concentrate on particular instances of it, on what is involved in understanding specific types of material in Scripture. For understanding is a multiplex skill or art (understanding Hamlet, understanding the football results, understanding an atlas, understanding my wife . . .); ultimately a different approach is required for each form of the task. The varying objects of understanding with which Scripture presents us similarly require varying approaches. Further, as it happens, many of the different insights that have emerged from the study of interpretation at the rarified, abstract level over recent decades come into sharper focus and more direct relevance when applied to specific kinds of material.

To be comprehensive would involve examining one by one every scriptural genre, ultimately every scriptural text, but that would be to sacrifice ourselves to the concrete as fatally as we might otherwise do to the abstract. I propose instead to consider three broad scriptural genres—instruction texts, narrative texts, and prayer texts—which between them raise most of the issues we need to be concerned with. It may be no coincidence that they constitute examples of the three main ways of speaking that appear in Scripture: in instruction texts such as laws or prophetic oracles, God addresses people;<sup>2</sup> in narrative texts, people address each other; in prayer texts, people address God. They also constitute genres from the main divisions within the two Testaments (Torah, Prophets, and Writings, or historical books, poetic books, and prophetic books; Gospels and Epistles). They embody three forms of language, the discursive, the imaginative, and the existential.

With a little persuasion, they can also be harnessed to illustrate other diversities of approach to interpretation. For instance, texts may offer confrontation, reassurance, or response. Their meaning may be located within the text (in the inherent form and interrelationships of its various elements), beneath the text (in the common human

2. In chapter 6, I divide this second way of speaking into two.

experiences, feelings, and convictions that it concretely symbolizes and expresses), behind the text (in the aims and intentions of its author or the life setting of its tradition), or in front of the text (in the possible mode of being in the world that it sets before us). Interpreters may take one of several foci for their work: perhaps the world out there, the work's universe, the objective truth as the work conceives it; perhaps the needs of the audience it addressed and the effect it had on them; perhaps the personal feelings and experience of the author, to which the work gives expression; perhaps the inner dynamic of the work itself as a world of its own. They may regard texts as windows (onto another world), as mirrors (reflecting back insight on the interpreter's world), or as portraits (with a world of their own).<sup>3</sup>

Different genres cause different questions about interpretation to surface; I doubt whether any one philosophy of interpretation opens up all secrets. It is unwise to treat all texts as fundamentally expressive of an understanding of human existence (as Bultmann does), though some are. It is unwise to treat all texts as primarily didactic, concerned to teach something (an assumption for which Barr faults fundamentalists). It is unwise to treat all texts as "story and poem."<sup>4</sup> Like literary criticism, biblical interpretation needs to cultivate an eclectic, "open methodology."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, such a methodology will then recognize that the genres do overlap in their inner nature; the questions about interpretation consequently also overlap. A prayer text is also an instruction text; a narrative text reflects the experience of God and response to God that are more the overt concern of a prayer text. What a narrative tells a story about, an instruction text expresses as a theology or an ethic and a prayer text responds to in worship, commitment, and plea. So I make such distinctions in the sections that follow in order to let the issues emerge as sharply as possible; the distinctions themselves can then be allowed to become fuzzy in order for the insights to be applied across any artificial divides.

## 1. Instruction Texts

By instruction texts I mean material that overtly offers people direct teaching on belief and behavior; it is instanced by the laws, the prophets, Proverbs, the words

3. For analyses such as these, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 3–29; R. J. Karris, "Windows and Mirrors," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1979 Seminar Papers* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 1:47–58, and his references; V. S. Poythress, "Analysing a Biblical Text," *SJT* 32 (1979): 113–38, 319–32; R. Lapointe, *Les trois dimensions de l'herméneutique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1967); Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:314–15; R. Jakobson, e.g., "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language* (ed. T. A. Sebeok; New York: Wiley, 1960), 353, 357; Luis Alonso Schökel, *The Inspired Word* (New York: Herder, 1965; London: Bums and Oates, 1967), 134–50, with his references to K. Buehler's *Sprachtheorie*; E. V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 152–53.

4. So David J. A. Clines, "Story and Poem," *Int* 34 (1980): 115–27.

5. So M. J. Valdés in *Interpretation of Narrative* (ed. M. J. Valdés and O. J. Miller; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 10.

of Jesus, and the epistles. It is not with such material that either Testament actually begins; Genesis and Matthew are narrative texts. But it is convenient to consider instruction texts first.

The least controversial shibboleth of biblical interpretation for a century has been the conviction that any passage of Scripture should be understood against its historical background. Many instruction texts in Scripture offer some justification for that belief in that they themselves draw attention to their historical context. Most prophetic books begin by telling us something about the author's background and the period to which the message related, as if to say, "You need to see the oracles that follow as the work of this prophet in this context." The reasons for this are clear as we go on to read the prophets. One aspect of it is that their persons, lives, and personalities commonly enter into their message or embody it in some way; the way they express themselves and the kind of emphases they bring reflect their individuality. It is important to see Amos as a Judean prophesying in Ephraim, to see that Isaiah's name ("Yahweh is salvation") embodies a theme taken up by his message and that Hosea's marital experience shapes his interpretation of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. In a parallel way, an epistle characteristically begins by identifying its writer and its recipients; these introductions, too, often indicate key aspects to the epistle's significance. Paul's direct apostleship (Gal 1:1) is of key importance in Galatians, as is Paul himself in Philippians or 2 Corinthians; John's sharing on Patmos his brothers' and sisters' experience of tribulation is of key importance in Revelation.

The historical context often alluded to by the introductions to prophetic books or epistles can be illumined from sources inside and outside the canon. Inside the canon, Kings or Acts provides us with an account of the reigns referred to by the prophets or of Paul's visits to churches from where and to which he wrote his letters. Elsewhere, Middle Eastern sources offer us information on the international (and sometimes the national) context of the prophets, or sources from the Roman Empire illumine the background of the epistles. Nevertheless, neither of these sources is as helpful as one might expect. Kings and Acts have interests of their own that shape their presentation of Israelite and early Christian history. Often they do not give us the kind of background information that we might hope for. Extracanonical sources, for their part, rarely clarify the content of the biblical documents in any direct way, and often an interest in archaeology and Middle Eastern background constitutes a diversion from seeking to interpret texts themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the books themselves are our major resource for a knowledge of the situation that the prophets or the epistles address, of the question that they are concerned to answer. So one of the interpreter's first tasks in studying Amos or 1 Corinthians is to read through the book with this interest in mind: what were the various aspects of the needs, circumstances, beliefs, or lives of the readers that the writer needed to address? Even when you have understood clearly the words someone uses, you have

6. Cf. T. S. Eliot's analogous comments in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber; New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), 112.

not understood what this person meant until you know “what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.”<sup>7</sup>

The fact that we learn most about an instruction text’s historical context from the contents of the book itself perhaps explains the presence in Scripture of some exceptions to the generalization that most of the prophets and the epistles begin by telling us about their authors and background. A book such as Joel leaves us uninformed on its date; a document such as Hebrews tells us nothing of its authorship, but the contents of these works make clear what were the aims of their writers in relation to the needs they perceived. Biblical scholarship has been centrally concerned with establishing the nature of the actual historical process whereby Israelite and early Christian religion developed, and for this purpose to locate each of the biblical documents chronologically is of key importance. Whether we date Joel in the ninth, fifth, or third centuries (three favored possibilities) affects our understanding of this development. But it makes no difference to the meaning of the work itself. What matters is what kind of context the document was addressing, and the nature of that the document makes clear enough. It is this that decided what form of continuity and discontinuity the prophet had to manifest in relation to where the audience were, or that determined whether the prophet’s ministry was fundamentally a reassuring one or a confrontational one.

The importance of appreciating the kind of circumstances a writer was addressing comes into especially clear focus when we contrast the contradictory emphases of different writers. Ezekiel 33:23–29 disallows appeal to the example of God’s blessing of Abraham as a key to hope of return from exile; Isaiah 51:1–3 then offers that example as a key to hope of a return. Paul in Romans 4 declares, “People are justified by faith, not by works; you only have to look at the example of Abraham to see that”; James in James 2 declares, “People are justified by works, not by faith; you only have to look at the example of Abraham to see that.” A large part of the reason for the differences between these two pairs of statements lies in the different contexts to which they were addressed. Only as we appreciate the circumstances of their audiences can we appreciate the significance of their statements.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the prophets press us to understand their writings against their historical context exposes a fundamental weakness of the approach to predictive prophecy that appears in many Christian paperback bestsellers such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*.<sup>9</sup> Here a prophet such as Ezekiel is read as if he were giving a coded preview of events in the twentieth-century Middle East. Reading Ezekiel that way ignores the hermeneutical hint with which his book begins and the pointers it gives to its audience as it goes along.

A historical approach to instruction texts, then, rules out one form of finding contemporary relevance in them. It does not rule out all concern with their contemporary

7. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 31.

8. J. A. Sanders, “Hermeneutics,” *IDBSup*, 404–5.

9. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970; London: Lakeland, 1971).



relevance. Indeed it makes a contribution to that, insofar as the distancing effect that a historical approach brings can help us grasp the text's real meaning.

An awareness of the historical nature of instruction texts emphasizes for us their human origin, even though it is among such texts that we also find the scriptural material that is overtly addressed from God to human beings. The laws are presented as dictated by God to Moses. The Gospels give us the teaching of the Son of God. In his letters Paul claims to write in words taught by the Spirit and, even when most tentative, associates the Spirit of God with his judgments (1 Cor 2:13; 7:40). Most strikingly, the prophetic books combine with their initial allusions to their human and historical origins the reminder that what you are to read is not merely human words but the vision or the word or the oracle that Yahweh revealed. The prophets also combine with their ongoing allusions to their historical context the repeated reminder that they function as God's direct messengers who declare "thus says Yahweh."

A first implication of this way of speaking is that the teaching in these books overtly makes special demands on its readers. Both the notion of inspiration and the notion of authority are especially at home with material of this kind. It speaks as the Word of God and expects to be treated as such. The interpreter is challenged to approach it with a special openness, and with a special expectancy. In his study of the phenomenon of translation, George Steiner includes an analysis of "the hermeneutic motion, the art of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning." Its starting point, he suggests, is an act of trust that "there is 'something there' to be understood." Without this, the effort to understand will soon collapse. "This means nothing," asserts the exasperated child in front of his Latin reader or the beginner at Berlitz" (the language school); but giving in to that tempting conclusion means never reaching understanding.<sup>10</sup> This is all the more true with the trusting conviction that I am reading words God spoke. For the task of interpretation, this conviction carries the significant implication that Scripture is neither unintelligible nor trivial, and it encourages me to persist in the effort to understand even where I am tempted to give up.

If the text I am reading is the Word of God, this will also mean that I relate to it as a person of prayer seeking to hear what God has been saying, as well as a person using my reason to decipher a human artifact. It makes interpretation a charism.<sup>11</sup> What by the exercise of the charism of interpretation I understand I can then go on to commit myself to; but it is also the case that what I commit myself to I can then go on to understand. My commitment to it can enable me to open myself to understanding. (It can also do the opposite; knowing I have to be committed to it may inhibit what I allow myself to perceive in it.) An academic or historical approach and a believing or theological approach are not in tension with each other. They can be partners. Either on its own is inadequate as a means to interpreting a text. To put it another way, I may think that in interpreting a text I am the subject in

10. *After Babel* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 296–97.

11. So J. Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (London: SCM; New York: Harper, 1967), 152.

relation to it as object, the master in relation to it as servant. I am doing it the favor of letting it speak once more. But if this is the Word of God that we are reading, the interpretive movement is put in reverse. God is the subject and I am the object, God the master and I the servant. I am granted the favor of overhearing what God has said. At least, God may grant this; I cannot assume that or force God to speak. Hence “prayer must have the last word.”<sup>12</sup>

A second implication of seeing instruction texts as the Word of God is that they can and should be brought into relationship with each other. A historical approach reflects and reveals the fact that these texts offer not a timeless theology or ethic but concrete, contextual insights and commands. This historicity of Scripture perhaps explains much of its ambiguity (as it seems to us) over topics such as what baptism means and who are its proper recipients. Even as merely human documents they might be taken to be the contextual embodiment of more far-reaching principles that we could seek to identify; as the words of God (who does not slip into irrational obiter dicta) they are certainly so. We are invited, then, to look behind them and relate them to each other. What Paul (and God) wanted to say to the Corinthians we discover from 1–2 Corinthians. What he might want to say to us we learn by considering that discovery in light of other Scriptures.

How Mark, Paul, and John conceive of the person of Christ is rather different, even when they use the same expressions (e.g., “Son of God”). If God spoke through them all, interpreting them as Scripture means considering them in light of each other after one has established what each writer meant individually. They will be capable of becoming part of a coherent whole, though at the level of thought and concepts, not necessarily of their own words. What Chronicles and Ecclesiastes imply about the attitudes and beliefs appropriate to the person of faith is very different, even though (indeed, especially because) the authors probably lived in approximately the same period. They need to be understood individually, often as in reaction to each other.<sup>13</sup> Interpreting them as Scripture also involves determining in what way and with what qualifications their messages will make a claim upon us when they are considered in light of each other.<sup>14</sup>

A third implication for interpretation is that, although their human and historical origin demands that we interpret them in accordance with their meaning as it would be understood by intellectually and spiritually competent contemporary readers such as God was originally addressing by means of human agents, their divine origin opens up the possibility that God might have meant by these words more than their human author or original reader would have understood. When New Testament authors tell us how First Testament prophecies have been fulfilled

12. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 531.

13. Cf. B. M. Ejxenbaum’s comments on literary interpretation in *Readings in Russian Poetics* (ed. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1971), 17–18; also the discussion of intertextuality in, e.g., J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981), 100–118.

14. Cf. C. M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 73–74.

(e.g., in Matt 1–2), they sometimes attribute to these prophecies meanings that were foreign to their human authors. In light of the Christ event and by the Spirit's guidance they are able to see significances in them that God could have known but that the prophet did not. The example of Hal Lindsey quoted above draws attention to the hazards of reading nonhistorical meanings into Scripture on the basis of extrascriptural information; but perceiving such meanings in light of other Scriptures is difficult to prohibit, though as difficult to test. It is also without so much point now that we have the New Testament to tell us directly about Christ; we can therefore allow the First Testament to press its own agenda upon us, not one determined by later considerations.

Yet even a historical approach to instruction texts may be able to justify finding more in them than their author knew; for prophecy, at least, is rather like poetry.<sup>15</sup> Like prophets, poets often feel that their message has been "given" them, and that they may not be able fully to express in words the vision they have seen, or that they cannot necessarily perceive all the implications of the words they have heard and expressed. The meaning of a poem may go beyond what the poet can indicate. Any further meaning an interpreter finds in the work is to be expected to be a deeper grasping of what the poet grasped. It will not be an allegorizing of it that reads into it a quite other meaning; it will be a fuller understanding, not an unrelated one.

Metaphor, in particular, invites the reader beyond the strictly circumscribable semantic significance of words; it expresses "what ideas feel like."<sup>16</sup> But it does more than that. While one needs to be wary of overextending a metaphor (Jesus is the true vine, but you can't ask what is the soil the vine grows in; God is our Father, but you can't ask who is our Mother), equally one needs to be wary of underinterpreting it. A metaphor points to a depth and breadth of meaning that may go beyond what the author had perceived. Its language is deliberately open and suggestive rather than totally defined and specific.

At the same time, metaphor trades on everyday earthly reality. To the urban Westerner, "vines" sound inherently spiritual; to the Palestinian, they were originally little more so than coffee or concrete are to us, and the metaphor worked because the writer was utilizing the everyday and down-to-earth to extend the boundary of the sayable. Interpreting biblical imagery, then, involves an attempt to hear everyday statements in their everyday significance and yet with their transcendent allusions.

In this respect, as in others, metaphor merges into symbol, whose central function is "to connect the clear and focused area of our experience with a dim but insistent kind of experience that is a constituent of consciousness but is, nevertheless, not clearly apprehended."<sup>17</sup> One way of distinguishing them is to see a symbol as a com-

15. Cf. D. N. Freedman, "Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy," *JBL* 96 (1977): 21–26.

16. I believe this is Karl Shapiro's description of poetry in *The Bourgeois Poet* (New York: Random House, 1964).

17. William A. Beardslee, "Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology," *Encounter* (Indianapolis) 36 (1975): 303, following Alfred North Whitehead.

munity metaphor, one widely accepted without (necessarily) being dead; one that “acquires a stable and repeatable meaning or association”<sup>18</sup> that enables it to be a means whereby a community evokes indirectly what cannot be articulated with the same power in a direct way.

Jesus is the real vine: a variety of significances and resonances from the First Testament belongs to the symbol, whether or not Jesus or John was immediately aware of all of them. God is our Father: a range of experiences of fatherhood and sonship (positive and negative) can help to unfold the meaning of the symbol. Of course symbols need to be understood historically; images of fatherhood vary in different cultures. At the same time, they are particular cultural embodiments of widely known archetypes. “There is one Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its name” (Eph 3:14).

So particular occurrences of the symbol need to be interpreted in relation to the archetype as well as in relation to its historical context. In using metaphor and symbol, writers are fitting their work into the larger whole comprised by reality as God constitutes it, creates it, sees it, and orders it. They are seeking to be open to God. Metaphor and symbol do trade on the familiarity of the down-to-earth, but they also trade on the fact that things like vines (or even coffee and concrete) have their own place in God’s scheme of things. It is for this reason that they can bring to expression other realities of which we are only more vaguely aware, or only become aware through them.<sup>19</sup>

Metaphor and symbol with their openness and potential are not the only or sufficient ways of speaking of God, as (for instance) Sallie McFague sometimes implies in her suggestive book *Speaking in Parables*.<sup>20</sup> The creativeness of metaphor and symbol (intuitive, experiential, self-involving, allusive, plurivocal, holistic, open-ended, dynamic) needs to be complemented by the discipline of conceptual thinking (analytic, cerebral, distanced, defined, measured, nuanced) which tests it. Paul Ricoeur, with whose approach McFague identifies herself, recognizes this, noting that one can see taking place in Scripture itself a move from symbol to system and conceptualization (not, of course, to be understood as more advanced than symbol, as the two complement each other, and the latter is parasitic on the former).<sup>21</sup> Within Scripture, a special locus of this incipient theologizing is instruction material such as the wisdom teaching of Proverbs 1–9, the discourses in John, and the letters of Paul.

18. Norman Perrin, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Message of Jesus,” in *The Society of Biblical Literature One Hundred Eighth Annual Meeting Book of Seminar Papers* (ed. L. C. McGaughey; Missoula, Mont.: SBL, 1972), 2:553; cf. his *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1976).

19. Cf. T. Hawkes’s discussion in *Metaphor* (London: Methuen; New York: Harper, 1972).

20. (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1975); see, e.g., 29.

21. See, e.g., his “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975): 129–35; cf. G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 93–94; also B. Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame; London: Athlone, 1975), 1–32, on the distinction between metaphor and analogy.

## 2. Narrative Texts

Discussion of poetry, metaphor, and symbol leads easily into consideration of narrative texts, for biblical narrative, like poetry, needs to be interpreted as literature if it is to be interpreted adequately. As Leland Ryken observes, the Bible “is in large part a work of literature,” not a systematic theological treatise. Like McFague, he stresses that its theology and ethics are expressed in poems “about the weather, trees, crops, lions, hunters, rocks of refuge and human emotions such as love and terror and trust and joy”; the interpreter who does not seek to appreciate Isaiah or the Song of Songs as poetry, then, will not interpret them adequately. Even more clearly the Bible’s stories are literary works, experiential and concrete theology, “full of the usual ingredients of literary narrative—adventure, mystery, brave and wise heroes, beautiful and courageous heroines, villains who get their comeuppance, rescues, guests, suspense, romantic love and pageantry.” Thus “most parts of the Bible resemble the world of imaginative literature . . . more closely than they resemble the daily newspaper or an ordinary history book.”<sup>22</sup>

Whether fundamentally factual or fundamentally fictional, a story creates a world before people’s eyes or ears. In this respect, it is similar to a painting or a photograph (which again may be fundamentally fictional or fundamentally factual). It portrays the world that we live in, but “arranged into a meaningful pattern, in contrast to the fragmented pieces that make up our moment-by-moment living.” It calls us back to the essential, the enduring, the fundamental, the truly real. It portrays for us “both a better and a worse world than the one we usually live with, and demands that we keep looking steadily at them both.”<sup>23</sup> It may do that by conventions that are highly “unrealistic,” such as those of C. S. Lewis’s fantasy stories or Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, but this does not mean it is remote from reality. It may actually be closer to truth than documents that are completely factual but quite shallow or insignificant. Historical factuality is an important aspect of many biblical narratives, yet even narratives that are fundamentally historical are not mere archive or chronicle. Indeed, any writing of history involves making sense of data by bringing to them some vision of meaning capable of turning them into a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Facts do not speak for themselves; understanding them is always a hermeneutical enterprise. And the plots and configurations of history writing are the same as those of literature (or vice versa).<sup>24</sup>

Considering the features that make narratives more than collections of data is of great importance if we are to understand them. These features of their aim and method give works such as Kings or Ezra, Matthew or Acts, something in common

22. Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination* (Downers Grove, Ill., and Leicester: InterVarsity, 1979), 22, 94.

23. *Ibid.*, 85, referring to Northrop Frye’s *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

24. Cf. H. White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4 (1972–73): 281–314; *Metahistory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

with fictional narratives such as the parables or the largely fictional stories (as I take them to be) of Ruth and Job, Esther and Jonah.

All these biblical stories create a world before our eyes and ears. It is a world in which God promises blessing and shows a readiness to overcome all manner of obstruction, resistance, and delay in order to keep the promise. It is one in which God hears the cry of an oppressed and demoralized people, rescues them from their affliction, and draws them into a near relationship of worship and obedience. It is one in which a woman's life falls apart but is remade through the extraordinary loyalty of a foreign girl and the extraordinary love of a kinsman. It is one in which a prophet runs the other way when God calls him, has to be redirected by means of some foreign sailors and a bizarre monster, succeeds against his will in drawing his audience to repentance, but never comes to accept the nature of God even though he understands it quite well. It is one in which an extraordinary Galilean teacher and healer loses his life but regains it and promises to be with his followers always. It is one in which Palestinian artisans and Greek intellectuals begin to turn the world upside down by preaching about this man.

The world into which these stories invite us both attracts us and makes us hesitate to be drawn into it. It makes us draw near and draw back equally by its realism and by its vision. It is ruthlessly true to the suffering and sin that run through life and history: deprivation, animosity, fear, anxiety, hunger, guilt, injustice, immorality, loss, frustration, disappointment, grief, failure. This draws us because we want to be able to face these realities, to take account of them, to overcome them. It also makes us draw back lest these realities cannot be comprehended or overcome and lest to face them will thus bring a further pain that we can hardly bear or a cost that will be too high to pay. Stories can thus both reassure and challenge, support and confront, reinforce and unsettle; they may offer identity or disturb it. Different stories may "work" more one way or the other; some stories that are a comfort in one context would be false comfort in another (for instance, Chronicles if it were written in the time of Amos), some stories that are disturbing in one context would in another be a kick to a person already down (for instance, Kings in the time of the Chronicler).

Different types of story work in different ways. In the most intelligible introduction to structuralism in biblical studies that I know, J. D. Crossan remarks that "myth establishes world. Apologue defends world. Action investigates world. Parable subverts world."<sup>25</sup> Yet the best stories hold together comfort and confrontation, as they reflect life itself in holding together suffering and hope, cross and empty tomb, life in its gritty reality and death in which are the seeds of resurrection.

The Bible portrays a world in which the realities of sin and suffering can be faced, comprehended, and overcome, because active in it is also a God who blesses, who intervenes, whose providence works behind scenes, who refuses to give up when we insist on doing so, who in Christ walks earthly soil and in the Spirit walks in the

25. *The Dark Interval* (Miles, Ill.: Argus, 1975), 59.

midst of God's people. He finds his way to us in the midst of these very realities.<sup>26</sup> This portrait draws us, because we would like to live in such a world. It, too, makes us draw back, because we wonder whether that world actually exists. If we are to live in it, we have to be drawn into it the way a child is drawn into a story.

Indeed, we only really understand a story if we allow ourselves to be drawn into it. The parables, as the new hermeneutic has interpreted them, illustrate this point most clearly. Here Jesus begins by portraying the world that his hearers know well, the world of sowing and harvest, of shepherding and laboring, of weddings and funerals, of Pharisees, tax gatherers, priests, Levites, and Samaritans. He thus draws his hearers into his stories, because these stories manifestly relate to their world. They are at home in these stories, nodding in understanding as they unfold. But then Jesus' stories eject out of that world and somersault into a topsy-turvy one in which the tax gatherer finds God's favor, the Samaritan does the right thing, and people get a day's pay for an hour's work. The parables certainly create a new world, but the price is the destruction of an old one. They are understood only by those who are drawn into them and go through this world-destroying, world-creating process. Indeed, a good story has the power to draw you into it almost against your will. Story is characteristically open-ended, imaginative, experiential; it has the last word.<sup>27</sup> It is not only the parables that require a personal involvement if they are to be grasped. A narrative such as the story of Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the loose woman (Luke 7:36–50) requires an entering into the world of each participant as well as their common world if one is to hear it aright. The scientific ideal of objectivity in interpretation has its place, especially in interpreting instruction texts, but it is not up to interpreting story or prayer adequately.<sup>28</sup> The gospel story is designed to make something happen to people when they are drawn into its everyday but extraordinary world. It does not offer itself merely to the intellect. It addresses the whole being in the power of that reality that it portrays and that created it. It draws us into face-to-face involvement with the God of Israel and the Lord Jesus Christ active in our world, grasps us, and changes us as we come to link our story onto the one related in the biblical narrative. A "language-event" takes place.<sup>29</sup>

The Bible came into existence because people wanted others to share its world. The narrative texts of Scripture are as practical in purpose as the overt instruction texts. They are not just literature. To put this point another way, these texts that speak in the past tense, and refer to things that happened in the past, covertly relate to the future. By portraying a past or an imaginary or an other world they issue a promise, a challenge, or an invitation that opens up a future or a possible world. Even (especially) the Bible's stories about Beginning and End, while making a claim about

26. Cf. Amos N. Wilder, *The New Voice* (New York: Herder, 1966), 61–62.

27. So W. Brueggemann, *The Creative Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 61–62.

28. See further Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury; London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), e.g., 274–305.

29. Ernst Fuchs's term: see A. C. Thiselton, "The Parables as Language-Event," *SJT* 23 (1970): 437–68; R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper, 1966), 20–71.

linear history, also function like myths in that, because they portray a time when things are as they should be and are seen as they are, they “provide a paradigmatic or exemplary symbolic complex that is so raised above ordinary experience that it provides a norm and shape for it.”<sup>30</sup>

Narrative texts thus seek the same commitment as instruction texts though they achieve this aim by more subversive means. They may be expected to imply the same beliefs and imperatives as instruction texts, but the story fleshes out the overt information and challenge of the didactic; perhaps the latter would be unintelligible without the former.<sup>31</sup> The story may sometimes express its didactic point quite overtly (cf. John 20:31); but this is rare, because if the story’s didactics are too overt, the story itself becomes contrived and ceases to work as a story. It has to work indirectly, subliminally, if it is to work at all.

Characteristically, in instruction texts the form (the actual words the writer uses) is dispensable. The contents can be summarized, commented on, reexpressed, without necessarily losing anything. The ideas expressed in the words are what count. In contrast, a story cannot be paraphrased or summarized without losing something. The content comes via the story form and only via this form. The medium is the message. Admittedly, “‘narrative . . . is *translatable* without fundamental damage’ in a way that a lyric poem or a philosophical discourse is not”; it is easier to understand another culture’s stories than its thought patterns.<sup>32</sup> But narrative cannot be turned into straight didactic. The crucifixion story does things to the reader that a statement of the doctrine of the atonement does not. The latter will help me appreciate the story of the crucifixion more fully, and such a theology does need to be worked out, as happens in Scripture’s own instruction texts; theology is not to be reduced to story.<sup>33</sup> Yet Christian theology is parasitic on the Christian story; the story gives it its raw material, and it is finally the story it serves, because it is the story (the gospel) that matters.

By describing narrative texts as a literature that opens up a world that we may enter, I have set an explicit or an implicit question mark alongside two common traditional ways of interpreting scriptural narratives, as designed to offer examples of the behavior that God does or does not approve, or as aiming to recount things that actually happened in history. Tradition does not in theory place exclusive emphasis on these two views of narrative; but homiletic practice has come close to an exclusive concern with the former, and exegetical practice has come close to an exclusive

30. Beardslee, “Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology,” 305; cf. his *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 21; James Barr, *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London: SCM, 1980) = *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 36, 126–27.

31. Cf. D. Tracy, “Metaphor and Religion,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978–79): 102; Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation* (London: Collins; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 174.

32. H. White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980–81): 5–6, quoting R. Barthes.

33. Cf. D. Ritschl and H. Jones, “*Story*” als Rohmaterial der Theologie (Munich: Kaiser, 1976).



preoccupation with the latter. Ever concerned to polarize from tradition when it perceives it, fashion is more recently inclined to be dismissive of both “moralizing” and historical positivism.<sup>34</sup> As usual, it is half right and needs to be considered with a cool head.

Three of the five New Testament narratives explicitly inform us of their purpose in writing: it is to tell us about Jesus in order to encourage in us a securely based faith in him (see Luke 1:1–4; John 20:31; Acts 1:1–5; we can here fudge the question of whether they refer to initial faith or ongoing faith). It is a fair inference that the aim of the major First Testament narratives, as well as that of Matthew and Mark, is comparable: it is to encourage faith and hope, repentance and commitment, in relation to Yahweh the God of Israel. Both Testaments relate God’s story; God’s person and activity are the narratives’ supreme interest. They come into clearest focus.<sup>35</sup>

Human beings setting us examples are thus not a central feature of Scripture. One should not exaggerate the point: there are stories with a subordinate interest in pointing to a good example. There are also stories where human initiative, bravery, faith, or fortitude are central (e.g., Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther). Yet even here it is doubtful whether they are exactly examples to be followed, partly because the characters are rather out of the ordinary for that (foreign heroines, Israelite kings, young princes, Persian officials, exiled queens), partly because it is as such that they, too, become part of God’s story. Further, God’s story advances despite as often as through human cooperation. Here, too, it is not a question of examples to be avoided; the story is too realistic to think that they will be. Rather, it portrays for us a world in which human sin and tragedy are real, but God’s grace and providence are bigger, and it invites us to flee from moralizing to grace. The story of what God has done in Israel and what the God of Israel has done in Christ recounts the once-for-all events upon which the faith is based (its aetiology) and the characteristic pattern of events that it can look to see repeated (its paradigms). It offers mirrors for identity, not so much models for morality.<sup>36</sup> It portrays a world that should be, once was, and therefore can be again.

This takes us to the other traditional focus for the interpretation of scriptural narratives, the task of investigating how factual they are. This concern often assumes that the question Is the story true? can be reduced without remainder to the question Is the story historically factual? and further that understanding what the story means can be reduced without remainder to establishing what are the historical facts that underlie it. These two assumptions explain much of the past popularity of textbooks such as Bright’s *A History of Israel*,<sup>37</sup> which has a reasonably conservative estimate of the First Testament’s historical value and can be presumed, by recounting Israel’s history, to be giving the reader an understanding of the meaning of the First

34. See, e.g., L. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978).

35. See Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), on this process.

36. So Sanders, “Hermeneutics,” 406.

37. (First ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press; London: SCM, 1959).

Testament. These assumptions are mistaken. Some of the best stories in the Bible, the parables, are historically not true; they are fictions. Fiction's advantage is that it is not limited to representing what has happened; it can also represent what could happen.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, all biblical narrative is concerned with what could happen, not just with what has happened. We have noted that even narratives that are fundamentally historical are not mere archive or chronicle. The books of Kings offer the nearest thing to straight historiography in Scripture, but they, too, relate more than historical fact: they comprise a nightmare review of the history of Israel's relationship with God, an acknowledgment of the justice of the judgment of God, designed to draw Israel into an act of confession and thereby to open up the merest possibility of its having a future with God once again. The truth of the story involves much more than mere historical factuality, and the understanding of it is little furthered by books called *A History of Israel*.

This does not mean that the whole Bible could be fiction. Crossan asks, "is story telling us about a world out there objectively present before and apart from any story concerning it, or, does story create world so that we live as human beings in, and only in, layers upon layers of interwoven story?" and answers that the second is the case. God is unknowable, and "we can only live in story."<sup>39</sup> The creativity of the teller of Bible stories is well acknowledged. These stories do not claim to be directly God-given, as prophetic words do. They were works of the creative human imagination, as are stories outside the Bible. Acknowledging them as Scripture, however, implies that these particular stories indeed do reflect God's story. Their world may have been imagined, but we are not shut up to Crossan's gloomy view that it is merely imaginary. They are not stories that have sense, but lack reference.<sup>40</sup>

Part of the grounds for this conviction is the fact that the stories do commonly reflect factual history. They are more than history, not less than history. The belief that their vision of reality, their world, is true has part of its basis in the events they point to as evidence for that vision. Nevertheless, narrative exists in order to offer a patterned portrayal of events, to render a world, and this central aspect of its importance is ignored when interpreters are preoccupied with discovering what historical events are referred to by the various biblical narratives (the open, critical approach to the task) or with proving that historical events are referred to by the various biblical narratives (the apologetic, conservative approach to the task). These concerns equally distract the interpreter from the task of interpreting the narrative itself.

38. So R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 120–21, following Aristotle's *Poetics*; cf. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 19; Tracy, "Metaphor and Religion," 100.

39. *The Dark Interval*, 9, 40–41; cf. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966; New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 36–40.

40. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Response" (to essays by Crossan and others), *Biblical Research* 24/25 (1979/80): 79; also D. Greenwood's discussion of "Poststructuralism and Biblical Studies" in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; 6 vols.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 3:263–88, and F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: Athlone, 1980).

Concern with the scientific factuality of Genesis 1 offers an instructive instance of the way a concern to investigate the historical events referred to by a narrative distracts attention from its actual meaning. Various aspects of the chapter's message (its world) become clear when one considers it in its contexts in the literary work to which it belongs (Genesis–Kings; Genesis–Exodus; Gen 1–11 and 12–50; Gen 1–2 and 3–11) and when one considers its own internal dynamic (e.g., its double climax in the creation of humanity and in God's rest; its structured form with its recurrent features such as God's speaking, God's seeing, and God's naming). Theologically, as the beginning of the Bible story, it is a most exciting chapter. Most of its excitement has been missed, however, when the focus has been placed on the relationship between its picture and the historical/scientific facts about world origins.

Similarly, such a focus is more of a hindrance than a help in interpreting the Gospels. Matthew and Luke offer markedly different accounts of Jesus' birth, the beginning of his ministry, and his resurrection appearances; but if the interpretive task concentrates on looking behind or harmonizing these differences, it ceases to follow the story Matthew or Luke told, the world they portrayed.

Investigating the history that lies behind a narrative can indeed fulfill two functions related to its interpretation. One, referred to above, is that if a narrative makes historical claims, the validity of these claims is a necessary though not a sufficient condition of the truth of the narrative. The other is that examining the differences between the events and the narrative's presentation of them (what they included, omitted, emphasized, reordered) will help us perceive aspects of the interpretation the narrative gives them. Comparing a new version of a story with an earlier one, too, can further the task of interpretation in this way.<sup>41</sup>

A concern with the historical events underlying a story or with the sources underlying its final form is still extrinsic to interpreting the story itself. Equally extrinsic to the story are the intentions of the author, except in the cases of Luke, John, and Acts, where (like Woody Allen and Hitchcock as directors, and some experimental novelists, I suspect) the authors insert themselves for a moment into their story. We often speak of interpreting a work in accordance with its author's intention, but that intention is elusive, in the case of the biblical books, except insofar as it is embodied or stated in the text itself.<sup>42</sup>

Knowing something of a narrative's historical background helps one to interpret it; Genesis 1 again offers an example, since various of its features gain their significance from its exilic context, and an awareness of that context enables us to spot those features. The significance of the parables can hardly be appreciated if one is unaware of the resonances of words such as "Pharisee" and "Samaritan" in the vocabulary of a first-century Jew. Without this we inevitably miss the scandal of Jesus' claim

41. See classically G. Bornkamm's study of Matt 8:23–27 in Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 52–57.

42. See D. Newton-De Molina, ed., *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), for the debate on "intentionalism."

that God preferred the tax gatherer's prayer to the Pharisee's or of his impossible juxtaposition of the word "good" and the word "Samaritan."<sup>43</sup>

Often general features of Israelite or first-century life are an important part of the taken-for-granted background to biblical narratives. Nevertheless, the general value of efforts to establish the precise historical context of biblical narratives has been overrated. We can rarely (never?) place them geographically and historically with certainty and precision. Indeed, this may be inherent in their nature. Teaching texts work by revealing their background, intention, and message. Narrative texts work by being more reserved about these.

The key to the purpose and meaning of biblical narratives does not lie in data external to the text. It lies in the text itself. One perceives its meaning by means of an act of imagination, a guess, an intuition, more or less inspired, an act of divination.<sup>44</sup> Beginning from an insight—or rather a striking possibility—suggested by some aspect of the story, one jumps into the midst of the story and considers whole and part from this vantage point. Tentative purported insights thus have to be systematically explored and tested; interpretation requires a demanding combination of sensitivity, openness, enthusiasm, imagination, and the rigor and slog of hard work that develops ideas and tests them.<sup>45</sup> I do not wish to be reading an alien insight into the text, or more likely moving a marginal one into its center: this is an important insistence of E. D. Hirsch<sup>46</sup> against the more fashionable approach represented by Kermode, who inclines to the view that it is more important to be interesting than to worry about being right. I believe, for instance, that Genesis is the story of God's blessing—originally given, deservedly compromised, graciously promised, variously imperiled, partially experienced. That view is suggested by verbal clues in the text, but it must be tested by considering how the book's various episodes relate to this theme.<sup>47</sup>

Other biblical stories are more sparing in the clues they scatter, and leave us uncertain about their meaning. Is Jonah about how God deals with a reluctant prophet, or how God deals with a foreign nation, or even how God deals with a repentant Israel? What is the structure of Matthew, or Mark, or Luke? Responsible interpreters may formulate very different views on such questions. Others may not accept my understanding of Genesis, objectively clear and compelling though it seems to me.

Perhaps literary works have various meanings in different contexts or for different readers? This view offers openness and scope to the interpreter but threatens

43. Cf. A. C. Thiselton, "Understanding God's Word Today," in *Obeying Christ in a Changing World* (ed. J. Stott; 3 vols.; London: Collins, 1977), 1:107, quoting John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper, 1973), 64.

44. So F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7, 16–17.

45. Cf. E. Haller, "On the Interpretative Task," *Int* 21 (1967): 161.

46. See his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

47. I have sought to do this in D. J. Wiseman and A. R. Millard, eds., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), ch. 1.

arbitrariness. To insist (as Hirsch therefore does) that literary works have only one meaning (though they may have many applications or be capable of having fresh significance in different contexts) offers objectivity but threatens woodenness and makes much diversity of interpretation difficult to understand. We can appropriate some of the virtues of each of these views whilst sidestepping their drawbacks by affirming that part of the greatness of a good story may be a complexity that cannot be encapsulated in a single formula (“the story is about x”). Different readers will thus spot different facets of it. Interpreters may then be able to agree that there are several such facets: Ruth portrays how a Moabite comes into the center of the life and faith of Israel *and* how Yahweh takes an Israelite woman into terrible loss and grief but out the other side *and* what was the ancestry of King David.

Interpreters may also be able to agree on meanings that do not belong to the story, not so much because author or readers could or would not have envisaged them but because they are not natural to the story. Alongside looking for moral lessons, another preacher’s instinct is to seek to reconstruct the psychology of biblical characters, because understanding our own and other people’s feelings is so important in Western culture. A theologian’s instinct, by contrast, is to seek to formulate the work’s message in theological terms. But narratives rarely deal directly with either theology or the inner workings of the person (those concerns find nearer analogues in the material considered in sections 1 and 3 of this chapter), any more than with mere historical facts or moral examples. Interpreters need to be able to recognize when a text refuses to answer their questions, so that to press these will be to overinterpret them.<sup>48</sup>

To describe narratives as living portraits of an alternative world helps, finally, to align them with the future concern of books such as Daniel and Revelation and helps to interpret them. These books take the symbolism of didactic and the linear portrayal of narrative and project them onto the future. They arise out of contexts when the implicit promise of past narrative is insufficient, portraying a future that contrasts with the unhappy present, a world that should be, will be, and perhaps therefore can be.<sup>49</sup>

The existence of such forward projections of the line of biblical narrative draws attention to the further fact that each biblical story, while self-contained, also forms part of an overarching story extending from creation through the life of Israel and the Christ event to the new Jerusalem. This is of relevance to interpreting Scripture in that it means that no one biblical narrative can be finally understood out of the context of this overarching biblical story. Act 1 and Act 2 (First Testament events and New Testament events) can be understood only in light of each other.<sup>50</sup> The exodus cannot be understood out of the context of the exile or vice versa.<sup>51</sup>

48. Cf. Haller, “On the Interpretative Task,” 160.

49. Cf. Beardslee, “Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology,” 305.

50. So John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon; London: SCM, 1967), 202–3.

51. Cf. John Goldingay, “The Man of War and the Suffering Servant,” *TynB* 27 (1976): 79–113 (also at <http://www.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/goldingay>).

### 3. Prayer Texts

Biblical narrative grows as a new generation links its own story onto the story of God's dealings with his people in the past. The narrative from Genesis to Kings developed in this way. Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah adds the experience of the postexilic community to the story of Israel up to the exile. Luke adds part of the story of the early church to his Gospel; here in Acts the "implied author" explicitly introduces himself in the "we passages." In his letters, Paul links his story onto the story of Jesus (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–11). How do we go about interpreting material in which people explicitly focus on relating their own experience?

One major tradition of studying interpretation over recent decades has treated written texts in general as the reflection of the particular historical (concrete, existential) experience of their authors, to which interpreters can gain access through their own analogous historical experience. This tradition's insights on interpretation provide us with a suggestive way in to interpreting prophetic or Pauline texts that directly reflect personal feelings, attitudes, and experience, such as Hosea, Jeremiah, Philippians 3, and Romans 7.<sup>52</sup> The material in the Bible that is most naturally susceptible to this approach is prayer texts such as the Psalms that, unlike most narrative or teaching texts, explicitly speak of the feelings, attitudes, and experiences of their authors.

The beginning of communication between people (parents and infants, foreigner and native, counselor and client) depends on two things they share. One is objects both can point to: mummy, daddy, teddy; tree, house, food; experiences of fear, loss, anger. The other is a mutual interest in these objects and a mutual involvement with them. If either party is not willing to look in the direction the other points, there can be no communication. In a parallel way, the beginning of our ability to hear what the Bible says is that we share things with it (we are also human beings relating in the one Spirit to the same God on the same basis) and that we want to grow in the understanding, relationship, and commitment to God expressed in these texts. Communication begins, then, on the basis of a shared interest in something people have in common. If a lion could talk, we could not understand it.<sup>53</sup>

Communication then develops by means of an ongoing conversation between such people. At first we only approximately grasp what the other person means; our categories of apprehension are rough and ready. A persistent, careful listening to the other person is needed if we are to come nearer to understanding what they are pointing to. We never totally grasp someone else's perspective, but that is the ultimate goal we nevertheless strive toward. Two friends or a married couple will recognize (perhaps ruefully) that they will never fully understand each other, yet they may also recognize that they understand each other a bit better each year. Their understanding develops as both are prepared to keep asking questions of each other and listening

52. Cf. Schökel, *The Inspired Word*.

53. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell; New York: Macmillan, 1976), 223.

to each other's answers, to keep revealing themselves to each other and being open about how they see things. Asking the right questions is of key significance in a personal relationship, because they enable other people to express themselves to us.

Something similar is again true of the Bible. A strange conversation is involved because the outward form of the answers we shall receive from it is fixed. One aspect to the conversation, then, is that in seeking to discover the significance of these answers, I need to identify the question to which this text is a response. As I keep coming to it with the questions I can bring on the basis of what I have in common with it, it keeps responding. As particular aspects of its meaning grasp me, this enables me to formulate some further, fresh question that may free new facets of its meaning.

In an ordinary personal relationship, however, I am not merely concerned to understand another person. In learning to look at the world through their eyes I hope to understand not only them but also the world. I recognize that my own perspective on reality is limited by the fact that it is my perspective; it may be as good as anyone else's, but that does not mean I have nothing to learn. One of the devastating fruits of close friendship or marriage is the discovery that there are other perspectives on the world than my own. It is a positive fruit, however, because it can offer me the opportunity to broaden my horizon. So it is, again, with the Bible. I seek to empathize accurately with the psalmist's situation before God so that I can look at God and at life through the psalmist's eyes. Thus understanding involves learning to stand where someone else stands, seeking to look at the world through their eyes; and our shared involvement in the topic we are discussing is an indispensable aid towards a shared understanding. In parallel with this, our understanding of Scripture is facilitated by our sharing in a relationship with the God to whom the psalmist also speaks.

There is, however, a negative aspect to this feature of understanding; the involvement of which I have spoken is a potential liability as well as a potential asset. It may encourage us to identify our experience or our way of looking at things with the ones we are seeking to understand. We squeeze other people into our own mold and thus misunderstand them; we subsume what we think we hear within the categories of what we think we know already and thus miss distinctive features of what is said.

In a similar way, again, the experiences, needs, and desires we bring to the biblical text ("what rings a bell with me") are both an asset and a liability. They give us a starting point in asking questions of the text, but they may hinder us from hearing the things that the text was saying that do not correspond to what we have experienced or to what we are already interested in. We listen to the text's answers to our questions but ignore other aspects of the text that do not relate to these questions. As we may put it, only part of the text is "relevant." But if our questions, arising out of our experiences and interests, are to be our way in to understanding the text itself, then realizing that the text is actually the answer to a question rather different from the one we asked must lead not to our ignoring these other aspects of the text but to our seeking to formulate a new question that will open the way to hearing some of these other aspects. Generally, we hear "as though we know already, and can

partly tell ourselves what we are to hear. Our supposed listening is in fact a strange mixture of hearing and our own speaking, and in accordance with the usual rule, it is most likely that our own speaking will be the really decisive event.<sup>54</sup> Thus a Latin American Roman Catholic perceives how prominent is the theme of political and national liberation in Scripture, which people in more privileged situations have often taken little note of, but misses the equal emphasis on spiritual liberation that also appears even in books such as Exodus. A North Atlantic evangelical notices the stress on personal salvation in the New Testament but misses the emphasis on the church. An Israeli Jew (or a Christian supporter of Israel) finds it easy to identify with the story of the conquest of Canaan in Joshua but may miss other features of the story such as God's concern to be fair to the existent inhabitants of Canaan. Our social context is thus particularly influential on what we are able to hear and what we miss. Some prayer texts (e.g., Ps 72) and some other parts of the Bible are difficult to hear in an industrial rather than an agricultural society. We may need to imagine ourselves in a developing country rather than a developed one in order to interpret them.<sup>55</sup>

The church's familiarity with and its commitment to Scripture is thus both a liability and an asset with regard to interpreting Scripture. Its familiarity gives us a way in to understanding it, but it may mean that the cutting edge of what it says is blunted; conversely, unfamiliarity with Scripture may enable us to hear it quite freshly or may make it difficult for us to hear it at all. Participation in the realities Scripture speaks of helps us to perceive them there and to respond to them; a purely clinical, analytical understanding misses the most vital dimensions of these texts. Yet this same assumed identification with Scripture unwittingly hinders our perceiving aspects of the text that do not already have equivalents in our faith. Those who are most committed to the biblical gospel may be hindered from understanding that gospel precisely by this loyalty.

In John, Jesus reminds us forcefully of this point. Those who are committed to doing God's will recognize teaching that comes from God (John 7:17). Yet those who were most familiar with the Scriptures and had committed themselves most unequivocally to following the Scriptures had the most difficulty in perceiving what they were pointing to. A further aspect to the charismatic nature of interpretation appears here. Interpretation involves the Holy Spirit not only because our imagination needs the shafts of intuition the Spirit has to give but also because our wills need the softening that the Spirit has to effect if we are to be open to costly new insights on the significance of Scripture for us. Interpretation is a moral issue. This relates to the fact that when we say "Jesus is Lord" or "Yahweh is a great God" we are not merely conveying information but declaring our commitment and our worship. The "deep structure" of these statements is similar to that of declarations such as

54. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 470; cf. W. W. Johnson, "The Ethics of Preaching," *Int* 20 (1966): 423.

55. On this problem, cf. R. L. Rohrbaugh, *The Biblical Interpreter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).



“We believe in Jesus Christ” or “We praise you, God.” For such true statements to be truly interpreted, to be authentic on my lips, part of their significance must be to indicate my commitment—even if Bultmann went too far when he implied that “Jesus is Lord” indicates mainly or even exclusively that commitment (“for a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements have to be true”).<sup>56</sup> We have to seek to understand texts in their historicity; but we have to do so out of our own historicity, the assumptions and horizons that affect how we see and what we see. Our personal situation and context shape the way we read, just as the authors’ situations and contexts shaped the way they wrote, and we have to reflect as carefully about the former as we do about the latter. The image of the merging of horizons<sup>57</sup> has thus come to be used to describe the process of interpretation. I inevitably view the world from the vantage point where I stand, which fixes a horizon for me. If I can look at it from someone else’s vantage point, my horizon is broadened. I can see reality more fully.

My historicity means I am not only in a different context from that of the text; I am in a later one, and all that has happened between the emergence of the text and my own life both links me positively to it and makes it difficult (impossible?) to hear it as I would have done when it was first uttered. Helen Gardner commented that *The Waste Land* in 1972 was a different poem from the one printed in October 1922 in *The Criterion*: familiar and famous, not new and exciting; fixed in a certain period of the past, not contemporary; located in the midst of the total T. S. Eliot corpus, not at the culmination of his then corpus.<sup>58</sup> Elvis Presley’s records of the 1950s can be appreciated now in a way they could not then, even though (or rather because?) they cannot now strike us with the shock and offensiveness that they then had. The First Testament cannot be the same for the reader who comes to it as a Christian as it was for the believing Jew of pre-Christian (or post-Christian) times.

My historicity makes some texts more difficult for me to hear than others. In the 1920s, Romans suddenly became audible again in Germany, as had happened in the sixteenth century. During later decades of the twentieth century, 1 Corinthians 12–14 became audible again in many parts of the world. The Luther and the Barth for whom Romans came alive (let alone those who suddenly made sense of 1 Cor 12–14) themselves misheard their texts in marked ways, but at least some appropriation of them was now going on.

It is partly because different texts can be heard at different times that understanding a biblical text is not a once-for-all act. I can perceive aspects of it today, but miss others, which I may be able to see tomorrow. One generation becomes blind to insights that were once well appreciated (hence the value of using the commentaries of other centuries), but is in a position to perceive things long neglected. While

56. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 45; cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Use of Philosophical Categories in New Testament Hermeneutics,” *Churchman* 87 (1973): 96.

57. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

58. Helen Gardner, “*The Waste Land*” (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 1–2.

the story of biblical scholarship includes some ongoing development of insight and emancipation from error, like the one that characterizes the story of science, more fundamentally it is the story of each generation's attempt to appropriate the biblical message in its own context, and the story follows a zigzag line; insights are sometimes lost, sometimes regained.

A further aspect of our historicity is that the Bible as a whole is separated from us by the gulf that divides us from the biblical world (worlds, indeed), a gulf carved out by differences in people's beliefs and assumptions, in how they think, behave, react, feel, and experience life, which are unmentioned by the text itself because they do not separate author and original reader, though they do separate author and modern reader. Dennis Nineham often returns to this theme.<sup>59</sup> One may question his more extreme statements doubting whether any satisfactory understanding of the Bible is possible, with the theological inference he builds on these that contemporary Christian faith cannot base itself on the Bible. His work is valuable, however, because it presses on us the reality of the gulf referred to above. Understanding the Bible is a demanding exercise, like understanding Philo or Origen, Chaucer or Shakespeare. To appreciate these works in their original significance (like fully understanding any other human being) is an ultimately unattainable goal, yet it remains the interpreter's aim, even while recognizing that our having to view them in our different context is itself an aid to other aspects of their interpretation. The works themselves can transcend the gap that separates us from them, and in some ways the passage of time gives us a perspective that makes them easier to interpret.<sup>60</sup>

How, then, are we to perceive where lie the differences between our own experience and perspective and those witnessed to in the text? How may we safeguard against misreading our experiences and perspectives into a text that actually speaks of different ones? One of the chief significances of the methods of biblical criticism lies in the distancing from the text that they can give to the person who identifies with the text. Critical methods treat the text as an object independent of me; this may be a bad way to start reading the Bible, and it is certainly a bad way to end doing so, but on the way it may facilitate the move from a "first naivety" to a second, postcritical naivety, a move via a hermeneutic of suspicion to a hermeneutic of recovery.<sup>61</sup> The

59. See *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (London: Macmillan; New York: Barnes, 1976); *Explorations in Theology* 1 (London: SCM, 1977); "The Strangeness of the New Testament World," *Theology* 85 (1982): 171–77, 247–55.

60. On this issue from a theological perspective see J. Barton, "Reflections on Cultural Relativism," *Theology* 82 (1979): 103–9, 191–99; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 53–60; S. Coakley, "Theology and Cultural Relativism," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 21 (1979): 223–43; F. G. Downing, "Our Access to Other Cultures," *Modern Churchman* 21 (1977): 28–42; and from a literary perspective see Steiner, *After Babel*, 1–31; H. Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 25–51; Lionel Trilling, "The Sense of the Past," in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking; London: Secker, 1951), esp. 187.

61. Paul Ricoeur's terms: see, e.g., *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 28–36, 496.

highly cerebral exercise of learning the biblical languages has its place here. The task of translation is, after all, the culmination of the act of interpretation, not a mere preliminary to it. It is an attempt to express the meaning of the words I have sought to understand. It parallels the counselor's attempt to reexpress in different words what the client said, to establish to both parties that the counselor has heard aright. While we can get an accurate enough understanding of a biblical text from a translation (better, by comparing translations), there are insights on the nuances of the text that seem to come only through close attention to its actual words, as counseling demands close attention to the very words of the client. Understanding something in a foreign language via an interpreter is quite possible, but unless the material is of a very down-to-earth kind, you are bound to miss something. Sharing someone's language is part of being willing and able to listen to him or her at all.

Another concern of criticism is to consider the Bible against its social context, seeking to identify the conventions of speech that lie behind its various texts. In any culture there is a range of attitudes, assumptions, ways of thinking, and ways of behaving that all who live in that culture accept without considering them. To such an extent are they taken for granted that we are not even aware of taking them for granted until we enter another culture that does not do so and has its own habits and assumptions. Now for us the Bible is such another culture, and one aspect of the complex task of understanding it is to discover its conventions of thinking and speaking. Form criticism deals with one aspect of this task by seeking to identify the basic genres or forms that appear in a literature and the social context (*Sitz im Leben*) to which they belong.

That such study is to be expected to illumine our understanding of a literature can readily be illustrated from our own culture. The various items that may come into our mailbox (a letter from a friend, an advertising circular, a bill, a wedding invitation, a greeting card) each have forms of their own. The kind of paper that is used, the format, the language, the opening and closing phrases, all constitute signals that take us a substantial way toward understanding the meaning of each item before we examine what the words actually say. One can imagine how difficult it would be for people in Africa in three thousand years' time to understand this material, given their unfamiliarity with the conventions that we take for granted.

This is our own position in relation to the Bible, a wide-ranging collection of works from a different age, a different culture, a different civilization. Form criticism seeks to recover the way things were said and written in that world and to devise the right kind of question-and-answer procedure that will open up the distinctive meanings (and expose the distinctive sets of possible misunderstandings) that belong to each genre.

As it happens, form-critical study of prayer texts has been a particularly fruitful exercise. The Psalms themselves were among the first subjects of the pioneer form-critic Hermann Gunkel, who analyzed basic ways of speaking to God represented in them. His work was taken further by Sigmund Mowinckel, who looked at the Psalms systematically as the vehicles of Israel's corporate worship, the expressions

of its self-identity and the means of its mutual fellowship.<sup>62</sup> While such study takes us into the shared conventions of prayer texts, form is not all; a person uses form to express something unique. Comparing examples of various genres helps one to perceive the individuality of particular prayers and praises. Psalms 95 and 100, for instance, are psalms of praise with close parallels, except there is nothing in Psalm 100 that corresponds to the closing stanza of Psalm 95, where the movement of communication turns from congregation-God to God-congregation as God invites the enthusiastic worshipers to shut up for a minute and listen. (It is ironic that in the Church of England this last, distinctive section of Ps 95 came to be omitted from worship.) Sometimes the individuality of an author takes up a familiar form in order to make it do something quite different. My mail includes advertisements that are personalized in the hope that I may treat them as “proper” letters; newspapers include advertisement features designed to attract the credence given to editorial matter or satire that could be taken by the unimaginative (or the person from another culture) as a serious editorial. In the First Testament, Amos uses the form of an oracle of judgment on the nations to soften up Israel for an oracle of judgment against itself, the form of an invitation to worship to indict Israel about the true nature of its worship, and the form of a funeral dirge to picture Israel fallen by God’s judgment (Amos 1:3–2:16; 4:4; 5:1–2). Such creative individual use of forms makes clear that texts such as the Psalms that reflect basic forms are not mere formal, institutional texts written to order for an institutionalized cult. They reflect the real experience of nation and individual. Claus Westermann has especially emphasized the point; it is significant that he came to his research on the Psalms from the background of the experience of the Confessing Church in the 1930s and from his personal experience of prison camp. Walter Brueggemann has taken this study further in light of Ricoeur’s work on hermeneutics, seeing the Psalms as representing various stages of personal experience of orientation or equilibrium, disorientation, and reorientation in a new faith.<sup>63</sup>

In discussing how we interpret prayer texts, we have brought together two contrasting approaches to interpretation. One begins by assuming that our experience and the experience reflected in the text are parallel, so that the one can be understood in light of the other; it emphasizes the link between the two human experiences. The other approach seeks to distance the interpreter from the text and look at it “objectively” in light of its context rather than in light of the interpreter’s experience. It is the differences between these two approaches that make them so important to each other. On its own, the objective, critical approach to Scripture falls short.

62. See, e.g., Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (Oxford: Blackwell; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

63. See Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981); Walter Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” *JSOT* 17 (1980): 3–32; Brueggemann alludes to Paul Ricoeur’s *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) and *Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), as well as works referred to above.

It falls short of the modern readers' hopes (they learn nothing from Scripture that can relate to their faith), and it falls short of the ancient text's hope (given that it was written and preserved in order to speak for and to people in their relationship to God). Karl Barth points out that it is precisely in following where the text in its humanity points, in treating it historically, that we have to grapple with the divine reality that is its concern.<sup>64</sup>

On its own, the approach that hastens to identify its concern with those of the text also easily falls short because it can encourage us to use the text merely to confirm us in the religious beliefs we had before we read it. We assume that the experience to which the text witnesses mirrors our own; we look down the well and see ourselves. So here objective, critical approaches can help us respond in trust and obedience to the scriptural texts themselves, because they help us actually to hear these texts aright. (Ricoeur remarks that Sigmund Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism* "thought he could economize on biblical exegesis" with the result that "he found, at the end of the analysis, only what he knew before undertaking it.")<sup>65</sup> "Whether in terms of the current 'contextual' emphasis in the World Council of Churches [WCC], or in terms of the charismatic movement, a polarization has emerged between the preoccupation with present experience and the study of the New Testament. . . . The hermeneutical task is to establish a relationship between two sets of horizons; those of the New Testament itself, and those of the interpreter's present experience and conceptual frame."<sup>66</sup>

That statement (which of course applies to First Testament study too) has a history going back long before the WCC and the charismatic movement. Indeed, the central tragedy of the history of biblical study over the past two centuries is that the objective, distancing, critical approach to Scripture and the obedient, trusting, experiential approach have proceeded in substantial independence of each other. The one is appropriate to the scholarly game and the exam treadmill, the other to believers on their knees praying or on their feet preaching. They are brought up on the second approach, struggle with the first approach to get a degree, and revert with relief to the first when they escape their professor's eye in the conviction that it is the application of the Bible in the contemporary world that counts; there is not enough time for the luxury of the distancing, critical approach. Our contemporary application of Scripture will be shallow and/or predetermined by the insights and experiences we bring to Scripture if we concentrate exclusively on contemporary application. Conversely, as we give ourselves seriously to understanding a passage for what it first meant to its writers and readers, the question of its application to us will often solve itself.

For an odd thing can happen when we do concentrate on that objective understanding. As we seek to enter the concrete fact of that past moment when some

64. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 463–70.

65. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 349.

66. Thiselton, "The Use of Philosophical Categories in New Testament Hermeneutics," 98.

people very distant from us met with God, suddenly we find ourselves in that situation and see ourselves confronted by that God. We realize that it is in one sense a totally different situation from any we know, but it is our God meeting the same flesh and blood in Christ as we are. We can appreciate their testimony and make our response to that same God. We meet God precisely through entering into a particular situation whose distance from ourselves we emphasize—through, not despite, that distancing process.

It will be evident that the kind of historical study that can lead to this insight is not the mere analysis of sources and reconstruction of events on which biblical study has often concentrated. Such procedures can clarify what is unclear because of our historical distance from the text and thus remove some of the disadvantages of not being the writer's original audience, but they do not in themselves help us grasp the point the writer was making. The old Russian icon had to be "discovered" not only physically—in that all the soot and more recent layers of paint have been removed—but also spiritually; we have learned how to look at it.<sup>67</sup> So it has to be with Scripture. Critical procedures open up the possibility of interpretation and help us to check purported interpretations, but they are not the task of interpretation itself. We understand Scripture only as we think ourselves into the text's perspective and let it interact with our own.

A reversal of movement in the process of interpretation thus takes place. As we have noted, I start as the subject, speaking, asking questions, being objective about the Bible, seeking to avoid reading into it the views I already hold or the experience I already have or the commitments I already accept. Then suddenly it becomes the subject, speaking, addressing, asking questions, challenging my views, my experiences, and my commitments; I am the object on the receiving end of its scrutiny. This exciting moment unveils whether I really regard the Bible as the word of God in human words, by acting on what I hear.

In the case of prayer texts and other works that directly reflect an author's own experience, that movement naturally has a different dynamic from ones we have considered in sections 1 and 2. There a word is spoken to me (or at least I put myself into the position of those to whom it was addressed). Here a word is spoken for me. The text is given to me to articulate on my behalf an experience, an attitude, a belief, a prayer. My response to it is to use it in this way, to allow it to call forth from me the praise, the prayer, the act of commitment, the protest, the declaration of trust that the text itself expresses. As well as having implied authors, texts have implied readers or ideal readers, and interpretation involves becoming such readers.<sup>68</sup>

Sometimes, admittedly, we find ourselves uncertain as to what kind of reader is anticipated by a text. Some texts are ambiguous. On occasion this is because we lack the right information that would enable us to see the text's meaning. At other times

67. N. S. Trubeckoj, in Matejka and Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 119.

68. Cf. R. Cohen in Valdés and Miller, eds., *Interpretation of Narrative*, 5.

ambiguity is built into the text; it is there to put further questions to the reader, who learns precisely by having to decide how to read the text.<sup>69</sup>

Although this reader-response approach to interpretation is often appropriate to narrative, it comes into its own with prayer texts, which speak to me by asking me what, if anything, I would mean by taking this text on my lips. I as the subject questioning the text may be unable to discover whether a psalm that expresses a love for God's law arose out of a "legalistic" attitude (it can be read that way) or whether a psalm that praises or laments in stereotyped fashion arose out of genuine praise or prayer (it need not be read that way). But the text as the subject questioning me penetrates to my inner person (cf. Heb 4:12) to discover whether I have the prayer, praise, or commitment to express by means of this text; not just to discover whether I have them, but to evoke that response to God by offering itself as a vehicle for it.<sup>70</sup>

69. Cf. P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), on this aspect of the Abraham and David stories; S. E. Fish, e.g., "Interpreting the Variorum," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975-76): 465-85.

70. Cf. Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith," 17-19.