On Hermeneutics



Robert R. Wadholm

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by

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Back cover illustration: Papyrus fragment with lines from Homer's *Odyssey*; Greek; Ptolemaic, 285–250 BC.

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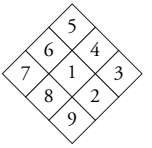
Signs as symbols signify,
leading one to wonder,
wells of wonder, seeking faith,
listening minds surrender.

To my wife, Grace and brother, Rick—
you are friends and inspirations;

Munyon, Stotts, Ryken, and Placier—
you taught me to listen to texts;

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Austin, and Russell—
to you I owe a debt I cannot pay.

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2. Clay foundation cylinder with inscription of King Nebuchadnezzar II discussing building activities in Babylon; cuneiform; Neo-Babylonian Period, reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, 604–562 BC.
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Introduction

Why another book on hermeneutics? Every distinct community of interpreters seems to have a book on hermeneutics tailored to them. This is not that.

This book is for Catholics and Protestants, humanists and scientists, rich and poor (feel free to make copies). It is meant for people who create, consume, and communicate messages—for humans. Of course, it will help if you can read. Thoughtfully.

On the other hand, this book is indeed written with a community in mind: a community of practice, a community of learning. This book was written to give students something to help them survive trips to the library (and computer) as they prepare and write interpretive papers, books, sermons and lessons—to communicate their interpretive work. While the book might be useful in courses related to biblical studies, particularly biblical interpretation, it might also serve as an introductory guidebook for doing general hermeneutics, or it can be adapted to the literature being interpreted (its histories, languages, cultures, and secondary resources). Because this text is released under an

open license, you can make the changes yourself, and republish (and sell) the book in whatever media and format you choose, granted that authorial attribution and the original open license are retained (no need to contact me for permission or pay royalties).

My goal in writing has been clarity, simplicity, and depth of meaning; any superficiality, over-complexity, or confusion are surely someone else's fault (probably yours) and not mine.

The book is meant to sit beside you as you study and write, as you interpret texts. It should push the reader to continue the process of interpretation, allowing you to see what the next step is, what you should be doing along the way, and what kinds of questions you should be asking; it should also help you to remember what done looks like.

This book is a beginning, and not an end, of hermeneutics. I offer it as a practical philosophy of interpretation, which means you should practice while studying, and you should think while practicing.

I have approached the topic as philosophy from a background of biblical studies and information science, making this (I hope) a unique and holistic account of the process of interpretation. But I present more questions than answers (I personally have more of one than the other). The questions I list are meant to guide rather than complete the reader's journey—you'll need

to think of your own questions related to the texts you interpret, as learning is related to reflection on doing.

This hermeneutics handbook is not meant to be presented as "The way it is," but rather more like "It seems to me like this might be part of the way to start thinking about this." My comments about meaning, significance and principles in the chapter *Meaning & Significance* are meant to challenge established beliefs and practices, as are my ideas throughout on the roles of presuppositions, experiences, questions, philosophy, and verification. The margins of this book have been enlarged to allow you to write in it—please do. Underline, mark with asterisks, cross out what you don't like, write notes in the margins about where I've gone wrong, or where something important has been left out.

This book is intended as a starting point for conversations on interpretation—so talk (or write)!

Part One:
What?

What is Hermeneutics?

What is hermeneutics? A student should know what it is they study; a student of hermeneutics should know what hermeneutics is, else what will you tell your mother when she asks? Unfortunately, no mature field of study has a universally agreed upon definition,[1] but this need not stop us from agreeing upon a definition for our own purposes.[2] Simplifying matters, we might say that **hermeneutics is textual interpretation**.

Interpretation is discovery of meaning. The methods of discovery—how one asks, seeks and knocks—affects what is received and found, what doors are opened. The methods of interpretation presented in this book are meant to be **Socratic** (asking questions to go from ignorance to knowledge), **analytic**

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1 For instance, there is no one agreed upon definition of music, physics, anthropology, religion, or philosophy—what a strange world we live in where we cannot even agree on what it is we are studying!

2 I'll agree with myself at any rate.

(analyzing problems and building knowledge from what is known),[3] **synthetic** (organizing knowledge), and **practical** (using knowledge). Interpreters should think clearly, ask questions honestly, and discover context and understanding; they should make low level (a.k.a., stupid) and common sense[4] observations and analyses, while also engaging the complex details and abstract thoughts of others; they should digest observations and analyses and structure them into a system that is for humans; and they should think and act in truth.

Hermeneutics is always textual interpretation, but **interpretation is not always textual**; other objects of interpretation include audible speech, human behavior including visible signs (such as sign language and body language), and non-human phenomena, including animal and natural signs and "signs of the times."

To interpret is to understand, to make clear, to explain, to see or describe the meaning of something. The "something" of hermeneutics is written language—texts. Texts may be written on wood, clay, wax, paper, leather, computer, phone, coffee mug, ankle,

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3 For more on analytic methods, see McCall (2015); sterling examples include Russell (2008), Austin (1962), Plantinga (2015), Nozick (1981; 1990), Kim, Korman, and Sosa (2012), and Sosa, Kim, Fantl, and McGrath (2008).

4 In the process of discovery, common sense is a useful, though imperfect, guide.

or spaceship. While both the medium and the language affect the composition and meaning of a text, they are not identical with the text—**the text is linguistic meaning with material form** (it is written), and is not merely matter or words. Texts require at least one author/writer who has knowledge of a language and how to write it (complete illiteracy is not an option).

Even if a text is not what is being interpreted, **meaning is required for all kinds of interpretation**. If there is meaning, there must be a meaning-maker, and this requires a mind on both ends: at the creation of a message and at the discovery of meaning. In interpretation, a mind discovers the thoughts of a mind, while in hermeneutics, a mind discovers the thoughts of a mind through text.

Interpretation is a complex process that requires a message creator, a message, encoding, a message receiver, message reception, decoding, internalization, and actualization:

- **A message creator** is usually an intelligent agent—a thinking, self-determining being—who creates a message in a specific context (in a time, a location, a language, a culture, a worldview, etc.). An intelligent agent may also create the means for a message to be constructed autonomously following algorithmic procedures, such as in a computer program

or through the complex physical processes of a created system. Without a message creator, there is no message, only data.

- **A message** is information of some kind, and not merely data. Information is data that is processed, organized and represented by a mind, or by an externalization of thought processing, organization or representation (as in a computer program), while data are simple facts—states of being in the world—which are unprocessed, unorganized, and/or unrepresented by a mind.
- **Encoding** of the message transforms thoughts into some form of externalization according to accepted rules (as in language or literature), often through material embodiment.[5]

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5 If the message has a material component, it is subject to the laws of **entropy**: the amount of chaos or disutility in a system. The law of entropy is such that ordered things tend toward disorder, utility to disutility, higher forms of energy to lower: material things fall apart and get worse, and when information has a material component, parts of that information can be lost due to distortion and change of the original state of the material in which it is encoded. Entropy seems to be a natural and universal process given the laws of physics in our universe, though life seems to reverse this process; if a message were encoded in life (not merely in organisms, but in life itself), it might grow in meaning through time.

- **A message receiver** is an intelligent agent who receives the message in a specific context, or who creates the means for a message to be received or processed autonomously following algorithmic procedures, such as in a computer program.
- **Message reception** is the physical receipt of an external encoded message through the senses and awareness that it is a message. If a receiver is not aware of a message, or does not actually sense it, the message is not yet received and no interpretation can occur.
- **Decoding** of the message includes parsing and re-conceiving the information—the externalized form of the message is transformed back into thoughts according to accepted rules.
- **Internalization** is the remaking of a message's meaning—the information is organized and represented to oneself in its re-conceived state.
- **Actualization** is making actual the purpose of the message through action—believing without doing is not believing.

The truth of an interpretation can be tested or verified by linking the receiver's inner thoughts (as well as their inner and outer actions) with the objective reality of the message and original thoughts of the creating

agent. We may thus **falsify**[6] **a given interpretation** based on its failure to track or essentially fit with an original message, authorial intent and thought. True interpretation corresponds with the reality (and structure of reality) of the message, purpose and thoughts of the author. It is sufficient for an interpretation to fit the essential structure of these—it is not necessary or plausible for an interpretation to be **identical** with the structure of these, but it must relate directly and in a coherent and non-contradictory way.[7] A message itself may be partially incoherent and self-contradicting, but the interpretation must cohere with the message and not fundamentally contradict it.

Simplified: an interpretation, to be true, must essentially fit with the original meaning of a text, and must not be at odds with the original meaning—**an interpretation must fit and not fight the meaning of a text**. Because an interpretation must fit, but need not be identical with, the meaning of a text, you can understand a text without fully understanding it, but

6 To **falsify** is to show that something is not true, but is false, incorrect, or does not fit reality.

7 For an in-depth philosophical discussion of identity and identicality, and the relation of each to interpretation, see Robert Wadholm (2016).

you can also misunderstand it (any theory of interpretation must allow for misinterpretation, else it fails[8]).

Interpretation is necessary because there is not merely one thing or person in the world—there is more than one mind and self—and each of these minds has a different perspective, knowledge store, language use, thought patterns, contexts, and experiences with the world and oneself. Additionally, humans are essentially social creatures, and society requires sharing of thoughts through actions. If there is to be social unity (with diversity) of thought or action and knowledge of that unity (with diversity), interpretation must occur, not merely across time and culture, but also every time information is shared.

Interpretation is possible because:

- Persons and their minds are similar,
- The world is similar throughout time and circumstances, though it is not identical,[9]

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8 This is precisely where I think postmodern hermeneutics fails; that is, hermeneutical methods that allow for no knowledge of absolute truths also fail to allow for misinterpretation—in addition to being self-defeating.

9 In this regard, see especially Hirsch's (1967) argument against what he terms radical historicity: "Even though there are always shared elements in a culture which constitute its very substance, *all* men in a culture do not share the same

- Some living creatures (such as humans) have minds that process and create information, and
- Communication forms (such as language) and media (such as writing) exist which allow for conceptualization, standardization, and externalization of thoughts, purposes, and messages.

Hermeneutics, as defined here, is a human and not merely Christian activity, though the term hermeneutics is often used to refer to the interpretation of canonical Christian scriptures, as **a synonym of biblical interpretation**. Like any kind of textual interpretation, Biblical interpretation is complex, but the Bible has additional complications. The Bible is an ancient collection of texts encoded in several ancient written languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and not in audible modern American English. Are you a native speaker and reader of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek? Did you live in the historical, cultural, and geographical settings of the authors of scripture? In addition, scripture is said to be inspired by God, and has a long history of interpretation by those who have sought to apply its truths to their lives as a community.

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general perspective on life, the same assumptions; they do not always speak the same idiom. It is a naïve abstraction to consider any period in the past or the present as having this kind of homogeneity (emphasis his)" (pp. 256–257).

You must be *taught* how to read and understand Dr. Seuss or another author who speaks your language in your time and place at the level of a young child. How will you ever read and understand ancient scriptures that speak mysteries of unfathomable depth about the creator of the universe? Can you trust translations? Can culture be translated? Do you understand God?

Some problems/questions that arise in biblical interpretation:

- Can we understand God? Should we try? Is scripture meant to help us to understand God?
- Is the text's meaning the same as what God reveals through it? (By understanding the meaning of the text, do we thereby understand God's meaning in the text?)
- What are the differences between written, auditory, and non-verbal visual messages with regard to divine revelation? Is one more authoritative than another?
- Are the words of scripture the same as the Word of God?
- Can anyone, including a non-believer, a young child, or mentally challenged person, interpret a biblical text correctly?
- Can every text be understood? Is every meaning apparent?
- How can we know what was in the mind of someone else, especially when that someone else received

revelation from God? Does God's transcendence reach even to the mind of the author (i.e., are the minds of the authors and editors lifted beyond the realm of ordinary reality in some way)?

- What is inspiration, and what is inspired?
- Are the cultural-historical backgrounds of original authors or editors important? If meaning is only discoverable with access to these, are these inspired too (is the text deficient in some way if these are not included)?
- Who were the original audiences? What must be known about them to understand the message? If we must understand the audiences, is the text itself not enough (i.e., is the message not successfully transmitted for us unless we also know the audience; is knowledge of the audience inspired; is the text deficient in some way if it does not tell us everything we need to know about its intended audience)?
- Is the importance of a text only to be found in the original thoughts of the author or editor, the text of the original message, in its historical significance or use, and/or in what it makes a current reader think or feel?
- Is the purpose of every message, and every part of every message, to teach? Does every message teach every current reader? How can we know what is being taught?

- What is the genre(s) of the writing, and how does that affect what it might mean? Are genres inspired?
- If every word of scripture is inspired (the doctrine of plenary inspiration), what about the words we have lost or changed in transmission (are those words still useful, as in 2 Tim. 3:16)? Are the translated words inspired? Is it the meaning behind individual words (and/or groups of words) that is inspired? How is an individual word useful or meaningful?
- How do languages, culture, and storytelling change throughout scriptural history?
- How do texts relate to each other? Does meaning pass between them? Are some (or all) necessary for understanding every other (if Scripture is its own interpreter)? Where do we begin with interpretation (with one word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a section, a book, a genre, a collection of books, etc.)?
- Is inspired writing only something of the past (is written divine revelation finished)?

What we need, perhaps, is a **method of interpretation**,[10] whereby we might understand scripture and

10 Thiselton (1992) argues for *ten* different methods of interpretation, each matching the nature of a specific kind of text: "Methods of interpretation should vary as greatly as the types of text that the Bible contains" (p. xvii). While I agree that the questions we ask of a text (as well as what answers we can expect) ought to vary with the kind of text,

provide evidence for our interpretation with a means

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still the overall method should remain intact across kinds: using an entirely separate method of interpretation for a different variety of text (for instance, poetry as opposed to prose)—especially methods with mutually exclusive or contradictory fundamental and philosophical bases (e.g., the meaning resides in the text vs. the meaning resides in the reader's response)—would be like using an entirely different scientific method for observing and analyzing each species of animal or each field of science. A scientist of any kind will utilize some form of scientific method no matter the subject of inquiry (biology, physics, information systems, sociology, etc.), but will also use separate and specific methods for the subject at hand. A scientist, for instance, will always hypothesize and observe, but their hypotheses will take distinct forms, as will their observations—we observe stars or information in a different way than we observe humans. This is not to say that there is one agreed upon scientific method, but that all scientists carry out their work as if there were—they disagree not on the number of scientific methods, but on which is genuinely *the* scientific method. Genre-specific questions and approaches are necessary, but the overall method of interpretation as a general and systematic process remains at play, and while it need not be static or unitary in aspects, the method must at least be coherent and foundational, as well as multi-dimensional (as we apply our method to different levels and kinds of texts). Hermeneutics is not merely a science—it is an **art and science**, as are most human endeavors—but hermeneutics is not irrational. Interpretation is a method of understanding and applying/verifying texts both "sacred" and "secular", both prosaic and poetic, both literary and non-literary; it is *a* method and not many.

of verifying or falsifying our interpretations[11] (this will not answer all our questions, but we must start somewhere). Texts are meant to encode information, to be decoded and to be understood, but scriptures are not merely texts—they are thought to be messages from and about the divine, to transcend the natural. Yet sacred scriptures of all religions are still texts, and require interpretation as such (and not merely spiritual illumination)—the methods we use should help us understand both scripture and text messages from our friends. How do we know what a message means that comes from a friend? What does the text say? Do we let it speak for itself? Can a text speak for itself (in the absence of text-to-speech software)? Is no interpretation necessary when we seek to understand other people's thoughts? Interpretation is still necessary, a method of interpretation is still necessary, but we do not often think about our own methods or processes of understanding the world and other people's thoughts.

Our methods are invisible to us (when we were babies our methods were quite visible to our parents). This is especially true when our **perceived gap of understanding** is small—we think we understand what the other person means because of our shared backgrounds and contexts. We share a **frame of understanding** with

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11 **Falsification** is showing something to be false, while **verification** is showing something to be true.

the author—what is important, how to encode, how to decode. Without a shared frame of understanding, interpretation is difficult or impossible. A method of interpretation should help us to make these frames and gaps of understanding visible, at the very least to help us see what it is that we don't understand and why.

Why develop a method of interpretation? What is it good for? **Hermeneutics is a means by which we may come to know thoughts**—the thoughts of others, and in scriptural hermeneutics, perhaps even the thoughts of God. But isn't it arrogant or sacrilegious to suggest that interpretation is a means by which we can know God or understand our world? Interpretation is not merely a matter of our own mental effort, but depends also upon an original thinker and a revelation of those thoughts (this is as much true with scripture as it is with your friend's text message). We may come to know God's thoughts as he reveals them, and he may choose to reveal them in many ways (for instance, through the order apparent in the universe, through a person, through a text message of a friend). One way God has revealed himself seems to be through the words that were written long ago, which we may come to understand by using our own minds, gifts from God with which to seek him. Using our minds does not entail an absence of the Spirit—it is with our minds that we examine and appreciate fully the work and words of the Spirit.

The purpose of hermeneutics—what it is good for—is to understand the world in which we live, to see clearly our own place and purpose, and to know others more fully. As we interpret scripture, may we also love God with all our heart, soul and strength, actualizing his love in the world. As we examine the meanings of texts, we examine our own lives; as we examine sacred texts, God examines us—with the end being that his thoughts become our thoughts, and his ways our ways; if we take a misstep in our methods, we may break communication among humans, or worse, mistake our own thoughts for God's, our ways for his.

Developing Methods of Interpretation

How should we interpret texts? What **methods** should we use? Some interpreters argue that we should change our focus in hermeneutics from methods to **imagination** and **transmission** (i.e., I should use my imagination to transmit the past and my present circumstances, rather than focusing on an unattainable meaning or a method to find that meaning).[12] But these same interpreters are merely using their own sets of methods—in this case, imagination and transmission—rather than removing the need for methods. We cannot remove the need for methods; they are the "how" of interpretation, whether we admit this or not.

Our methods should be simple enough to remember and use, yet complex enough to cover texts of every

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12 See Gadamer (2004), Grondin (1994), and Mootz and Taylor (2001). Interpreters like Gadamer seem to want to *produce* meaning rather than *discover* it—what happens when their interpretive methods are applied to their own writings?

variety, from all times and places; they should be general enough to apply across wildly different written works (poetry, narrative, letters, text messages, and billboards), yet specific enough to provide actual guidance ("interpret good" is not sufficient as a method). Our methods should be applicable to any kinds of religious and non-religious texts, yet should take account of the fact that scriptures are a different kind of text.

What methods of interpretation have been used throughout history? Perhaps it would be useful to survey the methods of others in the past so that we do not mistakenly believe that we have built our own methods without a previous foundation. Methods of interpretation tend to focus on one or more of the following: **the author, the text, the context, or the reader**.[13]

13 See Grant Osborne's analysis of the problem of meaning and various modern and postmodern hermeneutics related to the axes of author, text and reader (2007, p. 465–521). I have extended his analysis to include also context, because it seems to me that sometimes a method focuses more clearly upon the *contexts* of the author, text and/or reader than on any of the three as a thing in itself. I do not think that methods are limited to a focus on only one of these, nor does Osborne—I think many methods focus equally, or nearly equally, on several axes, and perhaps even several in progression as I outline here.

Past hermeneutical methods include:[14]

- The **proof-text method**: Ignore context—look for themes or secret codes to apply directly to your life (reader-oriented).
- The **literal method**: The text is meant to speak for itself, with the goal of discovering the author's original intent (moves from text to author orientation).
- The **historical-critical method**: Get "behind" the text to understand how and why it was made (context-oriented).
- The **reader-response method**: Produce meanings by reading and transmitting a text (reader-oriented).
- The **syntactical-theological method**: Use context to find intention—discover the historical, linguistic, literary, and theological/philosophical meaning of a text (context and text-oriented).
- The **bounded imagination method:** The author's intent is the **boundary of meaning** (arrived at through the syntactical-theological method) and **validator** of truth, while **imagination** is the catalyst to fresh and relevant understanding (moves from text to reader to author orientation).[15]
- The **principlizing method**: Based on the syntactical-theological method, state the timeless principles embodied in the message that are applicable to the

14 This list is informed by Kaiser and Silva (2007, pp. 28–46).

15 See Hirsch (1967).

current church (moves from text and context to reader orientation).[16]

While hermeneutics may be useful in everyday life, methods of interpretation historically arose with special interest in understanding and applying religious scriptures. Greek and Roman scholars developed methods for interpreting the literature of Homer and Hesiod, as well as the classic poets and philosophers;[17] Jewish rabbis developed methods for interpreting the Torah; Christian leaders developed methods for interpreting the Jewish scriptures and early Christian writings; Hindu priests interpreted the Vedas; Buddhist monks interpreted sayings of the Buddha; Muslim teachers interpreted the Koran. **The history of hermeneutics is also largely the history of interpreting religious texts**.

We might profitably consider the history of textual interpretation by categorizing types of interpretation, rather than viewing the methods as progressing toward some better unforeseen future method that is the culmination of all (the one method to rule them all … and in

16 Kaiser, 1981, p. 152; Kaiser & Silva, 2007; Köstenberger & Patterson, 2011; and to a certain extent, also Osborne, 2007.

17 The writings of the early Greek poets and philosophers were looked upon as scriptures, and treated with reverence and deference to their apparent wisdom and truth.

the darkness bind them); approaches to interpretation often overlapped with one another, and do not seem to relate to each other in a clearly progressive manner. We will discuss five main approaches to hermeneutics in the history of interpretation, identifying key ideas, strengths and weakness of each: the transformational approach, the authoritative approach, the literal approach, the rationalist approach, and the postmodern approach.[18]

The Transformational Approach

In the transformational approach, scriptures are often characterized as entirely divine in origin, and there is a secret key that transforms the words of a text into revelations of mystical union with the divine. Understanding and applying texts requires access to the key; without the key, the texts are without true meaning.

For Jews, Christians and Muslims (and some Hindus), this type of method centers on a person who is

18 The following history of interpreting religious texts is based upon Wadholm (2005a), Froelich (1984), Grant (1984), Graves (2014), Kaiser and Silva (2007), Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (2017), Köstenberger and Patterson (2011), McNight (1988), Mootz and Taylor (2011), Mueller-Vollmer (2006), Osborne (2007), Bartholomew, Greene, and Möller (2000), Bartholomew, Evans, Healy, and Rae (2003), Bartholomew, Hahn, Parry, Seitz, and Wolters (2006), Bray (1996), and Coggins (1990).

a prophet-type or Christ-figure (Christ, Muhammed, Moses, Krishna) and communion with the divine through spiritual experiences, community, and godly living. This approach emphasizes what we might call the 1. **prophet-type**, 2. **moral**, 3. **prophetic**, and 4. **spiritual** aspects of scripture.

The Prophet-type Aspect [19]

Some Christian interpreters who emphasized this aspect believed that the Bible reveals Christ in every place, and that union with him is necessary for understanding the texts. From the Garden of Eden to the walls of the New Jerusalem, interpreters find Christ. From the times of the prophets in the Jewish scriptures and throughout the Babylonian exile and Grecian rule, the people of Israel saw a Savior in scriptures and a community of faith. This "anointed one" (what "Christ" means) would come and dwell among them and change their world.

Early Christians (and perhaps Jesus himself) may have held some version of this view, and made it their way of interpreting the central message of

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19 In Christian circles, this is often referred to as Christological or Christocentric interpretation—hermeneutics experts do not often transcend their own religious or cultural contexts in their analyses (and though I am no expert, I include myself in this critique)—even though other religious and cultural communities interpret their own scriptures in remarkably similar ways.

scripture—salvation through Christ. The early Christian writers saw the overarching theme of scripture as the revelation of Christ. Later, during the time of the early church fathers, this theme was developed to the point of seeing Christ in every bit of scripture. Each moment of history became "HIS story." Heretics[20] claimed that messages from the Old Testament were worthless or that they contradicted the New. The church, in response to the heretics' arguments, began to reinterpret the Hebrew scriptures with Christ as the true underlying message in every seemingly immoral, legalistic, or violent passage. Teachers such as Martin Luther would later use a Christ-centered approach to develop a holistic interpretation of the Bible that fit their own views of God and his plan.

Jews found the prophet-type in Moses and the prophets,[21] Muslims found in Muhammed this prophet-type for reinterpretation of the Christian and Hebrew scriptures, while Hindus found in Krishna (an avatar of the great preserving god, Vishnu) the key to unlocking the ancient Vedic literature (early Hindu scriptures).[22] Early Greek and Roman poets and select philosophers became the prophet figures through whom the later

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20 A **heretic** is a person whose beliefs are not in line with the central beliefs of a religious community.

21 Imagine that.

22 The *Bhagavad Gita* is instructive in this regard.

Greco-Roman world viewed classical sacred writings. Modern prophet figures include Kant, Hegel, Darwin, Freud, and Marx. These various prophet-types did not merely reinterpret their central scripts for their communities, they (or their disciples after them) added to and transformed the meanings of earlier scriptures to personally center on themselves or their personal teachings as mediators of the truth. While not all traditions focus on the prophet-type as Lord, divine, worthy of worship, or as one who personally unifies us with transcendence, this is often the case (at least functionally). Whether individual prophet figures (some of whom may be fictional) thought of themselves in this way or not, they have nevertheless been used in this way.[23]

The Moral Aspect

Texts tell us how to live. They instruct us to do certain things and not to do others. For instance, while the Christian scriptures center on grace, their authors still uphold right living as the standard for those who wish to know God. Sacred writings, such as the Bible, are said to be guidebooks for holy living, rather than artistic creations or sources of abstract knowledge. This aspect emphasizes the "doing" and not the "thinking"

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23 My point in this section is not to equate interpretation within all religions, but rather to show overlap in interpretive approaches.

or "being" of life. Those who support this view often find fault with others who try to dissect scriptures and develop ways of thinking based on the texts. Instead, interpreters who emphasize the moral aspect focus on what the texts compel us to do. Many have held this view, from leaders of religious fights against loose living, to "Pietist" groups in the Reformation (separatist Christians who wanted to live pure, unworldly lives); from monasteries of the Middle Ages to scholars in the 19th century like Albert Schweitzer who found the Bible to be a moral code for life; from Jain, Hindu and Buddhist ascetics,[24] to postmodern pragmatists.[25] A text's primary, or only, value is to help us to do good, to live well, to shun evil. The prophet-type, through which the texts are understood, is often the one who defines what is good, and is also often an example of how to live well and shun what is not good.

The Prophetic Aspect

The prophetic aspect might also be called the historical aspect, as it focuses upon time (history) and timelessness (progression according to a will, laws or principles beyond time); or it might also be termed

24 **Ascetics** are people who practice what some might characterize as extreme forms of self-discipline and abstinence from normal life.

25 Truth is what is practical.

the community aspect, as it follows a community or communities as a key to interpretation. For instance, the Bible is understood as telling us about communities of the past, present, and the future, and it speaks to us as a community yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The entire Bible points toward a future kingdom of God in heaven and a present kingdom of God on earth. It was written for us, not just for its original audience. Diverse interpretive communities developed this aspect from the prophet-type hermeneutics discussed earlier, seeing their own communities and their own contexts as keys to interpretation—the present community is somehow fundamentally one with, and yet different from, the communities of the original audiences. This is a prophetic aspect, and not merely a historical or community aspect, because for these interpreters true understanding builds forward and reveals itself. Something or someone from outside of time is speaking in time, and its voice is heard communicating to and through communities.

Within Christianity, the early church leader Augustine of Hippo[26] was a significant figure in the development of this and other aspects. Other interpreters came before him who emphasized the place of the church in God's history, but Augustine, who lived about sixteen

26 Hippo is the city in North Africa where he lived, not his pant-size.

hundred years ago, developed this aspect the furthest. In his arguments, Augustine found in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian texts the timelines of two great cities—one heavenly and one earthly. God's plan was to develop his own heavenly city alongside an evil worldly city, and in the end to destroy the city of the world and complete his great work, the city of God. Everything in history (and texts) is seen as God's care for his people and his plan of salvation progressively revealed in history.

Other interpreters who emphasized the prophetic aspect include dispensationalists, who understand texts through the lens of the various epochs or ages (dispensations) in which God reveals and acts in distinctly different ways throughout history. The ancient Essenes[27] interpreted the Hebrew scriptures as pointing to a righteous community of faith to whom God reveals himself in the end times. Modern cults also often emphasize this aspect, reading their own communities into the texts and envisioning epic historical developments and struggles as keys to their texts. Hegel, Darwin and Marx are good examples of this historical, progress-minded, community-centered interpretation of texts and natural and political history.[28]

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27 **Essenes** were a monastic sect of Jews before and during the time of Jesus.

28 Perhaps not many readers will agree with me here.

The Spiritual Aspect

Sacred texts are often interpreted as enabling or providing spiritual understanding of and communion with the divine spirit (the texts are, after all, "sacred"). The writers of the Hindu Upanishads spiritualized the earlier Vedic literature and reinterpreted these as pointing to absolute unification of the self with the divine world-soul;[29] Sufi Muslims and Greek orthodox Christians contact and merge with the divine, and their scriptures are interpreted in this light; Pentecostals encounter God's spirit in the text and read scripture through their own spiritual experiences. In this aspect, sacred writings teach us to devote our lives to the divine and to experience the Spirit firsthand—it is by the Spirit that we understand the divine Spirit embodied in the texts.

In Christianity, interpreters who emphasize this aspect see the Bible as personal experiential accounts of God's interactions with man and his activity on the earth; the Bible is to bring us to communion with God, so each passage acts as a passport to experiencing God for ourselves. The monks meditated, the mystics prayed, the Quakers quaked, and the Pentecostals pentecostalized. In each group, the scriptures became a manual for communion with God through spiritual application of its truths.

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29 I like to unify myself with the coffee-soul.

This aspect often grows out of responses to what are perceived as evidence of "dead religion" (or "dead interpretation") and has always become more popular on the fringes of religious communities as the wider community focused instead on understanding their texts in more reasonable and literal ways, more detached from who we are as emotional and spiritual humans (often to the neglect of the explicitly spiritual elements in their own scriptures). This aspect is usually seen (by its teachers) as a corrective to what is broken in typical hermeneutics—interpretation is not a straightforward activity, and requires contemporary divine activity and assistance.

Aspects of the transformational approach are diverse, each with **strengths and weaknesses**. Prophet-centered interpretation finds a prophet at the center of everything in the texts (for instance, Jesus is everywhere in the text), but this often changes from prophet-centered to prophet-bloated interpretation. What the texts actually have to say is often ignored by interpreters who see their prophet in every jot and tittle of a text.[30] Moralizing interpretation focuses on what the Bible wants us to do, but often fails to recognize the spiritual and philosophical themes in the Bible. This interpretation neglects the truth that we have to be Christians before

30 **Jots and tittles** are itty-bitty markings in the Hebrew written text.

we can do Christian things. The Bible is not just about right living—it is about living with God. Prophetic interpretation sees our world as a battleground and our present community as moving toward some greater hope. Sacred texts such as the Bible do indeed center on the prophetic, but this interpretation too often finds its authority in the community or its leaders (the authoritative method discussed next) and not in God, the texts or its authors. Mystical spiritual interpretation often becomes an excuse for private interpretation of scripture. In this view, the ultimate union of the individual with God becomes the central focus, but this fails to recognize that God's words are for the world and his community, and not merely for the individual.

Overall, the transformational approach attempts to be textually based and to apply scripture in a direct manner. But many baseless beliefs and distortions of scripture have arisen over time from this approach because of its non-literal mystical or moralizing interpretations of sacred texts. These problems arose from emphasizing the practical and the spiritual nature of scripture, neglecting original meaning in favor of applied meaning. But this is not to say that interpreters who followed the transformational approach always fell prey to the weaknesses of their approach. Many interpreters attempted to construct a holistic approach to interpretation by emphasizing multiple aspects of the

transformational approach. Early church fathers were an interesting case in point.

If you were one of the church fathers, how would you respond to people who ask you what the Old Testament has to say to Christians today? It's just a bunch of old books about a God who decides to favor a small country and give them laws to follow, but the nation doesn't like their God all that much so they rebel against him again and again, and he repeatedly judges them for their sins. That's quite a bloody, immoral and inelegant story. How exactly is that to be understood in light of what Jesus did on the cross? The New Testament is about grace and love and living righteously.

If you lived in the Greco-Roman world, and you found yourself surrounded by philosophers who were reading deeper meanings into texts such as Homer, Hesiod, and Plato, you might respond with the transformational approach to the Bible, which transforms the texts into deeper meanings. Interpreters like Philo (a Jewish philosopher) thought that maybe the crazy accounts in the Old Testament can be understood as spiritual truths. Later, Christian leaders, including Origen and Clement, would apply this approach even further. But Clement found a two-fold meaning in the Bible—the scriptures are comparable to the spirit and body of a human; there is a spiritual and a literal meaning in every text. Origen taught that humans have

a spirit, soul, and body, and that the Bible, likewise, has **a spiritual** (spirit), **moral** (soul), and **literal** (body) **interpretation**. In this approach, the interpreter should move from the literal meaning, to the moral application, and then to the spiritual meaning. If the Bible says that God wanted Israel to kill the Canaanites, interpreters following this approach might say that the deepest meaning was that God wants to cleanse the world of sin, and to bless his chosen people by using them to expose and get rid of sin in their own lives.

This was a powerful approach. Augustine was converted under Ambrose, a teacher of this approach, and found in this approach a strong argument against skeptics of the scriptures and traditional Christianity. Many other great teachers throughout the centuries found guidance in the "spiritual" meaning of the text, and throughout much of the Middle Ages and into the Counter-Reformation (which was the Roman Catholic response to the Reformation) this approach continued to flourish among interpreters in the traditional church. The holistic transformational approach not only made interpretation contemporary, it also emphasized the divine nature of the text and the Holy Spirit's ongoing presence in the interpretation of scripture.

There are obvious weaknesses with this holistic transformational approach: sacred scriptures may at times mean more than one thing, but if they do, **who or what provides the second (or third) meanings?**

- If we respond "**The leaders**," we fall back to the authoritative approach[31] and its problems (questions arise such as: "Which leaders?" and "What if the leaders disagree?").
- If we respond "**The Spirit**," many groups throughout history have claimed divine enlightenment in the interpretation of scriptures, but disagree with each other—how will we judge between these "spirit enlightened" interpretations? Is it even our place to judge between them? Maybe the Spirit contradicts himself? If so, can the Spirit be trusted, can he be wrong, can he even help us understand in a non-contradictory way?
- If we respond "**Traditional morals**," there are many mutually exclusive traditional morals even in single communities. What is the basis of the morals of the community? Is this basis more important and true than the sacred scriptures?
- If we respond "**My mind** provides the second and third meanings," is everyone similarly capable of using their minds to produce these same meanings? Are different minds guaranteed to create the same additional meanings? Shouldn't the mind be used to discover the meanings, rather than creating them?

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31 See the next section for a description of the authoritative approach. Sneak peek: it's about authorities.

Are we listening to our own minds, or the minds of the authors of a text?

- If we respond "**The text** itself provides its own second and third meanings," these are not second and third meanings—these are first meanings. If the moral meaning is implied or spoken of in the text itself, this is one of the text's *literal* meanings, not its second "moral meaning," and the same could be said for its "spiritual meaning."

Might there be many (even infinitely many) second and third meanings (for instance, many moral meanings to the nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill")? Is the growth in the number of different interpretations a bad thing? Doesn't it mean that we are producing meanings rather than discovering them? Are we worried about this? Do we care what the original authors actually said and meant anymore? When you write, would you want your readers to find the moral and spiritual meanings of your texts to the neglect of the literal meanings, even if these extra meanings were not related to what you actually wrote?

In short, attempts at a holistic transformational approach can be rather arbitrary—the text can be said to mean anything the interpreter wants (morally, spiritually, prophetically, and with reference to a prophet-type). In its overemphasis on enlightened extra meanings, this approach may neglect what the scripture means

in favor of what it means to the interpreter (this is also true with other hermeneutical approaches that find meaning in the interpreter's response to a text). Divine self-revelation in history becomes overshadowed by the unbridled imagination of the reader—the reader is revealing himself to himself, a foolish activity if the intent is to actually understand the thoughts of another mind outside oneself. The community is left to create itself because its standards are found in its own "prophet-type," "moral," "prophetic," and "spiritual" preunderstandings of the texts, rather than being found in the texts. Such a community is in need of reform, but will they listen to a contemporary prophet if they do not listen to their prophets of old?

This is not to say that the transformational approach is not valuable:[32] it is valuable, and is often a true and honest approach to texts. Interpreters should not deny the transformational values of a text (its own prophet-types, morals, spirituality, and prophecy), but neither should they provide their own. Sacred texts should be read transformationally, but the transformation ought to be of the reader, not the text—the meanings ought to transform us, not be transformed by us. If a sacred text is about a prophet-type (such as Jesus), and it is about goodness and morality, and it is prophetic for a historically progressing community, and it is meant to

32 A double negative makes a single positive or a triple neutral.

bring us to the divine Spirit, these things will be in the text itself. Let the text speak. Your true transformation is dependent upon your listening.[33]

The Authoritative Approach

Have you ever been told "Because I said so"? Some adults love giving this response to their children's questions—it's easier than thinking of an intelligent answer, or an answer that the child will agree with. This is what the authoritative approach is like. I should know: I'm an authority on the subject.

In the early church, the apostles were often the source of doctrinal development, which meant that they had most of the responsibility of keeping their fellow Christians in line (almost all of the New Testament was written with this in mind). It was sort of like babysitting for Jesus. So, what happens when the babysitters die? Thankfully they trained new babysitters before they died. But as the years went by, these new babysitters found that some of their fellow Christians were straying from the truth of scripture (and as they say "The banana that strays from the bunch gets eaten"). The leaders warned the straying Christians that the Bible should be read and interpreted in light of the Church

33 When you are in a conversation, if you are merely listening to yourself, you are not in a conversation.

and not by the individual or the straying brethren (the Bible is the community's, not the individual's). The true meanings in scripture were the possession of the leaders of the Church, and they had been given this authority by God.[34]

It was true. They did have authority from God. But the straying Christians wanted to hear some logical arguments for their interpretations. Several church leaders through the ages (including Tertullian, Irenaeus, Augustine, and Gregory the Great) responded that the interpretation of the Bible was subject to "the rule of faith." What was this rule of faith? Basically, it was what the church accepted as truth and meaning in the Bible. Tradition and leadership ruled (and at times without any good reasons).

This approach brought about a great amount of conversation within the church. What was it exactly that the church believed? What was their standard? The transformational approach and the literal approach (discussed in a later section) were both attempts within the church to answer these persistent questions about how to interpret the Bible. The authoritative approach helped to spur the Church on towards developing clear creeds and doctrines, and recognizing a New Testament

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34 Loud thunder from heaven can be heard when you say this sentence out loud.

canon.[35] During the Middle Ages, the authoritative approach often reigned supreme over all the other approaches, and was partly responsible for making the pope a powerful figure and head of the authority of the church (if the authority is a person outside the text, why not a person with a funny hat?).

Before and during the Protestant Reformation, several leaders questioned the right of the church to hold sway over the interpretation of the Bible. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin found authority in the Scripture itself (often through literal interpretation), and to different degrees each of them denied the supreme authority of the church in matters of interpretation. Ironically, each of them still clung to a "community of faith" interpretation, which emphasized the importance of the Christian community in finding the meaning in scripture. Eventually, the "community of faith" approach gave way to the probing rationalist approach (described later), which found authority in the individual's reason.

Where does the authoritative approach come from? When people question a community's traditional hermeneutics, leaders often respond with a call to authority, and this authority is found in themselves

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35 The **canon** was not a weapon (that artillery piece has three n's), but a "standard" collection of books that were recognized as authoritative scripture, while others outside the standard were recognized as just good books, or not.

or in the community as a whole. Unfortunately, if we look to leaders of the past and present, we will find that they do not all agree. If we look to the community of faith, for instance, those we view as the true Church, we will find that we can only know the identity of the true Church as we understand scripture, but to understand scripture we must first rely on the true Church's interpretation (which leads us in a vicious circle). If authority is our method, we seem to require another source of authority (beyond leaders, or historical interpretations, or the community). How are we to answer the skeptics who want to know why we believe what we believe?

The Literal Approach

Rabbis and prophets of the Hebrew scriptures taught that the scriptures need to be understood by looking at words and figuring out what they originally meant, drawing spiritual truths from the text, then applying the underlying meaning to today. This sounds simple, but it is still a revolutionary way of looking at texts, including the Bible. A literal approach need not mean a wooden interpretation, one that fails to properly understand poetry as poetry, story as story, or parable as parable. Just because it is a literal approach does not mean it takes everything literally: a **literal approach attempts to discover what a text literally means**, rather than trying to understand what it figuratively

means. Figures of speech are one thing, but turning every text into a metaphor for something else is seen as going too far.

When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he didn't respond with emotional, spiritual, or authoritarian remarks. Yes, Jesus is an emotional being. His is the greatest Spirit (because he is infinite). He is the King of kings. He could have responded in these ways, but according to the narrative, Satan was distorting the truth of scripture and offering Jesus an alternative spin on the texts. Jesus found solace in the words of God. In essence, he responded to Satan with "The Bible told me so." And it literally did.

In the fourth century A.D., a Christian literal approach to scripture flowered. Leaders such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and John Chrysostom taught this approach, reacting against the allegorizing transformational approach. They said that the Bible's meaning was primarily to be found in the text (the history and events and words, etc., which were called the *historia*). Secondarily, and based on this literal interpretation, the spiritual, theoretical, or theological meaning was to be built (which was called the *theoria*). Even with this distinction, sometimes these leaders tended to get so close to the transformational approach's interpretations that it was hard to tell the difference. At other times, they would interpret the

text so literally that it would end up meaning nothing to contemporary believers.

Later, Augustine helped to develop this school into a more holistic approach that dovetailed with the transformational and authoritative approaches; he claimed a four-fold interpretation of the Bible: **the literal, the moral, the analogous, and the spiritual**. This view was very important during most of the Middle Ages. But Augustine often based his interpretation on the authority of the church (the authoritative approach). John Calvin and other leaders in the Reformation didn't exactly like that approach, so they sought to find meaning in the Bible alone. Calvin said that the historical and grammatical meaning of the Bible was the meaning; from this meaning we may draw our theology, and apply it to our lives today.

The literal approach helped to bring the church back to a historically accurate view of its scriptures, and kept theologians through the ages on their toes (metaphorically speaking) by always bringing people back to what the Bible actually had to say (the authorities were made to be responsible to the text and the original authors). Unfortunately, this approach often reverts to overemphasis on the human side of interpretation. The approach clearly makes the divine scriptures its center, and tries to bring clarity and objectivity to the interpretation process; it attempts to find meaning using the mind more than the spirit or the imagination

(if these are even different things), and allows for fresh insight into the mind of God through the discovery of information in the text.

This school has been charged with being too human-oriented, non-practical, unspiritual, not prophet-centered, and blind to its own authoritarian stance (their authority is their understanding of the texts). The original authors, texts, and audiences of the scriptures are made to be all-important to our understanding of what God reveals—the key to scripture is found in scripture itself.

The Rationalist Approach

The world is flat. The universe revolves around the earth. We are unique in the cosmos. God made everything and continues to work in the world. Plato and Aristotle were geniuses. The church holds the keys to salvation. Traditions are the heart of a people; without them the people perish. Humanity's sinful nature is responsible for all of the evil in the world. Chocolate is disgusting.

Some of these statements are true, and some of them are false (especially that last one). Others are only partly correct. But if the whole list of beliefs is held as indisputable *as a single system*, when one of them falls, they all may come tumbling down.

If the backbone of a people's thought structure is taken away, those people turn into jellyfish until another backbone is found. The end of the Middle Ages witnessed a renewal of interest in the things of the East and in the West's own past, in the rationalism of the classical world. As the humanists[36] began to grow in number, they also grew in boldness. Luther, Calvin and others denied the established Church's authority and found meaning in the literal words of God. They found God's meaning by using their own minds.[37]

The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the resurgence of a classic approach—scientific rationalism.[38] Natural science was being redeveloped from the ground up (starting with individual human thought and experiences), and people started turning their attention from what God and the church were saying to what the physical universe and their own minds were saying.

The problem was that the universe and their minds seemed to be contradicting God. One of these had to

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36 A **humanist** is a person who focuses on the value of individual humans and human solutions to human problems, holding up human achievements of the past (often from the classical cultures of the Greeks and Romans) in arts and literature as examples of the dignity and meaning of human life.

37 Gasp.

38 **Scientific rationalism** is the combination of inductive and deductive reasoning—empirical observations and logic are the source of all true knowledge.

be wrong, and since it is difficult to scientifically test God, can you guess who won the argument? Leaders like Schleiermacher, Wellhausen, Bauer, and Harnack all found fault with the church's traditional interpretations—the church was so unreasonable and unscientific. They wanted to make the Bible relevant. So, they studied and analyzed and critiqued the history of the Bible's development, the sources of the Bible's authorship, the development of the Christian religion within its cultural contexts, the literary forms of the writings, etc., until the modern reader was so separated from the original meaning in the Bible that it no longer mattered what the Bible said.

This rationalist approach denied the supernatural elements in religion (including miracles, divine revelation, and eventually even the creation of the world by God) as its first principle, because the supernatural was not scientific or reasonable. Only what they could prove with reason and with scientific data was allowed. The Bible became just another book.

Leaders of this approach distinguished between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. The Old and New Testament were suddenly too divergent to be studied together, so they were separated into their respective domains. Often theology made no difference in their interpretations, only scientific theories really mattered any more. The rationalist approach

opened a whole new world of inquiry into the Bible. Like morticians dissecting a dead body, the Bible was cut to pieces, analyzed, scrutinized, and studied in every conceivable way. While a systematic study of the Bible was beneficial to its understanding, an outright denial of the Bible's foundational source in God made the texts into a dead relic of society's past. The sacred texts of Western society were not alone—soon all religious texts became open to similar scrutiny and critique. Even Shakespeare got shaken down—critical historians denied his very existence.

Many traditional theologians and interpreters reacted strongly, but the damage had been done. Science had torn apart any shred of objective meaning that sacred texts may have contained. The interpreters were left to build up the world of the texts by themselves, supplying the meaning wherever they saw fit (which is what the "New Hermeneutic" is all about).

The scientific method has been one the world's greatest achievements, but it is not fool-proof. The scientific method and a nature-only approach to the world have a disabling disease—they claim to be a full-fledged worldview, but cannot justify their own existence. Without God, there is no reason for there to be reason. There is no scientifically testable hypothesis for the universe's existence. The natural laws have to be founded on something outside of the physical universe.

To prove (or even falsify) the scientific method's truthfulness is not a possibility. All too often the scientists of our modern world are given the seat of the theologian, philosopher, and interpreter of scripture, and they then dictate authoritatively (and unscientifically) what humans may believe, creating a jaded, godless, and meaningless world. On the bright side, at least everybody will have cool gadgets to play with!

The rationalist approach has widened our perspective of sacred texts and their formation, as well as enabled us to find new insights into the human side of revelation. Proponents of the approach have introduced powerful new tools for textual study, and have helped to increase our appreciation for history and its impact on religious communities. But it fails as an approach to interpretation of sacred texts because it undermines the ultimate source of the writing—God. This approach has lessened the faith of many in miracles, the supernatural, and the historicity of scriptural accounts. It no longer matters to many interpreters that Jesus is recorded as having healed people or raised from the dead—what matters is that people of the past seemed to believe this, and we can at most derive some spiritual or metaphorical meaning from this. The only thing of religious importance in interpretation is the spiritual or moral applications that we can draw from the accounts, and this does not require historicity or truth, only feeling and commitment—blind faith.

This approach too often destroys the plain meaning in the scripture in favor of creating exciting new hypotheses—proponents often care more about being known than about knowing (popularity is more important than truth). Further, if my mind provides the meaning for a text, how can I understand anything that is not already in my mind? Am I the only one who exists in the world? Do texts communicate the thoughts of other minds? Don't scientists and rationalists write texts themselves, in which they want their own thoughts to be understood by the reader? But their thoughts aren't scientifically testable, nor can they be logically proven to exist.

Interpreters using the rationalist approach can go only so far in their proclamations about what they know (information is more scarce than beliefs and guesses about what it might mean). In the end, the rationalist approach is too often based upon authoritarian interpretation, with leaders of the approach as the ultimate authorities (what a text means is what the establishment says it means). The greatest number of scientists and scholars, or the most prestigious scientists and scholars, are taken for the ultimate arbiters of truth, those "in the know"—what they say is gospel truth … until it isn't any longer, and a new "truth" prevails. This pushes people to question: "What is truth? Is it something we can know? Does truth even exist?"

The Postmodern Approach[39]

Authorities disagree. How do we resolve this difficulty? One response has been to become skeptical of all dogmatic assertions, all strongly-held beliefs—to deny that any other interpretive approach has found ultimate meaning—and this is the postmodern approach. According to this approach, other approaches (and their interpretations) are just competing stories, all true in their own way, but ultimately mistaken if they take themselves seriously, because all of them are the chance results of history, culturally-bound perspectives on reality and not reality itself. Texts don't really say what interpreters believe, interpreters just think they know what texts say, and their interpretations may be true for them, but not true for me.

Meaning is not unitary: there are many meanings—perhaps more meanings than interpreters. Meanings are not bound by what an author meant or by what an audience might have been expected to understand. Each interpreter constructs their own meanings, and no interpreter has the one true meaning (that is, no interpretation is true for everyone in history). Humans have no access to objective or absolute truth, if truth

39 If a postmodern interpreter complains that I have misrepresented or misinterpreted postmodernism here, I respond that misinterpretation is not possible from their perspective.

even exists. We only have access to our own narrow windows on the world (our limited experiences and thoughts), and our own cultural-historical situations color those windows. We can't see truth as it is (if there is truth); we only see it as we see it. Knowledge is relative; nobody knows the absolute truth, only the truth for them—perhaps existence is also relative, or there is no truth to be known.

If these ideas are true, as the postmodern approach claims,[40] all we are left with is stories. How you see the world is a story. How the authors of scripture see and interact with the world is a story (but their story is alien to us). A correct interpretation is one in which we allow our stories to overlap with theirs, perhaps creating a bigger story (a meta-narrative). We can't know their story for sure, but we can enact their story in ours. Meaning is always only embodied in culture, history, politics, social structure, race/ethnicity, gender/sexual preference, and language; we must reimagine the story of the text-world in our own cultures, histories, politics, social structures, races/ethnicities, genders/sexual preferences, and languages. Our imagination is the key to production of meaning.

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40 Yes, the claim "we cannot know the absolute truth" is an absolute truth claim, making postmodern interpretation and theories of knowledge both self-defeating and intellectually vacuous—that is, they suck one's knowledge away, including the knowledge of what post-modernism even is.

I, as an individual interpreter, and we, as a community of interpreters, are the producers of this story.

Perhaps we should be suspicious of texts, as they often involve story-worlds that are authoritarian, or oppressive, or racist, or gender-biased; their truths are not truthy for me. "Self-evident truths" in texts (plain meanings) are illusions to be overcome in favor of the ugly story-worlds that transcend the text (which must be likewise confronted and overcome). Texts are only important as sources of critique.

The dangers of this approach are many and various. If we can't know the real truth, can we know God? Can we know what Paul meant when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians? Can we know what the Buddha taught? Can we know what laws say? Can we even really know what postmodernism is? It is illogical to strongly hold the belief that all strongly held beliefs are false, or to hold as absolute truth that all interpretations are merely one's perspective even though this requires you to interpret others' interpretations through your own perspective (of postmodernism) as if it were absolute truth. Interpretations disagree; this does not mean that all are wrong, or that all are right; it may be that one or more are right. Similarly, if two interpretations are mutually exclusive, at least one of them is wrong. The postmodern approach disallows for misinterpretation, even as it claims that all other interpretive approaches misinterpret.

Perspective does not mean ignorance of the truth. For example, I see a tree, but from my perspective, I can only see the surface of the bark and leaves facing me. Even if my perspective is limited, my knowledge may yet be true. My knowledge does not have to be identical with all that can be known to count as knowledge—I don't need to know everything about the tree, or see it from every perspective, to know that it is a tree, and I don't need a tree to literally exist in my mind. I can see a tree through rose-colored glasses and still know it is a tree (and not a rose).

Neither does perspective mean multiplicity of truth (i.e., that anything you claim as truth is true for you). If I claim the tree is a dog, I am wrong. The tree is a tree. Similarly, if I claim that the solitary sentence: "The tree is green" is about *a brown dog*, I am wrong—it is about a tree. The tree may be brown, but I don't know that information from this sentence. What I know is that it is green (it might also be brown, but the tree is not fully without the color green, else the sentence is false). The tree in the sentence is green and it is a tree—we know these things from the sentence itself. If we can produce our own story-worlds from texts and pretend that these are the meanings, then I interpret writings about the postmodern approach as being about puppy dogs, and that is what they mean to me. What do they mean to you?

So, What's the Big Deal?

How I view texts and their meanings will affect how I view the world around me and how I act in it; methods of interpretation may either distort or enhance my vision of God, myself and the world. How I interpret becomes how I understand (or how I fail to understand), and this informs how I live. Hermeneutics is not about books, but about thoughts, purposes, actions; whose thoughts, what purposes, which actions, and how can we know these?

Hermeneutics, as interpretation, demands belief, and belief requires content—believing requires something to believe in. To interpret a message, I must believe that:

- There are other minds[41] situated as I am in the world (yet with different circumstances and views of the world);
- A mind can communicate with other minds through materially encoding and embodying thoughts;
- I can decipher and understand these messages;
- I can know (in part) the thoughts of other minds by interpreting these messages.

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41 Or one other mind, or my own mind in different circumstances.

If there are no minds, there is no meaning, for even my own thought is without meaning (a wholly material world is a meaningless world). If there is no communication, there is nothing to interpret. If I cannot understand a message, I cannot be said to interpret it. If interpretation does not involve one mind knowing (in part) the thoughts of another through the medium of a message, an interpreter is merely self-constructing meaning (they are making it up) and this is nothing less than self-deception. Interpreters prove that they believe the items above when they create their own messages … and expect readers to understand their thoughts.

Interpreting sacred writings often requires a further belief: a divine Mind is behind the message. Belief that a message is from God requires belief in God. Because of this belief, a danger lurks beneath—confusion of a text with a person.

A written message is not a messenger. Texts don't do things, but the ideas embodied in them do if we let them, and the ideas are the ideas of the author(s). It is the author that purposes change in the reader of a text, not the text. A book does not speak: the author speaks, and the book is that speech. For instance, the Bible does not tell Christians to do something: the author of a text in the Bible tells Christians to do something. Texts don't mean things, authors do, and they show us what they mean in their written messages. Texts are

useful, to be sure, but only if they are used—they don't do the work themselves. The sentence:

> "_____ (fill in the blank with a text's *title*)
> _____ (fill in the blank with a verb) … "

should be seen as merely short-hand or a figure of speech for:

> "_____ (fill in the blank with a text's *author*)
> _____ (fill in the blank with a verb) … "

For instance, "The Koran tells Muslims about Allah" is true when it means "In the Koran, the author tells Muslims about Allah;" "*The Raven* is a poem that speaks to me" is true when it means "Edgar Allen Poe speaks to me in and through his poem, *The Raven*;" "The Bible teaches that children ought to obey their parents" is true when it means "In the Bible, God, Moses and Paul teach that children ought to obey their parents." Similarly, a book does not transform anything or anyone ("That book changed my life!"): transformation comes from understanding and use of the book. **Texts are not intelligent agents**.

Further, **the sacredness of a text is not the same thing as its divinity** (godhood). Too many interpreters

deify their texts. In certain Christian groups there is great confusion between the Bible, the words of God, the word of God, and the *Word of God*;[42] many Muslims claim that the Koran exists eternally in Arabic—the book is said to have been always as it is; many Hindus worship words as god ("om"); Sikhs treat their scriptures as a holy person (a guru); again, many protestant Christians think and speak of their Bible as the supreme authority in a Christian's life, and a collection of books—or more commonly a "biblical model"—is Lord rather than God himself in the person of Christ and his indwelling Spirit. But the identity of a text is separate from the identity of God. Within Christianity, not only are the written or spoken words not identical with the divine, they are non-identical in essentials:

42 The Bible is a collection of writings considered to be the standard sacred texts of Christianity; the words of God are the words that God speaks or writes directly, such as at Sinai; the word of God is a message inspired by God, communicated from God, or, in the case of NT use, often the story of salvation centering on Jesus—the Word of God, Christ, the eternal, living creator and third person of the Trinity (not a text or collection of texts). The Bible and word of God are divine in inspiration and subject matter, the words of God are divine in composition, but the Word of God is God.

- The scriptures are written by humans, but no one wrote or created God;
- The scriptures may be inspired by God, but God inspires;
- The scriptures are everlasting, but God is eternal (without beginning or end, he is beyond time)—the scriptures began to exist, while God did not;
- The scriptures are powerful, but God is all-powerful (texts do not act, so the power of texts is not of the same kind as the power of agents—authors act through texts, and readers act as a result);
- The scriptures are given for the edification of the community, but God gives and is the head of that community;
- The scriptures were written on tablets, scrolls and paper, but God writes on our hearts;
- The scriptures are physical, but God is Spirit;
- The scriptures are literary, but God is a person;
- Through scriptures we may come to know about the world, but God created the world;
- Through scriptures we may come to know God in Christ, but God in Christ is who we come to know.

Hermeneutics might be vital, that is, necessary for life. But it is only necessary for life if there is a message out there that we must know to live. Is there such a message? Who is the messenger, and what do they want us to know and do?

Developing a Holistic Hermeneutic

A holistic hermeneutic is necessary, regardless of what texts we want to interpret. A holistic hermeneutic is one which attempts to account for the complexities of the process of interpretation, including the roles of preparation, experience and emotions, the persons and worlds of the message creators and receivers, and the way that humans analyze, construct and apply knowledge. I outline below one possible attempt at a holistic hermeneutic based on a literal approach described above, incorporating insights and tools from other approaches, including post-modernism and rationalism. This approach is neither the only of its kind, nor is it likely the best, simplest, or most comprehensive, but it is what I think occurs every time interpretation succeeds, that is, when meaning changes minds and lives.[43]

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43 For examples of this holistic hermeneutic applied to historical narrative from the Christian scriptures, see Robert Wadholm (2005b; 2007; 2017).

In this method, there are **four interrelated aspects of interpretation**:

1. Appreciation of **Presuppositions**
2. **Context Analysis** (explication and exegesis)
3. **Organization** (textual and thematic systemization)
4. **Application & Verification**

The **presuppositions of the author, the intended audience, and the interpreter** must be dealt with before the text is analyzed. The interpreter of a sacred text must be aware of their own theological, religious, cultural, and exegetical presuppositions before encountering a sacred text and must be open to new presuppositional horizons[44] uncovered in the text[45]—creators of texts have their own presuppositions, their own worlds from which they write, and interpreters must seek

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44 A **presuppositional horizon** is the edge of one's perspective beyond which understanding and application cannot occur. For instance, if I presuppose that there is nothing beyond the physical world and physical laws, I cannot acknowledge there to be a miracle, an eternal soul, or a God, and thus messages that presuppose supernaturalism cannot be understood or applied as intended, as these words and ideas have no true non-physical meaning.

45 See Dockery, 1999; Klein, Blomburg, & Hubbard, 2017.

coherence with these as much as is possible because it seems that much of the meaning and importance of a message is not encoded or transmitted in the text itself.

Analyzing context is extremely important to interpretation: authorial intent, literary genre and context, grammatical usage, historical-cultural background, and redactional issues (later editing of the text) may all be examined to discover the meaning of the text in the context in which it was written and read.[46]

Organizing the meanings in the texts allows us to see development in thought, and to view the forest as we discover the trees. Similar texts must be compared with one another at multiple levels, and holistic analytical/synthetic frameworks should be built.[47] In biblical interpretation, this includes biblical and systematic theology.

The interpreter must also **apply the text** and **verify** that they have properly understood the message.[48] Application must fit the systematic organization of meanings based on the context analysis and presuppositions of the author and message (the message leads, the receiver follows).

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46 Arthur, 1994; Fee, 1991.

47 Stronstad, 1995, p. 29.

48 Stronstad, 1995.

How might this holistic hermeneutic be applied to texts, and what are the dangers inherent in such a method?



Presuppositions

A text is the primary source of information about itself.[49] Protestant Christians have often claimed that t**he Bible, as a text, should be used as the primary source of interpreting itself—**the same might be said about other texts. The interpreter should seek to discover and adopt (if possible, even if only sympathetically) the **presuppositions of the original author and audience**—when we know these and have acquaintance with them first-hand, we will be in a better place to understand what is written than if we were personally ignorant of these and/or rejected these outright.

Creators of texts have **theological/philosophical, religious, cultural, and exegetical presuppositions** that affect the meaning of their messages, and that affect our ability to understand and apply them. We must not only discover what these presuppositions are (this requires homework), we must seek to sympathize

49 Arthur, 1994, p. 8.

with them, to see God, the world, and ourselves from their perspective (this requires mental labor).

Experiential presuppositions are also important in exegesis[50]—for instance, Bible study is not a wholly detached and objective enterprise, but is an exploration of the "existential continuity" that exists between apostolic believers and modern experiences of the interpreter.[51] For instance, those who have experienced miracles are more open and understanding when exegeting biblical history concerning miracles.[52] However, if the experiences of the interpreter become the sole and unbridled starting point of interpretation, "the perceived meaning of Scripture becomes easily susceptible to distortion by the pre-suppositions of the interpreter."[53] All interpreters approach scripture with experiential presuppositions that affect the outcome of their exegesis.[54] The relationship between personal experience and exegesis goes two directions: "At every

50 Stronstad, 1995, pp. 61–63.

51 Arrington, 1988, p. 383.

52 Stronstad, 1995, p. 62.

53 Arrington, 1988, p. 384.

54 Erickson, 1998, p. 71; Fee 1991, p. 27; Menzies, 1987; Stronstad, 1995.

point, experience informs the process of interpretation, and the fruit of interpretation informs experience."[55]

Dangers of Presuppositions include the following: a) an interpreter might delude themselves into thinking that their presuppositional horizon is identical with that of the original author and audience (because of lack of homework); b) an interpreter might undervalue their own presuppositions, and thus become a constant "push-over", believing everything they read, no matter the source; c) an interpreter may seek to make their presuppositions cohere with those of the original author(s) and audience and think that their interpretive task is completed (think of many who try to directly apply the text without caring what it means in context); d) an interpreter might "read things into the text" based on presuppositions instead of looking at the context. To counteract these dangers, an interpreter should work hard at understanding presuppositions—their own and the original author's and audience's—and should move on in the process of interpretation to context, organization, and application/verification to ensure that they have correctly handled the text.



55 Arrington, 1988, p. 384.

Context: Exegesis & Explication

Literary-historical analysis (exegesis and explication) and **thematic and systematic organization** are the "two interrelated phases" of a proper hermeneutic.[56] In both exegesis and explication, **authorial intent** is important, and a text's **genre** should be appreciated.[57] Regardless of a text's history prior to standardization, its message must be understood holistically in its larger literary context using the presuppositions of the original author and intended audience. An editor or author's redactions of his sources may in fact reflect their own particular interests and purposes in writing, but it is the finished work that the interpreter must seek to understand, not just the parts. The interpreter may only know an author or editor's original intent as he/she encounters the entirety of the completed work using grammatical-historical analysis and literary explication.

Explication is the literary analysis of the text. What kind of writing is this (genre, style, rhetorical form)? We should interpret poetry as poetry, proverbs as proverbs, narration as narration. Not everything in texts tells us how to do something, and very little is written as theology, philosophy or instruction, though when stories are in the context of teaching, they often

56 Dockery, 1992, p. 180.

57 Fee, 1991, p. 43.

serve as illustrations of what is being taught.[58] Many literary texts are stories, and if we don't know how to interpret a story or other literary types, we won't know what texts mean.

Dangers of literary analysis include the following: a) overemphasis on literary parallels (this is known as parallelomania); b) overemphasis on the style and form of a text to the neglect of its subject matter or purpose; c) overemphasis on beauty, experience or other affective dimensions of a message (how it moves the reader) rather than on the truth of what is described or illustrated; d) overemphasis on subjectivity of meaning (reader-response) without verification. To counteract these dangers, an interpreter should only claim literary parallels when there is sufficient evidence (thematic and/or linguistic), always keep in mind the purpose and truth values of a text and not merely its aesthetic qualities, and should seek to verify personal readings with the boundaries of the meanings in the text to avoid misreading—**the point of explicating is to make explicit what is implicit** in the text, not merely to imagine new possibilities of meaning and beauty.

Exegesis is the historical-grammatical analysis of the text. This includes not only an analysis of the historical-cultural background of the author, text, and audience, but also an analysis of the individual words

58 Fee & Stuart, 2003.

and phrases that are used, and how those words are used in context (how a word relates to a larger phrase, a phrase relates to a sentence, a sentence relates to a paragraph, a paragraph relates to a section, a section relates to a book, a book relates to a collection of books by the author, and how a collection of books by an author relates to a wider literature). There are many tools and books in the library and online that can be used to help you to understand the historical-cultural contexts of a writing, as well as what is going on in the language of a text. To analyze context, you will need to read and reread a text, outlining how different levels and elements of the context relate to each other (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, historical-cultural elements).

Dangers of historical-grammatical analysis include the following:[59] a) the importance of the historical-cultural background is exaggerated or minimized; b) the importance of the original languages is exaggerated or minimized; c) the meaning of a word is equated with its history; d) the various meanings of a word are read into a specific use; e) overemphasis on subtle points of grammar and vocabulary; f) over- or under-analysis of the relations of elements within a text (a text is made out to be structurally more complex or simple than it

59 This analysis is informed by Kaiser and Silva (2007, pp. 49–65).

is in fact); g) overemphasis on the world behind the text, rather than the world of the text. To counteract these dangers, an interpreter should get to know the language of the text and the history behind it, and keep in mind that meanings of words or word structures are dependent upon context. An interpreter should seek to verify all historical, linguistic, or structural claims made about the text or the world of the text using various tools (scholarly commentaries, background resources, encyclopedias, primary sources of historical accounts, exegetical articles, etc.).



Organization

When interpreting texts, organization often takes the form of a bottom-up or top-down approach (textual-thematic or systematic organization). Other organization includes philosophy (inquiry into what is, how we know, and what is valuable and why) and worldview construction (putting together a full-fledged picture of the way the world works, what it is for, and the place of humans in it). In scriptural interpretation, organization may take the form of theology (talk about God and God-related themes, at least partially based on revelation).

Bottom-up organization (in biblical interpretation, this is called biblical theology) is a holistic understanding of a text that seeks to analyze the key themes and agendas of the single text—or closely related texts by the same author—in its historical setting.[60] The organization of the thoughts of an author is said to be explicitly stated or implied in the text.[61] Daniel Fuller presents several **guidelines for constructing the bottom-up organization of a text**:[62]

1. Compare texts by the same author before comparing them with texts of other authors.
2. Analyze texts by the same author chronologically to discover progression.
3. Compare texts with texts of similar genre.

Top-down organization (in biblical interpretation, this is called systematic theology[63]) organizes knowledge of themes based on pre-established categories.

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60 Ladd, 1974, p. 25.

61 Klein, Blomberg, & Hubbard, 2017, p. 383.

62 Fuller, 1978, pp. 195–196.

63 **Systematic theology** is a discipline that "strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to the issues of life" (Erickson, 1998, p. 21).

Philosophy is about deep wonder and inquiry, questioning the text for what it says about truth, existence, what we can and cannot know and how, and the foundation of beauty and goodness in the world and ourselves. Philosophical use of texts might include arguments that are based upon meanings of texts to arrive at further truth through induction or deduction, or might make explicit the philosophical views and arguments of a text, or it might critique the rationality of previous analyses or applications (and show them to be illogical or unfounded).

Worldview construction combines these rational aspects with wider cultural thought patterns and perspectives of the world, and forms our presuppositions. Texts may inform how we see the world (our presuppositions) by embodying worldviews and showing their truth or falsehood.

Dangers of organization include the following: a) an interpreter might overlook important details in texts because they are looking only for patterns or proof-texts; b) an interpreter might miss the immediate context and instead focus on relationships between texts; c) an interpreter might come to think of texts as meant only to inform us about abstract truths or themes and miss other elements; d) an interpreter might become more certain of their own organization of meanings than in the contextual meanings of the original texts (we may place more weight on our dogma than the texts can hold

up). To counteract these dangers, an interpreter should always keep in mind that **most texts are not meant as grist for the mill of knowledge organization**. We should always approach texts with intellectual humility (we do not know very much, and we do not know very well) and in a responsible manner (attending to context and meaning), not being too certain where certainty is unattainable, and not being dogmatic with the text but allowing the text to tell us what it is we believe. We should also be on the alert for overgeneralizations: do the texts actually say what we think they say, or are we making up "universal truths" ourselves?



Application & Verification

An interpretation should be **applicable** if it is to be useful. Applicability, however, does not mean that every story, action or word must be applied directly and simplistically ("Judas went out and hung himself"), but it does mean that if a portion of text means something, and if we learn something from it, we must apply what we know in the light of what it means. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard present a useful **methodology for the application of texts to today**:[64]

64 Klein, Blomberg, & Hubbard, 2017, pp. 406–424.

1. Determine the original application.
2. Identify any cultural issues.
3. Determine what contemporary applications fit the truths presented in the text.

If many texts are stories, rather than commands, **how can an interpreter know how a story should be applied?** Consistent patterns and positive models may indicate an author's intentions of establishing "normative, consistent behavior."[65] Fee and Stuart dismiss the normative value of narrative details since the details are often incidental or ambiguous,[66] while Witherington offers the following **three guidelines for assessing the normative value of a narrative**:[67]

1. Look for positive repeated patterns.
2. Be sure that a pattern does not change.
3. Assess whether a clear authorial approval is given for belief, behavior, experience, or practice.

Hermeneutics must be verified in the life of the interpreter.[68] If findings are not verified by present

65 Klein, Blomberg, & Hubbard, 2017, p. 350.

66 Fee & Stuart, 2003.

67 Witherington, 1998, pp. 100–101.

68 Menzies, 1987, pp. 1–14.

experience, an interpreter's hermeneutic fails. If you think that the story of the parting of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus is meant to be interpreted as saying that all people should part rivers and walk across them on dry ground, and you attempt to do so, and a river does not part for you, you may find that your interpretation fails in some important way (perhaps you left out the part where God does the action of parting the waters and not you, or the covenantal significance of parting the water in the context of Exodus and later in Joshua, which reveals God's redemptive care for his people). Does your interpretation fit with how the world seems to work? Note that experience is not the only, or even the most important, verification we have access to: we should verify our interpretation by comparing it to the intended meaning of the text as clarified by our analysis, and to the experiences and interpretations of those who have gone before us. Further, we should assess if our interpretation is incoherent or unclear (does it only make more problems of understanding than it solves?); if so, it may fail, and we may need to go back to the text for answers. Or it may be that the text itself is incoherent or unclear—if that is the case, we might conjecture about the intended meaning of the author given the confusion of the text, we might continue to study the text and other people's interpretations, or we might shrug our shoulders and give up on that

particular text. Paul encourages Timothy to study to show himself approved by God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15)—will your hermeneutics be worthy of divine approval?

Dangers of application/verification include the following: a) an interpreter might attempt to apply the text too early in the process of interpretation (for instance, we may think a story applies to our lives in a simple and direct way); b) an interpreter might never get to application of the text because they believe absolute certainty is required before an interpretation is applied; c) an interpreter might read their present lives into the text, and fail to see that the text was written to and for a specific audience of the past, and that characters in the text had their own lives that were different than ours; d) an interpreter might make an application that is too broad or too narrow so that it fails to fit the original meaning of the text. To counteract these dangers, an interpreter should pray for the Spirit to enable obedience to truth, to enlighten one's mind, and to change one's heart (this prayer is important before, during, and after interpretation). If good works are to come from interpreting texts such as scripture (that is what true application will bring about), this will only come as Jesus works in and through the believer. Regarding certainty, if a text seems to say something in context, you are justified to believe and

act on that, so long as you have no other better reasons to doubt your interpretation. You are responsible for what you know—belief includes action—though this is not an argument for allowing ignorance of texts in order to be less responsible for application. If you are lazy, and you know you are lazy, you are responsible both for your laziness and your knowledge that laziness is wrong. Do not misuse the sword in your hand, and do not leave it in its scabbard—both leave you unable to face the enemy.

On Meaning & Significance

What is Meaning?

Meaning is important; meaning is central. Are there multiple meanings in a text? Is there meaning in the words, in a group of words, in the entire text, in the relationships among the words in a text, in the text's relationships to other texts?[69] **Who provides the meaning of a text?** The author? The text? The reader? Are we mothers of meaning, or midwifes and guardians? Is there a boundary of meaning for every text: are there things that a text does not mean, and can we find this out? **Meanings of "meaning" include**:[70]

1. The referent
2. The sense
3. The author's intention

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69 See Vanhoozer (1998), Cotterell and Turner (1989), and the introduction of VanGemeren (1997).

70 See Kaiser and Silva (2007, pp. 28–46).

4. The significance of a text
5. The value of a text
6. What a text entails

The Referent

A message only has meaning if it has a referent, and its meaning is the stuff that it refers to. A referent is the subject(s), object(s), action(s), relationship(s), event(s), state(s) of being, or qualities to which a word or phrase refers. For the message "The car sped down the hill," the referents are the car (object), the speeding (action), the downward motion (relationship), and the hill (object), as well as the events described and the relationships involved.

A noun such as "rose" might refer to a specific rose, but if the writing is fictional, metaphorical, or counterfactual, to what does "rose" refer? There is no physical rose being referred to, so what would "rose" mean? We might say "The image or thought of a rose in the author's mind is the referent," but when I say "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," I may not be thinking of an image, and have no specific rose in mind, only the idea of "rose-ness" instantiated counter to facts (such that its name is "Harry" perhaps, instead of "rose"—I've always thought Harry would be a lovely name for roses). We might at least say that "rose" refers to a concept or idea, which would be to say that "rose", in this instance, means (refers to) a specific concept or

idea. But who determines what each word or message refers to? Is it the referrer (the one making the message) that decides what a message means, or is it the text itself, or the reader?

The Sense

The senses of a word are its range of meanings.[71] You might use the word "hot" to mean:

- Overly warm: "The night was hot,"
- Beautiful: "___ (insert person's name here) is hot,"
- Sexy: "___ (insert person's name here) is hot" with a different look in your eyes,
- Stolen: "The car was hot,"
- Lucky: "I'll roll again.… I'm hot tonight!"
- Spicy: "That was a really hot pepper,"
- High-selling or greatly desired: "That's a real hot item in my store," or
- Part of a meat by-product's name: "Good hot dogs,"

and these senses might overlap in meaning. **The sense is the meaning of a word in context.** When you use a word, you don't usually mean every possible sense of that word—imagine saying: "That pan is really hot," and meaning: "That pan is a really warm beautiful sexy

71 For excellent discussions of sense, see Austin (1962) and Frege (n.d.).

stolen lucky spicy high-selling part of a meat by-product's name." Because many words have multiple senses, we must know *which* sense was intended if we are to understand meaning. Each sense is a possible meaning, but when we use a word, we don't always use it with all possible meanings.

The Author's Intention

The meaning is what the author meant to say with their message, whether this is in the text or not. What does the written message "I like ice cream" mean? Normally it means that the author likes ice cream, but if the author intended to say "pickles" instead of ice cream—for instance, if they chose the wrong words because they were looking at a vat of ice cream—the message means "I like pickles," regardless of the words used. But how do we know what an author intends with their message if they are dead or unavailable to the reader for answering questions about the text? How do we know that their intentions are perfectly clear in their text? How many texts have you read that are perfectly clear, and in which the author's intentions are fully and completely apparent to every reader? It might be that the meaning is only in the parts of the author's intentions that are successfully embodied in the text? If a horror novel was intended to scare, but caused people to giggle with delight instead, the meaning of "horror" was not successfully embodied in the text. Or

if a part of Paul's epistle to the Romans is confusing for every reader since the time it was written, perhaps the original intent of that passage is lost to us (it wasn't successfully embodied, or at least we don't know if it was yet), so that it doesn't mean anything to us, or at least it means less than it might have, had the author written more clearly.

The Significance of a Text

Significance is the way a text is used by interpreters (what each reader makes a message mean by reusing it), the meanings associated with it by interpreters (what a text means to the reader in contrast to what it meant to the author), or even the history and importance of its interpretation (also called a text's reception history). Messages are tools that are used, and that are even sometimes used beyond their original intention, or are misused.

The Value of a Text

The value of life might be its meaning—for instance, what is the meaning of life? Perhaps whatever life is worth. Value may be intrinsic or extrinsic—good in itself or good for something. Either way, value is about purpose—things may be ends in themselves, or means to other ends. The meaning of a text would be either its existence as an end in itself ("This poem means so much to me"), or as a means to some other end ("This

last sentence must mean that she loves me"). What is the purpose for which a text was written? That is its meaning.

What a Text Entails[72]

"I'm home!" I yell as I enter the house after work each day. The short phrase normally entails that I will get a kiss and hug from my wife and daughter, and that we will eat dinner soon (now you know why I like to go home). What a text entails is not merely what will follow from someone reading it, but rather what is true of the world because of the text (if it is true). I receive an email that begins with "Dear Professor Wadholm" and this means that the author probably wants something from me. I read in 1 John that God is love, and this entails that God is not hate (a contrary disposition), so that I know this means that if I am full of hate, I am not like God.



These various meanings of meaning may be individual senses of the word "meaning," but when we are interpreting a text, which sense of meaning do we mean? **All of the aforementioned senses are dependent**

72 What a thing **entails** means what necessarily follows or the consequences of that thing.

upon the first—meaning as reference. When we interpret, we begin here, but we do not end here—the other senses may be helpful if we are to understand both the meaning of a text and what the text has been taken to mean, if we are to clear up misinterpretations and provide clear and true interpretations, if we are to go beyond what a text means linguistically to what it means for our understanding and being in the world, as we organize what we know about the world and discover entailments and construct meaning from them.

What is Significance?

E. D. Hirsch[73] argues that the significance of a text is different than its meaning—significance is what it means, not merely what it meant. Does a text mean something when it was written and then mean or signify something fundamentally different when it is read and understood? Can a text legitimately mean something it was never meant to mean?

For instance, a professor writes the words "I am going to kill you all" on the whiteboard at the beginning of a class, but the students in class understand this to be a joke. And it is. A joke. But he forgets to erase the message after class, and the person who cleans the classroom later that day discovers the message and is

73 Hirsch, 1967.

worried about the general safety of the campus. Should the cleaner be worried? All the cleaner has access to is the text itself, and not the context in which it was created, so that the original intent and the sense with which the message was given might be lost (while the meaning of the individual words was retained). Does the message legitimately mean what the cleaner takes it to mean? Is someone threatening the lives of persons on campus? Has the cleaner grasped the significance of the message, and are the significance and meaning different? How different can they be?

What does the following text mean? (Does it mean something different than what it meant?)

> *Withdrawn to the peace of this wilderness,*
> *In the company of a few learned books,*
> *I live in conversation with the dead*
> *And listen to them with my eyes.*[74]

We may read this text, and it may mean something to us, but if it means to us something contradictory to what it meant when it was written, the text itself means no such thing (even to us). Rather, we have **misinterpreted**. We misinterpret the meaning of a text to the

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74 Quevedo (1580–1645) in a sonnet on books titled 'Desde la Torre' (translated by Liliana M. Rosa, and quoted in Shökel, 1998, p. 126).

extent that our interpretation conflicts with the intent of its author. We can check our interpretation by the text itself (the very words), or by asking the author, by learning the cultural and historical background of the author and literature of the text, or by using our own reason (to show that certain things can't be meant by the text and others can, with differing levels of probability). We may need to imaginatively produce ideas about how the text might be understood, but we can validate these (and when we guess, we should expect to be wrong at least some of the time). But our interpretation must fit the original meaning in essentials, else it is a misinterpretation (though remember that what a text originally meant and what it means to me now need not be identical).

On Principles

Many scholarly Christian interpreters of scripture argue that **the original meaning of a biblical text can be used to discover principles**[75] behind and above the text—the original meaning of some or all biblical texts doesn't presently mean anything to us until we turn it into principles that we can then apply in our own

75 **Principles** are general fundamental beliefs that may form the basis of action.

lives.[76] The significance of the text, the principles, are above the historical-cultural specifics of its details. While this method is very common among modern interpreters of the Christian scriptures, I think it is mistaken and suffers from some of the same problems of the transformational approach described above. The following is not merely a discussion for Christian interpreters of scripture, however, as the method of discovering principles may at some point find its way into other fields of inquiry (this may have already taken place in part), which in my opinion would result in the weakening of general hermeneutics, adding problems to the search for meaning.

Some Problems with Principles

1. **The Bible is not that kind of book.** The individual authors of scripture don't seem to suggest that this is how their texts should be read (so we might be using the texts in ways not intended). Proverbs and other wisdom literature specify the principles to be learned, rather than requiring discovery of ultimate principles behind the texts. **The nature of the genres of scripture suggest experiential, didactic, and redemptive historical truths** to be gained from the texts in a straightforward

76 Köstenberger & Patterson, 2011; Kaiser & Silva, 2007; and in a limited manner also Osborne, 2007.

way, rather than principles for living discovered beyond and behind the texts in a non-straightforward way.

However, it might be argued that if scripture is sometimes silent about how it should be understood and applied, this does not mean it does not *imply* how it should be understood and applied (for instance, through principles). Proverbs and other wisdom literature show that God sometimes reveals himself through principles, so why can't other scripture imply principles that are similar?

Nevertheless, it seems that scripture is not silent about how it should be understood and applied. The meaning of a text is either apparent or not. If the meaning of scripture is apparent, that means we can come to know from its words and context how it should be understood and applied. If the meaning of scripture is not apparent, then we don't know how to understand or apply it, and creating principles won't help, since these are not the original meanings, which aren't apparent. Further, most interpretations that rely on transforming a text into principles are based on texts which are already clearly understood and applicable from the original readers' standpoint—the principle is deduced because the interpreters feel the original understanding or application is lacking in some respect regarding today's readers. **Not all scripture is meant to be applied as general rules for today's readers**, and none

of scripture tells us to find principles for living beyond and behind its texts (though it does call for application at times and it always discloses truth). We should only interpret texts as principles when the texts suggest that this is how they should be understood and applied. We should interpret texts as authors mean them to be interpreted, and we come to know how authors mean their texts to be interpreted by attention to their words and contexts, not by attention to our own principles.



2. Part of the reason to interpret scripture is to know God, but **theology is more about truths than principles**. Principles are general fundamental beliefs that may form the basis of action, while truths are general or not, fundamental or not, beliefs or not, and may form the basis of action or not (Jesus' death on the cross is a truth, not a principle; not eating before you go to bed is a principle, not a truth). Principles are not all true, or always true,[77] and very few truths are principles. Theology is not a list of beliefs or rules, nor ought it to

77 Even "biblical" principles are not always true when applied to all circumstances: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6) is not always true in practice. While it is true that we should train up a child, the results will not always include obedience.

be. But it ought to be all truths. Where will we find these truths if all we receive from scripture is principles?

However, it might be argued that just because we sometimes find principles in the Bible does not mean we always find principles (or only find principles), and just because theology is more about truths than principles, this does not mean it has no principles.

Nevertheless, it seems that just because you can create a theology (in part or whole) from principles, does not mean that this is right, or that it is the result of proper interpretation. Any theology that is constructed based on principles behind scripture is not based on the intentions of scriptures' authors, inasmuch as the intent of authors does not include transformation into principles. This is a shaky foundation upon which to build theology—principles not intended by authors. To the extent that a theology contains principles that are not already in scripture, it is speculative and ought not to have the force of dogma—this doesn't make it wrong, it only makes it non-authoritative. The proper end of theology is never principles, but truth.



3. **We too often ignore the original meaning when we transform the text into principles**. We no longer care what the text *meant* in the past if we only care about

applying what the text *means* in the present. A focus on principles makes the words of scripture only important in the early stages of interpretation, while our own words are potentially the only ones that are applied (if we make principles the focus of all our interpretation of scripture). If we take the commentaries that are written by modern interpreters and transform these texts into maxims or principles, the interpreters who wrote the commentaries (and who believe in principlizing) would likely find fault with our interpretation of their own texts. They ought to interpret scripture as they would have us interpret their own works—**the golden rule of hermeneutics**.

However, it might be argued that all methods of interpretation are liable to be misused. For instance, methods that lack a focus on principles miss the big picture behind many texts and fail to make scripture applicable to modern readers. It is because the original contexts are "alien" to present readers that we must transform them into universal principles. Modern commentators would rather have readers interpret their own writings through principles than through specifics if they were being read by people from a different culture or far-future point in history.

Nevertheless, it seems that the "correct" use of the principlizing method is *misinterpretation*, because it focuses on a point not actually made by the author.

Hearing and thinking about a story is sometimes a valid application if it is what the author intends the reader to do. Often the author's original intent is for specific application by their original audience, not for us to apply as if we were that same original audience. But we must understand the specifics of the text, else any application we make will only be a fitting application by accident. If the original context of a text is "alien," we should seek to understand it, not turn it into something useable by making it vague or universal (if it is not meant to be taken in a universal way). Modern commentators would not want future readers to turn their works into principles in the same way they do scripture: such principles are not meant by the authors, but go beyond the text and the intent of authors. These meanings are additional, not part of the original—they add to the meaning while subtracting from it: they add new meaning as principles, and subtract historical-cultural meaning. If someone is going to make a principle out of your message, you generally only want them to do so if the principle is already a part of the message—explicitly stated or implied—and clues are provided for its discovery.



4. **Where do we get the principles from in the first place?** Are the principles present in the text? If principles are explicitly provided in the text, we just need to read and understand them, rather than discover or formulate them beyond and above the text. If principles are implied in the text, and the author(s) intended to imply them, why do the authors not state these principles if they are the point (or at least provide the reader with clues)? How do you come to know the principles if the authors don't mention them,[78] and what evidence is sufficient to show that a principle is implied in a text—isn't a verbal cue necessary in a written text, so that a principle must be explicitly indicated in words somehow? If the principles are not in the text, do we produce the principles ourselves? Do we deduce them from the texts? If so, it might be our reason that produces the principles, and we may be listening to our own arguments instead of the text. Perhaps the Holy Spirit provides the principles? If so, these principles would be the Holy Spirit's, and not the text's (do we only apply what the Holy Spirit tells us today rather than what he told the prophets yesterday in and through the texts?). **Principles make us and our present experiences the authority for interpreting scripture.**

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78 Do Jesus' parables imply principles? They seem instead to teach truths (rather than principles) in an embodied way—these truths are mentioned in the texts.

However, it might be argued that a principle does not need to be stated, and it may be implied without clues. That is how language works: more is said than is said (else how would a literary style like satire work?), and principles may be the shape of the meaning, its general contours. Further, a principle need not even be implied in scripture. The Bible is so true, so sacred that even what authors didn't originally mean to say can be meant for us to understand and apply through principles behind and above the texts. Synthetic knowledge—knowledge that is the result of discovering a truth from other truths—is possible, so that even if we use our reason to deduce principles, we may still be listening to God (all truth is God's truth). The Holy Spirit may speak above and beyond a text, as he did in the past, and this is not an either/or proposition—we can listen to the scriptures *and* to the Holy Spirit *and* to our reason. We, or our present experiences, are not the authority for interpreting scripture; scripture is the authority, and it informs and is the basis for our constructed principles.

Nevertheless, it seems that if a principle is not stated and is not implied with clues for its discovery, it is not in the text, and is thus not biblical any more than rape or incest is biblical—in fact, it is less so, since these are explicitly stated in the text. A principle as the shape or contour of a text must have identifiable

outlines from the text itself (i.e., it should have readily identifiable clues as to this meta-meaning—even satire is not satire if we don't have these clues). We may learn truths in and from a text through reason or the Holy Spirit, but if the truths are not in the text itself they cannot be learned in and from it (they must be added to it). Scripture may inform the construction of principles, but **the principles that are constructed are our own, not scripture's** (for them to be scripture's, they must have been meant by its authors, and this meaning must be apparent). We should not speak as if our principles are true interpretations of scripture if they are not in and from scripture; if we do, we make ourselves and our present experiences the authority for interpretation. Further, if the Holy Spirit provides truths or principles when we read scripture (and these are not in the texts), we should not take these as the meanings of the text, but as God's use of the text for us; this is revelation rather than interpretation.



5. **How can boundaries be established for the process of developing biblical principles?** Beyond what point are we ignoring the meanings embodied in the texts? If we only interpret some texts through the grid of principles (instead of all texts), how do we decide

when to do this and when to interpret literally (at the so-called "surface level")?[79] For instance, perhaps Christ's death should be transformed into a principle? If historical-cultural factors are different between us and the world of the text, do we then have a right and duty to find and apply only the universal principles behind and above the historical-cultural details of the text—must we pass beyond what the text meant to say to what it means for all people of all time, as if these could be different? If so, isn't Christ's death a historical-cultural specificity, so that we should turn it into a principle too? What would happen to Christianity if it transformed all historical-cultural details in scripture into principles? The cross of Christ would become a proverb.

However, it might be argued that we may establish principles for when we should look for principles in a text, and that will help to set boundaries and keep us from making all of scripture a series of principles. Further, a principle must fit with the meaning of the text, and not merely start with it as a springboard. It could be that a fitting principle behind the cross is that death is the cost of atonement, or that redemption requires payment by blood.

Nevertheless, it seems that we should ask ourselves "Where do these principles/guidelines for looking for

79 Osborne, 2007.

principles come from?" Are they from the texts of scripture? If not, upon what basis were they created? If they are general principles of understanding texts of all kinds, why do interpreters not apply these principles to texts of other kinds? Why don't we look for principles for living beyond and behind the texts of Mother Goose rhymes? Is it because we are explicitly told by Paul that all of scripture is useful (2 Tim. 3:16), so that we must do our best to see that it is indeed useful? We do need to make sermons and Sunday school lessons, right?

Maybe scripture isn't useful in that way (as principles), but is **only useful in what the author means to say through it**. Mere fit with the meaning of a text is not enough, if by "fit" we mean "is congruent with" or "has similar characteristics": meaning must retain its essential nature to retain identity. If meaning is reference, it must essentially refer to the same things; if meaning is significance, it must essentially signify the same things; if meaning is sense, it must essentially have the same sense. Principles that fail to refer to the same things as the texts they are supposedly based upon, also fail to retain the meanings. If a text speaks of a cross that Jesus is nailed upon (for instance, in the narratives of the crucifixion), it means to tell about that physical object, and not redemption or atonement. If we are to have a principle of redemption by blood, we may need to look elsewhere if the text does not provide this

(though a passage may fulfill a principle nicely, it may not mean to be transformed into that principle, unless the text says so explicitly or provides sufficient evidence that this is the case). We may still learn truths about atonement from the cross, without requiring narrative references to a cross to be transformed into principles.



6. **Principles don't require facts for their basis, or knowledge of such facts**, truths do. If we were only looking to apply the unchanging universal principles of a text, we could draw out these principles and learn them separately from the texts, and then throw the texts away: we don't need them anymore, do we? If the very words of scripture are inspired, yet we only apply the principles, and only the principles are true for us, we no longer need the inspired words—but are the principles also inspired?[80] If we still need the texts to continue updating our principles to fit our current culture and place in history, then principles change. But if principles change, they are not ultimate or fundamental (and are thus not principles).[81] If principles don't change, we can

80 McQuilkin, 1992.

81 Osborne argues that "A plenary-verbal, inerrantist approach to contextualization accepts the supracultural nature of all biblical truth and thereby the unchanging nature of these

throw away what changes in the text (the specifics of scripture) and listen only to the principles.

However, it might be argued that principles are based on specific applications in the text; the facts in the text are helpful for interpreters because they show how the principles were applied in specific contexts. Even if we don't apply the principles in the same way as in the text, the original applications are important as examples. The principles, if they are biblical, are inspired. We do not ever need to update our principles, only the applications.

Nevertheless, it seems that to be biblical, a principle must be intended by the author of scripture—it must be the Bible's principle, and not ours, or we are merely *using* the text instead of interpreting it. Using

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scriptural principles" (2007, p. 411). Osborne's statement moves from the words being true to the words being transcended by a supracultural nature as principles (instead of as words). This is functionally equivalent to saying "Scripture is principally true for modern readers" while the words themselves are paid lip-service—the words are only true as specific past applications of the principles. Only the principles are applied from scripture, because they are somehow beyond and above the words, beyond time and change, beyond culture. The principles seem to have replaced the words as divine revelation—we don't need an inerrantist position, one that allows for no errors in the words of scripture, because the words are apparently not the point of scripture: the principles are the point, the real meaning that never changes, and that never will be in error.

a text for purposes other than intended is not wrong (in fact, it is how languages and cultures develop), but neither is it interpretation. We are no longer trying to understand a text, but to do things with it. Principles are not based on specific applications in the text—they are superimposed on them. It is now only the principles that we hear, rather than the authors (or if we hear the authors at all, we only hear them in light of the principles). When I tell my child to do her homework, I don't mean for it to be a specific application of a universal principle. You could transform my words into a principle (such as "Listen to your parents"), and the principle might be true, but my words do not mean the principle, and you don't require my words as an example of the principle: my words can be thrown out without much loss. If you hear "Listen to your parents" when I say "take out the trash" you are not listening to me, but organizing facts about the world by reference to a principle, a principle I do not mean to communicate. I might have told my child to listen to her parents, but that does not communicate what I want—I want her to know what she is to do. While listening to my command may help you to know what my principles are (or the truths by which I live), if you are not listening to my actual words, you are not listening to my message. Should we listen to the messages of scripture, or to extra-biblical principles? Did God inspire what was

written, or did he inspire unchanging principles that are beyond culture and that were not written? If the latter, why did he inspire something that no one said?



7. **A hermeneutic focused on principles is insufficient**. If we used the development of principles as a general hermeneutic in all areas of inquiry, we would end up with anorexic history, sciences, arts, philosophy, etc.; the details are important in every field of work and inquiry. On the other hand, if we only transform scripture into principles and not these other kinds of texts and data, we treat scriptural texts as less important and meaningful in the details than these. We only turn scripture into proverbs—other texts we allow to speak for themselves.

However, it might be argued that just because principles are not sufficient, this does not mean that this kind of hermeneutical method is not necessary, and perhaps other fields would be richer if their texts were also transformed into principles.

Nevertheless, it seems that principlizing is not necessary (see the next paragraph). Other fields would not be made richer by transforming details into principles, but poorer. Theory building and organization of knowledge is different than developing principles:

with the former, the end is a fuller, more holistic picture of the world, while with the latter the end is a list of proverbs and general rules for living. Imagine a modern account of Julius Caesar in which every historical-cultural detail is transformed into principles for living, where his colorful life is quarried only for what it means for us instead of what it meant: could history as a field of study carry on with such a weak and reader-centric approach?[82] Yes, but to its own harm. The power and persuasion is in the details. Instead of applying transformation into principles to all fields, perhaps we should apply it to none?



82 Plutarch's *Greek & Roman Lives* draws out moral truths from the lives and facts surrounding important historical figures, and, indeed, much ancient and classical history does likewise—we can and should learn from history, and it should help to inform us about goodness and value. But Plutarch and others attempt to draw truths (even moral truths) from history, not to interpret historical accounts in a principlizing way. For instance, they do not read a previous historical account and deduce supra-cultural principles from it, then apply those principles. Instead, they look at the historical-cultural details, determine which stories and themes to frame, and then write accounts that weave moral truths through them. Plutarch would likely balk at a modern interpreter who attempted to principlize his *Lives*—any principles are already explicit in the text. The same might be said of scripture.

8. **Principlizing is not necessary.** It is not a universal human method of interpretation, and God did not reveal to humans that we should transform texts into principles, nor did he example transformation to principles as a proper method of understanding his revelation.[83] What would make us think that principlizing is a principal means of understanding and applying meanings?

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83 An argument might be made that Jesus' reinterpretation of the Law in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is just such a method, that is, one that transforms texts into principles. However, Jesus is not turning individual laws into principles and then applying those principles; instead, he often applies those same specific laws (not mere principles) more thoroughly and holistically to show that the righteousness of those accepted as law-keepers (the Pharisees and teachers of the law) is not enough to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). Again, one might argue that Paul's words in 1 Cor. 9:8–10 quoting and applying Deut. 25:4 "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" is an interpretation and application of scripture through principles. However, the context from Deuteronomy seems clearly to be speaking of humans through the form of metaphor (the commands before and after are about treatment of humans, not animals). Paul recognizes this in the original context, and draws on the original meaning of the OT quote *in context*, rather than merely the meaning inherent in its words (outside of context). Paul is reading *in context* and applying that—he is not formulating or finding a universal principle in the text and then applying this principle to his contemporary audience.

However, it might be argued that we don't require a divine command or example—transformation into principles is necessary due to the nature of scriptures. Scriptures are written by and to humans who are alien to modern interpreters (alien in culture and history), yet we must apply the texts if we are to be one with the original communities of scripture. We must apply the principles, because the specifics no longer apply. Further, the hermeneutical method presented in this book was not given or exampled by God,[84] so why is it necessary?

Nevertheless, it seems that if transformation into principles were necessary to understand and apply scripture, why would the authors of scripture (and God) not enlighten us to this fact, and/or why wouldn't it be a common human means of interpretation? If he didn't reveal it, and the method is not assumed of all humans, how do we know it? It seems to me like we made it up because we felt like we needed to apply scripture to our own lives, but there were passages with contexts that were too "alien" to us. All scripture is useful, so how can we use those passages? The hermeneutical method I have outlined in this book is meant to make explicit what humans naturally do when properly interpreting texts—it is meant to be a common-sense hermeneutic,

84 There was no Sinai revelation of a holistic hermeneutic, as much as I hoped there would be.

a method that has been illustrated by humans and God in their interpretations throughout history (we think about pre-understandings, analyze contexts, organize information, and apply and verify interpretations). The method presented here is meant to mirror what occurs in the universal and complex process of interpretation (see the first chapter) which includes application. The reason why some of the specifics of scripture no longer apply is because the texts were not written to or about you (so why are you trying to apply what was never intended to be applied to you?).[85] God spoke to and through people in the past, and he still speaks to and through people; he also speaks to people through scripture, but if he's not the one speaking (in the past or present), or if you are not the one he is speaking to, he's not the one speaking or you are not the one he is speaking to. Apply what was meant to be applied to you—what was intended and spoken—and know what was meant to be known by you. You can know beyond the texts, but you should recognize that your knowledge is not from the texts but is rather beyond them (i.e., not in them—your knowledge is not biblical).



85 I know this will be hard to hear, but all of history is not for you specifically.

9. It may be asking too much to expect a text to have a principle behind it that **coheres with every other principle** from every other text given that scriptures' authors don't intend to write principles, let alone systems of principles. Principles are not the acknowledged original meanings of the texts, so why must they be coherent with each other?

However, it might be argued that truth requires coherence (the law of non-contradiction), so that if there are biblical principles, they are coherent (they don't contradict each other).

Nevertheless, it seems that the authors didn't intend the truths of principles in their texts, so "biblical" principles could be true or false, contradictory or coherent—they aren't part of scripture, so it's not necessary that they be perfect. Although principles must be coherent to be true, they might not all be true. There might be principles above and beyond the text that are false, or that contradict other principles. If truth is correspondence with reality, and principlizing does not correspond with reality (that is, it does not correspond with what the authors meant), then the principles may or may not be true.[86] Further, principles are meant to be true generally, and not in every specific set of circumstances—this may be why we find such diverse proverbs as "Correct the fool … " and "Do not correct

86 But who would want false biblical principles?

the fool … "; each are generally true, yet together they seem incoherent (they do not make a closely coherent system, as they are contradictory). So-called "biblical" principles might similarly seem incoherent (especially because they are not actually biblical, but are superimposed on biblical texts).

The Meanings of Scripture: Inspired & Useful

Are the meanings in Christian scripture fundamentally different than meanings in all other sacred and non-sacred texts? Paul wrote that **all scripture is inspired and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness** (2 Tim. 3:16).[87] How can all scripture be useful in these ways if we do not turn it into principles first? How does scripture lead us toward righteousness and thoroughly equip us for every good work (vv. 16–17) if it sometimes depicts rape, murder, jealousy, lust, systematic annihilation of races, idolatry and lying, as well as cultural-historical details specific to its audiences but not congruent with our own contexts (for instance, think of women and head-coverings)? Is the usefulness of scripture a function of its meaning,

87 For more on inspiration, canonicity, inerrancy, and the composition of sacred texts, see Bruce (1960), Carson (1984), Carson and Woodbridge (1986), Porter and Pitts (2015), Sterling (1992), and Toorn (2007).

and is that meaning the meaning of the authors, or are Paul's words in 2 Timothy meant to be taken as pointing to universal meanings—principles? Is the value of scripture only in its usefulness, what we can do with it and what it can do for us? Instead, perhaps scripture has intrinsic value (it exists as God-breathed), and from this intrinsic value issues forth benefits upon those who believe (and this too is valuable)?

Knowledge of scripture makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). Does this wisdom come through knowledge of its principles, or does it come through knowledge of the texts themselves? Is the wisdom for salvation through obedience to a principle we have derived from the text, or is it by knowledge of and belief in specific historical-cultural references to a person (Jesus) in the texts? Inspiration and usefulness are related: the scriptures are God-breathed, and they are useful to us, in that their words and the ideas that they convey in context reveal the person and works of God. It is by knowledge of and faith in this person that we are saved; scripture is useful in bringing us to God's specific acts and words—revelation within history and culture—to make us to be like God, "fully equipped for every good work" (v. 17). God breaths goodness into us by his Spirit through Christ, made known in scripture, by faith in what we come to know in the texts, that is, through the meanings of scripture.

Scripture *means* what it *meant*. Inasmuch as we know what scripture meant, we come into contact with something that is able to make us wise for salvation, to transform us into the good; scripture is not in need of being transformed itself into principles (or allegories, or spiritual insights, or moral lessons).

Are principles the devil? No, but they seem to wear his clothes. Principles speak as if they were God, when they are mere creation; they look like divine and biblical authority for our lives, but they are not revealed, and they are not God for us. As rules, they are like the law, but principles are no covenant between God and man, they are no divine message, no mediation or mediator, no blood-soaked binding of the two, no examples of the specifics of holiness. They seem to offer direction for the community, words for today, easy to swallow pills that taste like sugar—they are. Look elsewhere for the Word of God, look elsewhere for salvation, look elsewhere for enlightenment from God, look elsewhere for understanding and application. But can we not learn from these principles? Yes. Are principles the point of scripture, its meaning for us? No.

But what would we do without biblical principles? We might listen to scripture itself. We might have God as our authority, Christ our savior, the Spirit who empowers and comforts. The scriptures are not God, nor are they identical with the Word of God—the word of

God is the story of revelation and its message, while the Word of God is the person of Christ. Scripture reveals, but Christ alone is the exact image of the Godhead bodily—it is to Jesus we owe our allegiance. He is our Lord, not the Bible, not principles, not Christian leaders or communities or theology books or sermons or doctrines (beliefs). We may come to know him through these, but these are not him.

Texts mean what they meant. Texts may yet mean beyond this, as we will discuss in a later chapter on prophecy, and they may be given new meaning or used to mean what they do not—such use does not constitute abuse, until and unless the user of a text intimates that their use is not merely use but is understanding. Meaning refers, and if it fails to refer, it fails to be meaning, though the word "meaning" may be used also to refer to a sense, an intention, significance, value, or entailment. A message must first refer, must essentially fit the thoughts, the meanings, of its creator, else it fails to have meaning—a message's meaning is that of its author. An interpretation must likewise refer to the message, the purpose, and the thoughts of a message's author, else it too fails. **Principles and improper use of "significance" breaks references**, and thus fails to count as good interpretation. We must listen to what *was* said and meant, not what *we* said or meant.

Part Two:

How?

On Presuppositions

What are presuppositions? Presuppositions are a person's thoughts, beliefs, feelings, experiences, views of the world, state of mind, and historical-cultural contexts that affect how that person may read or understand a message.[88] A presupposition is what may be **supposed before** exposure to new data and information. While presuppositions are the starting point of interpretation and may cause a person to understand a text in a specific way (or to compose a text in a certain way), presuppositions are not ultimately determinative of meaning—**people may think and act contrary to their presuppositions** as a result of **choice**, **chance** (for instance, miscommunications and mistakes), or **changes** in presuppositions. For instance, I may choose to be sympathetic despite presuppositions to the contrary; I may misread a message, or there may

88 For an example of the dangers of presuppositions in Christian—particularly Pentecostal—interpretations of the Bible, see Wadholm (2014).

be noise or corruption in the material embodiment of the message—a page might be ruined with coffee—and this may result in understandings not in accordance with my presuppositions; or I may have presuppositions that change while interpreting a text, making my original presuppositions imperfect guides to my thoughts and actions. Presuppositions have great weight in our thoughts and actions, to be sure, but a choice, a chance, a change may allow a person to think and act in ways we could not suppose likely beforehand, making interpretation unpredictable. People are not programed machines.[89]

One of the most important presuppositions of a person doing hermeneutics is the belief that "**This text means something**" (i.e., it is a message)—without at least this presupposition, interpretation never takes place. **Other necessary hermeneutical presuppositions include**:

- Beliefs such as: "I can understand this message" and perhaps unacknowledged beliefs like: "There is some purpose to reading this message," "There is truth," "There is something more than my mind,"

89 Though even programmed machines are unpredictable at times.

"I exist," "I am valuable," "There are other people with these same beliefs";

- A state of mind that is conscious and attentive;
- Historical-cultural contexts such as literary and linguistic competence, familiarity with objects and actions in the text (or objects and actions of the same kinds as those in the text), and self-existence (you need to exist in history and culture if you are to interpret);
- Experiences such as having understood a message before, having sensed the existence of the present message, and having created a message at some point;
- Thoughts that are silent enough to allow for other thoughts (those of the message) and that are toward a message (to allow for interaction with it and processing of the information);
- Views of the world that allow for what might be characterized as assent to the following: "Existence is possible," "Thinking is possible," "The world is possible," "Messages are possible," and "It is possible that this message is in the world".

In addition to specific presuppositions, the tone of a presuppositional approach to a text might be

characterized as suspicious or charitable.[90] **A hermeneutic of suspicion** treats a text as guilty before it is proven innocent—the text is not what it claims to be, it is false in some fundamental way, it is flawed in form or content, it is primitive or backward. Suspicion in hermeneutics often presupposes that:

- Later humans are better, smarter, more civilized, and more enlightened than earlier humans (i.e., progression of humanity)—"later" is not merely related to time but refers to the level of progress;
- Texts that are alien to an interpreter are also therefore defective (and/or primitive);
- The value of a text is archaeological—it shows what humans thought at a point in history and culture.

A charitable hermeneutic, in contrast, is one that seeks to be sympathetic with the message and author of a text—a message is innocent until proven guilty. A text is what it claims to be, it is true in some fundamental way, it is good in form or content, its message transcends its own historical-cultural context; that is,

90 These are the not the only ways of approaching a text, but both have been discussed frequently in the history of interpretation. Other ways of approaching a text might include: hopeful, despising, mocking, cautious, or accepting.

unless there is greater evidence to the contrary. Charity in hermeneutics often presupposes that:

- Humans act humanly when they sympathize—a human interpreter should give an author and text the benefit of the doubt;
- An interpreter does not have to agree with a text for the text to be valuable;
- There is a moral responsibility in interpretation—I must first seek to understand a text as it is, before I can speak about it or critique it. I may misunderstand a text, but I should never do so knowingly and willingly.

One danger with presuppositions is that we may end up finding in a text only what we thought we might find, only what we brought to the text ourselves, only our own beliefs, thoughts, experiences, feelings and views of the world. Our perceptions of the text might be altered or distorted by our previous conceptions; we might fail to listen to the message at all. Reading on a full mind might be like eating on a full stomach: not much new goes in (and we don't want to mind-vomit). How can we be sure that we are not merely reading ourselves into the text? We might ask: "How have my presuppositions changed as a result of reading and

studying the text?" But we might be merely solidifying our own presuppositions, and this would still count as "change".

Grant Osborne argues for what he calls a **hermeneutical spiral**, a change of *direction* in the presuppositions of the interpreter which comes closer to the presuppositions of the author of a message as interpretation continues.[91] This change in direction does not necessarily entail time travel, immigration, or mind transplant, but it does involve sympathetic time travel, understanding-immigration, and re-minding; an interpreter should try to put themselves in the author's shoes, try to see and think and feel through the original audience's perspective, attempt to relive the communication event in its time and place by becoming acquainted with the presuppositions of the author of the text. This process of sympathetic listening requires an interpreter to set their own presuppositions aside in their mind:[92] to identify and understand their own selves and to invite

91 Osborne, 2007.

92 In phenomenological hermeneutics, this is called **bracketing**; an interpreter first brackets their own presuppositions and gets them out into the open, before moving on to interpret the thoughts of another person. This can be thought of as a kind of bias transparency or a notice of self-disclosure, and may be helpful not only to the interpreter but also to anyone who encounters their interpretations.

the selves of others, to hear the other as they would want to be heard themselves. This does not require an interpreter to ignore the truths of their own presuppositions, but it does require them to acknowledge that the presuppositions of others (including the author) are not identical to their own and deserve a listening and open mind.

To identify and analyze your presuppositions:

1. Read the text—this will give you a starting point to discover which of your own presuppositions you might need to identify and make explicit (i.e., write down);
2. Identify your presuppositions: what are the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, experiences, views of the world, state of mind, and historical-cultural contexts that affect how you read or understand the text?
    a. Sometimes a good clue for finding presuppositions that are different than your own in a text is to reflect on the following question: "What parts of the text make me feel weird or confused?"
    b. Think about the author when you read: what is their history and culture like? How is that different than yours?

   c. Think about the original audience when you read: what is their history and culture like? How is that different than yours?
   d. Think about the message when you read: is it expressed in a familiar way? Are the conclusions or ideas in the text strange to you?
   e. Do you have to "transform" a text to understand it—must you change what it means for it to be useful?
   f. Make notes on any key thoughts you have, and write a very short summary about how your presuppositions differ from those of the original author and audience.
3. Continue to read and study the text (explication and exegesis, organization and application/verification), and reflect on presuppositions as a common practice;
4. Note changes in your presuppositions as you read and study the text, especially changes in direction (for instance, believing something different rather than believing the same thing to a greater or lesser degree);
5. Reflect on how you have been transformed from your interpretation of the text, summarizing your own key thoughts, beliefs, feelings, experiences, views of the world, state of mind, and understandings of historical-cultural contexts that have changed.

On Explication: Questions for Textual & Literary Analysis

What is literature? Are all texts literature? All written text that is meaningful is a message, but literature is not a mere message: **it is a form of message that embodies meaning in heightened language and structure—literature is art**. Types of literature include stories, poetry, wisdom literature (proverbs, philosophy, theology), prophecy, and letters. Types of non-literary texts include scientific reports, research papers, most legal writing, most journalism, notes, transcripts of non-artistic speech events such as conversations or interviews, commentaries, most modern history, most non-fiction, and digital-first messages in the form of emails, text-messages, and posts. What is the difference between literature and non-literature? Something like a text message on a phone, while it may be non-normal written language, may not yet count as literature, though

a haiku[93] could be transmitted via text message, and would count as literature because of its **heightened (special) structure and language use**—normal day-to-day language and message structure are subverted, transformed or transcended in literature.

Part of understanding any message is the **formulation of good questions**. You may have heard the phrases "reading for understanding," "reflective reading," and "critical reading skills"; these phrases refer to a specific kind of reading—one that is useful because it is purposeful, and this demands not only attention, but also inquisitiveness (this kind of reading is like the nerd in the front of the class who keeps raising their hand—and who subsequently learns more). What we are talking about is the *right kind* of inquisitiveness, the kind that looks for answers, the kind that understands which questions are appropriate and at what times.

Where do we learn these questions? Often by reading, for in reading we begin to understand what is important, what is common, what is expected of a reader. For instance, when we read mystery novels, we discover that we should ask the questions "Who done it? Why? With what? Why is that character so fishy? What clues are provided, and which are false-leads?" We may also learn by writing—we may think of writing

93 A **Haiku** is a Japanese poem in three lines of varying syllable length (5, 7, and 5) typically on the subject of nature.

as (in part) the asking and answering of questions in written form. We want to answer the question: "What is going on?" and to have the reader ask and answer questions such as: "What comes next? Why? What does this mean for me?" but not: "Why is this so boring?"

Questions must fit the writing because writing is always of a specific kind (such as a novel, a commentary, a history, a note on the back of my hand reminding me to buy milk at the grocery store), and every kind of writing has implicit[94] rules or forms (for instance, the note must fit on my hand and not cover my entire arm with ink). To understand a text, you must understand the rules and forms of the kind of writing it is—you should make these explicit.[95] If you know what kind of writing a text is, you are (implicitly) familiar with what questions fit that kind of writing, but you should make these questions clear: state the questions that are appropriate for that type of text, and try to answer them (with words) from details in the text. If you are not familiar with a kind of writing—for instance, apocalyptic literature—you need to start (and continue) reading lots of different texts that are of that kind.

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94 **Implicit** means something is implied, that is, not expressly or plainly stated.

95 **Explicit** means to state with words, to bring something into the open and clear by talking about it—to **explicate** is to make something explicit.

This will help you discover the rules and forms of that kind of writing—what makes that writing special, and what is important. In the upcoming chapters I have outlined a brief and incomplete array of kinds of texts (mostly literary genres) and some **starter questions**: to analyze your own texts, you will need to read that kind of literature yourself and come up with what you think are appropriate questions for your specific text based on its text type.[96]

Note: *You don't need to read every list of questions in this and the following chapters.* Instead, skim them, and when you are analyzing an actual text, find the questions for that kind of text in these chapters,[97] and use these questions as starting points for your own work.

To begin, we should ask the following simple questions about all kinds of messages, literary and nonliterary alike.

Questions for All Messages:

1. What am I reading?
2. What kind of writing is this (what is the form, the rules of the form, and the style)?

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96 For examples of literary analyses of biblical texts with varying genres, see Robert Wadholm (2005a).

97 If the type of text you are analyzing is not listed in the next several chapters, I'm sorry for this—ask, and I'll try to include it in a future version of this book.

3. Who wrote it, where, when, why, and to whom?
4. What is most important (what words, phrases and ideas are repeated, compared, contrasted, and why; what is highlighted or emphasized)?
5. How does this message relate to other messages? How does it relate to all that I know about the world?
6. What am I supposed to do with this message?
7. What are the rules or normal features of this kind of writing (i.e., progression, purpose, limits of time or space, importance of facts, etc.), and how can knowing these help me to understand messages in this form?

Many literary (or biblical) scholars and students ignore non-literary hermeneutics because they have no background in those fields or wish to remain in their isolated groups of interpreters (we too often put our blinders on when we are plowing our fields, but the blinders are for the horses, not the farmers!). Hermeneutical methods are used widely in the social sciences, the arts, the humanities, the physical sciences, philosophy, law, etc. Hermeneutics is a general method for interpreting texts, and is not merely for sermons, not for literary critique only. **Important non-literary texts that undergo formal hermeneutical analyses** (and questions for each kind of writing) include the following.

Questions for Scientific Reports

1. What is the problem?
2. What are the research questions and purpose of the study?
3. What is the gap in our current understanding or practice?
4. What are the findings and theories of related texts?
5. What kinds of quantitative or qualitative methods are used?
6. Do the methods fit the problem, and are the results generalizable?
7. What are the guidelines for using the methods, and are these followed?
8. How is the data analyzed?
9. What are the findings, and is there sufficient evidence to support the claims of the author(s)?
10. What theories/hypotheses are tested, used or created?
11. What are the limitations?

Questions for Transcripts of Interviews

1. What themes and concepts are identified by the interviewee?
2. How are the answers related to the questions (the wording, the bias, etc.)?
3. What common themes, words and concepts occur across multiple interviews?

4. How formal is the interview, and what kind of structure does it follow?

Questions for Legal Writings

1. What is the origin, history and appropriation of a law?
2. How does the law function? What is its purpose?
3. What are comparable laws in other contexts?
4. How does a specific law or decision relate to other laws, decisions and the general constitution of a state?
5. Are important words defined explicitly?
6. Is there any intentional vagueness or specificity?

Questions for Historical Accounts or Analyses

1. What are the motivations of actions?
2. Is there sufficient evidence for knowledge of an event or character?
3. How are differences in accounts of an event resolved?
4. What overarching theory dominates?
5. Is there any blaming or praising language, and what is its function?
6. Is this explanatory, descriptive, persuasive, critical?
7. Is it narrative, dialogue, monologue? (Who is speaking?)

Questions for Theoretical Works

This includes books and articles on physical and social sciences, philosophy, theology, arts and humanities.

1. Is this a new theory or old?
2. Is this work constructive (building theory), deconstructive (tearing apart a theory), analytic (problematizing, identifying and filling a gap in theory), synthetic (piecing theories together), framing (clearing and/or laying the groundwork for a theory), summative (simplifying), expansive (exploring a theory further), restorative (reviving a theory), explicative (making an implicit theory explicit), practical?
3. Who are the major conversation partners (i.e., whose works do the author quote or allude to)?
4. How are the theoretical parts related to the practical?
5. What examples (and kinds of examples) are used to illustrate concepts and why?
6. Is the writing positive or negative (are concepts defined by disagreement or by assertion and explanation)?
7. Which are most important in the writing; ideas, people, popular opinion/agreement, facts, feelings, truth, logic, space devoted to a topic?

Questions for Digital Posts

Note that computational analyses are possible with digital texts, allowing computer programs to inform interpreters about large sets of information.

1. What do people think about _____?
2. Are positive or negative words used more?
3. What words or phrases are used most often, and in what contexts?
4. Are there patterns of writing on specific topics, in quantity, quality, length, with reference to time variables, etc.? (Digital posts have been used to predict the outcomes of elections, up or downward swings in the stock market, television show ratings, moral opinions, and social activities.)
5. What cultural references are made, and why?
6. Is the text related to any non-textual information (pictures, videos, audio)?

Literature often contains non-literary writing within its bounds, so that we sometimes find legal codes in stories, theory in poetry, and parts of scientific reports in novels (and vice versa). Sometimes the literary form impinges upon the non-literary, so that normal rules of a kind of writing are transformed or elevated by its inclusion in literature. In these cases, literary and non-literary questions are both appropriate.

Questions for Literature[98]

1. What genre does this piece of writing fit into?
2. Does this literature use any archetypes,[99] and if it does, what is the significance?
3. If there are vivid details in the literature, what do they bring to the passage?
4. How does this passage speak about universal human experience?
5. What literary forms does the text use to convey meaning?
6. What values are embodied?
7. In what ways does this move me (what do I feel, and why)?

What are the major genres of literature, and what questions are appropriate for each? The next several chapters are brief introductions to various literary genres with lists of questions for each, beginning with perhaps the world's favorite and most universal literary genre: the story.

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98 Ryken, 1984. See also Frye (1965), Longman (1985; 1993), Harrison, Walke, Guthrie, and Fee (1978), and Fee and Stuart (2003).

99 **Archetypes** are character types, situations, or symbols that recur across literature.

On Story

Why do we love stories? Why do we need them? **Stories are important to all people of all times and places**: they seem to be a necessary part of how we come to know the world and our place in it, what is valuable, what is true, and what is possible. Stories do this by creating a simulated environment in which the reader or hearer lives vicariously through the characters, and by structuring the world and narrative in such a way as to **embody values, truths, and possibilities in descriptions of persons, objects, events, words, and actions**. Leland Ryken observes that "storytellers embody their point of view in their selectivity and arrangement of details."[100] Stories are examples of realities, good or bad.

Stories can be told in many ways. The **four modes of storytelling/narration** are:[101]

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100 Ryken, 1992, p. 85.

101 Ryken, 1992, p. 43.

1. Direct narrative (the author tells what happened in his/her own voice)
2. Dramatic narrative (dialogues and speeches)
3. Description (details of setting or character)
4. Commentary

How do we know what a story means and what a storyteller wants us to learn?

- **Authorial assertion** (the writer tells us something, rather than merely showing us)
- **Normative spokespersons** (characters give the meaning or sum up the plot)
- **Implied authorial viewpoint** (the author implies what they want us to learn based on their viewpoint of the story)
- **Selectivity and arrangement** (the author tells us what is important by including only what is useful for their purposes and by what is first or last or repeated or highlighted in some way by the arrangement of the text)[102]

How do stories work? What are the parts of a story, and how do they relate to values, truths and possibilities? **Three basic ingredients of a story** are:

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102 Ryken, 1984, pp. 62–63.

1. **Setting**: Three types of story settings are physical, temporal,[103] and cultural.[104]
2. **Characters**: Characters in a story may be sympathetic or unsympathetic, and they may be normative characters that embody "the standards, values, or norms that the story is offering for our approval." When a character in a story gives a summary of the story's meaning, they are a normative spokesperson.[105]
3. **Plot**: Five parts of a story are exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement (see below for details).

How does a plot convey meaning?[106]

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103 **Temporal** means having to do with time.

104 Ryken, 1992, p. 62.

105 Ryken, 1992, pp. 72, 85.

106 The following analysis of story plots is dependent upon an unpublished essay by Grace Wadholm, 2017—material from this essay has been directly incorporated into the present text without the use of quotations or citations.

Exposition: Introducing the World

A story begins by introducing either the world of the story or the protagonist, or both at once. The introduction shows the essence of this world, the values and truths that fundamentally shape the lives of the characters who live in it and that will shape the course of this story journey (the physical, temporal, and cultural settings). The author provides examples of the relationship between the protagonist[107] and the larger world, the tensions and demands that will determine the protagonist's **desires**, **objectives** that will meet those desires, and **actions** and **reactions** to the obstacles that will come between them and achieving that objective. The audience should pinpoint the center of good in this world—what **values** the story action will pivot around. We compare our own values to this perceived center of good to position ourselves in relation to the choices and actions of the characters. This means that we need to understand what those values are, or we will not understand the story or how to apply what we learn.

The exposition introduces the **protagonist**. The first clear indication of the protagonist comes when we see the central desire or objective of the story expressed by a

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107 A **protagonist** is often the sympathetic character of the story, the leading character or hero, typically the one with whom we should identify.

character or to a character (sometimes a story will force a character to begin to recognize what they need but are afraid to pursue). The protagonist's characterizations are set out, showing the traits, habits, life situations, and choices up to this point; behavior, physical aspects, etc. that will affect choices, though there is much to learn about the inner life of this character. These first impressions will be contrasted and challenged by the events of the story journey. The audience should identify the protagonist as the character to attach our loyalty to, to empathize with and to evaluate the choices made against what we would do in this same world. Our empathy journey through the storyline carries with it an expectation that we will watch the protagonist express desire, identify the objective to fulfill that desire, encounter obstacles, take big risks, encounter strong opposition that drives them to a low point, and then gather the strength to overcome; and to weigh that against our own desires, weaknesses, and dreams of overcoming. Things shown in this first glimpse of the world may come back later in the crisis/climax (these are called **setups**) to give the protagonist a chance to react in a starkly different way, clearly illustrating the change made in the story.

The **central characters** are also shown, in relation to one another, to the world, and particularly in relation to the protagonist and his objective. Glimpses of the

interrelated lives and settings of the protagonist and central characters should raise more questions than they answer.

The **risks** may begin to be introduced, but the fundamental things in this first section are why the objective is so important in the life of the character, and how his life is lacking without it, and maybe a glimpse of how wonderful life would be with it. As we have already identified the center of good, we should see how the values in the life of this protagonist are not within that center. We should have glimpses of the weaknesses in the character that are obstacles to his objective. We may also have a glimpse of an external antagonist, but the full power of that is only hinted at so far (leaving room for surprises and revelations).

The important plot point here is the **inciting incident**.[108] We are shown the reasons behind the objective that is at the center of the story, so we can understand it and have full empathy for it. Even if the protagonist does not himself want to admit his desires, we can fully recognize the reasons why this need is important to meet. Whether or not the character wants to meet that need, the objective must be made clear, so that we can fully buy in to the story. Regardless, as the story

108 An **inciting incident** is a complicating event, problem or decision that starts the story—everything before this is the backstory.

moves forward, the protagonist will be pushed by life to meet the need. This desire may come in the form of a **call** toward something, a call that disrupts the flow of life and makes the protagonist choose to desire to meet that call.

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Rising Action

Once the objective is made clear, the story makes a move. Though the protagonist may already be in a new situation, they must be fully committed to seeing this through. Some **inner or external journey** must take place to get the protagonist from a recognition of the objective to a place where the world (and he within the world) is fully positioned for that need to be met. This journey serves the story by allowing the final pieces of the world to be fully put into place before the main journey begins.

Final key characters are introduced, ones that are vital to the character's chances of meeting the need, and who in fact may *be* the thing that they need (e.g. love), if the protagonist can only win their affection or love.

As the character comes toward the moment of full commitment, or toward entering a new place, the **antagonisms loom nearer** and recognize the protagonist as

someone to oppose (because the antagonist has his own motivations in direct opposition to the protagonist).

The world then shifts to a **new world**, a new setting or situation in which the desires of the protagonist have a chance of coming to be. Many obstacles quickly become apparent, but it is only in this world, if the antagonisms are defeated, that the protagonist can achieve his great hope. At this point, all the key characters are present (though more may be introduced as representations of the further steps in conflict the protagonist must overcome) and the main setups have been established.

This new world or situation has new rules and implications that directly affect the protagonist's inner character, especially his weaknesses or issues that he has not dealt with up to now, issues that directly prevent him from achieving his desire. As the protagonist moves through this new world, he explores the situation, faces truths about himself, recognizes the reasons behind his desire, learns what will be expected of him, and begins to meet challenges that reveal his **inner weaknesses** (challenges presented by the antagonisms) that push him to decide what he is willing to risk or do in order to achieve the desire.

Stories often take shifts in view to show the **movements of the antagonist**, so that we can understand his motivation and see how they are in opposition to the protagonist. If there are several antagonists, brief

glimpses add variety and interest as we see the pieces of this world moving around one another. But the movements of the antagonist should be in relation to the movements of the protagonist (particularly in opposition to them).

As the protagonist faces all the challenges of this new world and situation, he is forced to **face himself** and come to some recognitions about his own weaknesses, about the true state of his relationship with the companion characters, and about the challenges he will face to gain the desire. The characters' true feelings are brought to light, they examine their needs and desires, weigh them against the risks and conflicts they face, and make their choices based on what they discover. For the protagonist, something is **revealed or recognized** within him about his inner desires that finally will be resolved—and even determine his choices—within the turning of the later crisis and climax.

The pieces of the world then begin to swirl around one another, growing in **complication** and setting up the big moments to come.

The actions of the protagonist up to now bring him into a **confrontation** with the antagonist, one that (possibly) brings some kind of reversal and pushes the protagonist to make a move. The antagonist here is in direct opposition to the desires of the protagonist (inner or external), and the move pushes the movement of

the protagonist backward, so that he must re-evaluate and make a choice about how to move forward again.

Because of the confrontation, the **protagonist makes a move that is risky** but that is necessary to move ahead toward the goal. He draws on the strength and self-knowledge that he has gained up to this point, as well as the support of his companions, though he does not have their full help yet. Only with their help can he finally conquer, but he won't have that until the crisis and climax.

The protagonist, and the world around him, reaches a point of brilliance, or the **big moment** that the story has been pointing to, the **big conflict** around which the whole story revolves, or some moment that promises and illustrates all the wonderful things possible for the protagonist if he sees this story through to the end and conquers, or illustrates succinctly the central premise or problem of the story. This is the moment when the protagonist shows what he is worth.

In this big moment, the protagonist may not have the full support of the other characters, which will be a big factor in the fall that happens in the next steps as the antagonist pushes back against a core, vital weakness of the protagonist, and **the protagonist falls**. The support of the other characters will need to be gained to have full victory. After the fall to a low point, the protagonist regathers strength and finally chooses to fight

for or abandon his objective; characters rally around the protagonist and provide the final strength needed.

The antagonisms of the story push back, hitting the exact weakest points of the protagonist's character or plan, so that it seems that there is **no coming back** and that the antagonists will surely win this fight.

When the antagonisms have pushed back on exactly the weakest points of the protagonist, pushing him to a near defeat, the protagonist must face those weaknesses and choose how to react, come back, change to overcome, or not change and be defeated. The character who reaches this low point is not always the stated protagonist of the story, but he *is* the character who is moving through the story's main **character arc**.[109] (A better plot will bring the actual protagonist to this moment, unless the low point of the other character is the worst thing that could happen to the protagonist, for instance, if the change must occur in the loved one of the protagonist.)

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109 A **character arc** is the total change (and direction of change) of a character through the story, which shows a transformation of values through actions (my hope is that your story has a significant character arc while reading this book.)

Climax

The lines of the story converge, and the protagonist, at his lowest point, must dig deep within and **make the choice** to take a final big risk, find the strength inside, and confront the antagonist in one final, decisive battle. Here is where he recognizes that he needs to call for the support of the other characters to conquer. If they show their love and support, and if he has enough inner strength, he will conquer in the final crisis and climax. Given the protagonist's values (which have become unified with the center of good in the story), and the truth of the situation in which the central characters find themselves, the climax is the turning point that provides an example of the possibilities of what might be if the risk is successful.

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Falling Action

As the climax is reached, the objective is either gained or abandoned, the desire is fulfilled, and the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist reaches completion (sometimes in a final moment of suspense in which the final outcome is in doubt). We begin to see **payoffs** from earlier setups, which are similar circumstances to those presented to the protagonist early in

the story, but now the actions of the protagonist show that he has changed in some important way. Characters are sometimes given their just desserts (rewards and punishments).

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Denouement[110]

The anxiety of the reader is gone; **the knot**—the problems, the conflicts, the complicated interrelations of the various lines of the story … and the knot in the reader's stomach—**is untied**. The new world is embraced and everything unravels to the new, better or worse, state that will be the end of the story. We see the final changes in place and an illustration of how this new world will be going forward, as well as how the protagonist will live as a changed person. The story portrays the consequences of gaining or abandoning the objective, of meeting the needs and desires, and the final implications in the lives of the characters once the story ends. The meaning of the story is to be found here in the values expressed, the truths exampled, and the possibilities uncovered.

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110 The **denouemen**t is the final resolution or unraveling of a story, and is pronounced day-new-ma (with a French accent).

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Stories are meant to be experienced from the inside, so to speak—we imaginatively embody ourselves in the circumstances and characters of the story world. Stories are more a world than they are a lesson, but we may learn from them nevertheless, and we do this in part by **questioning**. The story world means something—what does it mean?

Questions for Stories[111]

1. What experiences is the reader sharing with the characters in the story?
2. What are the details of the setting, and if they play an important role, how do they contribute to the story?
3. How do the details in the story help me understand the characters?
4. What are the plot conflicts, how are they developed, and how are they resolved?
5. What needs or desires or objectives are important in the plot?
6. What significant things does the protagonist's experiment in living say about human life and values? (The protagonist is the character in the story with whom we are to sympathize.)

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111 Ryken, 1984.

7. How is the story's unity shown in its coherence across episodes to a central theme or framework, and how do the episodes relate to each other in the development of the story?
8. How do the choices and tests the protagonist is confronted with give structure to the story, and how are those choices and tests related to the central theme of the story?
9. What changes and transformations appear in the characters through the story, and how are those changes and transformations brought about?
10. How does the protagonist fail, and how does he/she succeed?
11. Are there foils,[112] dramatic irony,[113] or poetic justice[114] in the story, and if there are, what do they add to the meaning of the story and its effects on the reader?
12. How does the story influence the reader's approval or disapproval of events and characters, and what does the story mean based on this approval pattern?

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112 **Foils** are contrasts or parallels that highlight a main character or form a sub-plot.

113 **Dramatic irony** is when a reader knows something that a character in the story does not know.

114 **Poetic justice** is when good characters are rewarded and bad ones are punished.

Stories may also include satire,[115] drama,[116] dialogue,[117] lists,[118] teaching, or direct commands, and there are additional questions we might ask of stories in these forms (see below for each).

Questions for Satire[119]

1. What objects, people or cultural elements are being attacked?

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115 A **satire** is a story in which humor, hyperbole, and/or irony is used to critique a person, society, idea, or thing by showing how stupid or wrong it is through example.

116 A **drama** is an action or series of actions in the form of external events and inner turmoil often revolving around spectacular conflict or crisis—drama is meant to elicit emotions.

117 A **dialogue** is a speech event (a conversation) in which more than one character is involved.

118 **Lists** might include arrays of people, places, things, numbers, events, phrases, or laws and may be ordered or unordered; hierarchical or flat; a single category or split into categories of two or more than two; and the categories may be thematic or arbitrarily distinguished in some way. For instance, the ten commandments might be understood to be a list of laws that are ordered (it matters how many there are and in which order they occur) that are flat (there is only one level of the list) and are made of at least two categories (the first four speak of a relationship with God, the last six relationships with humans), categories which are thematic and not merely arbitrary.

119 Ryken, 1984.

2. What is the form of the satire (i.e. story, poem, portrait, character sketch, or direct or derogatory denunciation)?
3. What is the norm or standard by which things are criticized?

Questions for Dramas[120]

1. What is the nature of the conflict or crisis?
2. Who are the characters, how are they developed, and what conflicts do they appear in?
3. What is the role of the setting?
4. Does the drama utilize poetic form, and if it does, how is it to be interpreted?
5. What is the role of irony?
6. How is the plot carried along by dialogue?
7. How does the stationing and gesturing of the characters affect the meaning?
8. What feelings are expressed?

Questions for Dialogues

1. Who are the characters, and what do their words and/or actions say about them?
2. Which characters are we supposed to sympathize with? Is there antagonism between the characters? Friendship? Distance or nearness? A hierarchy of authority?

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120 Ryken, 1984.

3. Is one or more of the characters confused, lying, mistaken, misinterpreting, or in some other way negatively affecting the communication event?
4. How does the setting affect what is being said or how it is being said?
5. What is the progression of the dialogue (what is it headed toward)?
6. Why are these characters talking—what does it do for the rest of the story?
7. How does this dialogue relate to other dialogues in the story?
8. How do the characters use words or themes differently from each other? Is there overlap?

Questions for Lists

1. If the list is ordered, what is the meaning of the order? Is the order arbitrary?
2. If the list is hierarchical, what are the sub-lists, and how do the sub-lists relate to each other?
3. How many categories are there in the list? Do the categories affect how we read and understand specific items in the list?
4. How is the list introduced (this may give clues as to the significance of the list and/or how it is being used in the text)?
5. What is repeated in the list?

6. Does the number of items mean anything? Are there numbers included in the list, and if so, what do they mean for the wider context of the story?
7. Is the list being used for rhetorical purposes (i.e., to persuade someone of something)?
8. Is there a progression in the list? A regression? A digression? A process?
9. How are individual items in the list used in the wider context?
10. What is the content of the list: names, objects, numbers, events, actions?
11. Is the list meant to be exhaustive (complete and without gaps)?

Questions for Teaching

1. Who is the teacher, and are they a sympathetic character (you may need to read the entire story to know)?
2. Who is the student(s), and are they a sympathetic character(s)?
3. What are the central words or ideas of the teaching (these are often repeated throughout, or may appear in the beginning or end)?
4. What is the student supposed to do with what is learned?
5. What is the basis of the teaching (reason, experience, scripture, philosophy, literature, culture, etc.)?

6. Is the teacher able to show that they can do what they teach?
7. Is this part of a series of teachings, or related to other teachers or teachings?

Questions for Direct Commands

1. Who is giving the command, and what is their authority to give such a command?
2. Is the command based on some kind of special relationship between the commander and the person who receives the command?
3. Is the command being given to the reader, or to a character(s) in the story, or both?
4. Is the action that must be performed an end in itself, or is it a means to an end? If it is a means to an end, what is the desired end?
5. What will happen if the command is obeyed or not obeyed? Is there anything promised or threatened?
6. What is the desired motivation behind following this command? Why should the command be obeyed?
7. How is the command related to the wider story?

On Poetry & Wisdom Literature

Poetry uses special language and structure to express truth and emotion and to move its hearers. Poetry is meant to be heard, not merely read (when you read poetry, you should do so with your voice and with feeling). Poetry is also meant to be remembered, to be repeated, to be echoed, to be emblematic (multiple words are often used as symbols together). Poetry is often **mimetic**.[121]

Questions for Poetry[122]

1. What is the topic, theme, or underlying situation, and how does this unify the poem?

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121 **Mimesis** is imitation, in the form of metaphor, hyperbole, simile, parallelism, figures of speech, onomatopoeia, rhyme, meter, assonance, alliteration, etc.

122 Ryken, 1984.

2. How is the poem structured? (Is it expository,[123] descriptive, or dramatic? What is the flow of the poem? What are the contrasts? Is the theme developed through repetition, catalogue,[124] association, or contrast? How does the poem fit into the framework of theme and variation?)
3. What is the poetic texture,[125] and what do the figures of speech and poetic devices mean?
4. Is the poem emotional or reflective?
5. How does the artistic patterning of the poem affect its meaning and effectiveness?
6. How is the theme in the poem resolved?

Proverbs are usually short pithy aphorisms (such as "Follow your heart"), statements that highlight general truths, values or good actions and effects rather than promises or mere facts. Proverbs are also often poetic. Proverbs (and wisdom literature in general) are often centered on **how to live the good life, the essence of wisdom, and reality**, and as such may be thought of as philosophy. A proverb is either always true (rare) or usually true (common), but if it is never

123 **Expository** here means a message that primarily teaches or explains.

124 A **catalogue** is a list of related items.

125 **Poetic texture** is the use of metaphor, imagery, meter, and rhyme.

or only sometimes true, it is a rotten proverb (you may find many of these in the mouths of Job's friends). The authority of a proverb is often a function of its creator's authority and wisdom—a proverb is a general observation or prescription based on the author's own experiences, observations and insights, and is meant to pass on values, views of reality, knowledge, and—greatest of all—wisdom.

Questions for Proverbs[126]

1. Is the proverb primarily prescriptive or descriptive? (Does it prescribe the way things should be, or does it describe the way they often are?)
2. What observations from everyday life are presented?
3. What figurative, poetic, or concrete language does the proverb use?
4. What simple and profound meanings are discovered?
5. What values, virtues, or vices are observed?
6. What is the basis of the wisdom (how was it learned)?

126 Ryken, 1984.

On Prophecy

What is prophecy? Prophecy is speech, writing or action with divine origin, the telling-forth of the divine will, words, and ways—past, present and future. As such, prophecy is much wider than fore-telling, for it encompasses any mediation of divine revelation. Prophecy is about what happened in the past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future, often with a choice given as to the future in the form of a call to repentance and obedience in the present. Part of the prophetic function is signs and wonders which verify the words of the prophet. Prophecy is not mere speech about God or repentance: it is given from God, not by humans interpreting their situations, and thus has its origins in the will of God to reveal, to remind, to encourage, to teach, to inspire, to defend, to attack, to show hate or to show love, to describe God in his glory and his suffering, to paint a picture of the world from God's vantage point within and beyond us.

Questions for Prophecy [127]

1. What are the setting, characters, and actions, and how do these transmit meaning?
2. How is ordinary reality flipped on its head?
3. What breaks are there in the flow of the writing and what does the diversity or impulsivity give to the writing?
4. What historical events or theological realities seem to be symbolically presented in the passage?
5. Prophetic writings are often poetic—what does the poetic form add to the message? (See Questions for Poetry above)
6. How are the prophecies related to the writings of earlier or contemporary prophets?
7. What does the prophecy reveal about God? About humans?

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First-century believers' use of the Hebrew scriptures is an interesting case of the interpretation and use of prophetic literature. NT writers build upon previous Hebrew prophets' use of scriptures earlier than their own times, and provide examples of how God uses humans and language to mediate his will, words and ways to us as members in a long line of prophets (as

127 Ryken, 1984.

modern Christians may view themselves as part of this same community of believers and prophets). Much of the OT is prophetic **commentary**, **expansion**, and **signals of fulfillment** of earlier revelation, especially pointing back to the Pentateuch and the Psalms. In the same way, Christ-centered NT re-readings of important OT texts show us prophetic commentary, expansion and signals of fulfillment of earlier revelation from the wider OT (particularly from the Pentateuch, Isaiah, the Psalms, and the minor prophets). But NT use of OT texts is often troubling for modern interpreters, not least because the NT writers don't seem to be using our own methods of interpretation! **Do the NT writers even seem to care what the OT texts meant in their original contexts?**

What did the OT writers mean? Walter Kaiser claims that the Hebrew scriptures are presented by first-century believers as always meaning what they originally meant (humanly) in context.[128] Kaiser argues that:

> A fair exegesis of the Old Testament text will show that the so-called later divine meaning was already in the purview of the prophets who originally wrote such statements in the Old Testament. Had it been taken any

128 Kaiser & Silva, 2007, p. 94–105.

> differently, the apologetic value or authority force would have evaporated, and no evidence could have been shown that the events in Jesus' life had been foreknown.

Kaiser seems to be arguing that because OT texts are used in NT arguments as evidence, the evidence must exist before it is used as such (the OT texts must have originally meant what the NT interpreters say they meant).

The argument here might be constructed as follows:

- NT writers are always correct in what they say;
- NT writers use OT texts as evidence;
- Therefore, the OT texts that are used originally meant what they are said to mean by their NT interpreters.

This does not take account of *how* they could have meant what they meant, other than by stating that they are divine literature and that perhaps they cannot be understood in their original context except with recourse to their NT interpretation. Can we understand OT texts in their original contexts without using the NT to interpret them? Is there a human meaning in the OT texts, and a divine meaning that the NT writers brought out?

Kaiser rejects the idea that there is an original human meaning distinct from the divine meaning, but his argument seems to depend upon the following presuppositions:

1. There is only one meaning in a text (not a divine and human);
2. The NT writers believed there was only one meaning (not a divine and human)—the NT writers believed that the human and divine meanings are identical;
3. NT writers had the one original meaning in view when they interpreted an OT text;
4. OT writers cannot possibly have lacked knowledge of the meaning of their own creations—the intended meaning of OT texts used by the NT writers could be understood by the original OT authors and audience;
5. Revelation does not add meaning to previous meaning, or make texts more meaningful;
6. OT authors meant for their texts to be prophetic and messianic (at least the ones that are used as such by NT writers) and meant for them to be fulfilled;
7. The NT writers' hermeneutical methods are fundamentally identical to that of modern Evangelical Christians;

8. The NT writers had access to the best OT texts in their original scriptural contexts, and quoted or alluded accurately to these.

Does the meaning of an OT text that is identified by a NT writer need to be identical with the meaning of the original author for it to be a true interpretation?

NT writers' use of the OT seems to follow the OT writers' use of other OT texts through **allusions, echoes, quotes** and **compilations of earlier texts**: all can be said to be **covenantal interpretations** of scriptures (i.e., they are read in light of the covenants of God with man). Paul reads the new covenant (Christ's life, sacrifice, death, resurrection and glory, and their meanings) in the Hebrew scriptures just as Isaiah reads the Davidic covenant (an eternal anointed king over Judah, and an eternal city and throne) in the Pentateuch, and Moses reads the Mosaic covenant (relationships between God and his creatures and his creatures with one another) in the creation of the heavens and earth.

It may be that **all biblical covenantal interpretations are also Christocentric** in some sense (emphasizing the prophet-type aspect of the transformational approach described above), and that as revelation progresses, so too does our knowledge (as Christ's community) of 1- the Father's covenants with his creation, 2- by the Holy Spirit, 3- through Christ. We should not downplay or overemphasize the differences between the

various covenants (in aim, audience, or content), nor should we posit a cross-revelation Christ-ness that is vague and unhinged (i.e., not related to specific historical contexts and situations). Neither should we believe that God's work contradicts itself—Christians believe that God's work is a progression of self-revelation of the historical Christ in the person of Jesus in space and time, the Creator of the world, the eternal mediator between God and man, the incarnate Word of God. What we come to know in scripture more and more is: 1- The love of God, 2- The work and presence of the Holy Spirit, and 3- Christ, and these three things, I believe, are at the center of a covenantal Christocentric interpretation of scripture (by OT writers, NT writers, and us). It is always by the love of God that we love others, it is by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit that we are members together of one community and body and by which we build each other up, and in Christ that salvation comes in the form of healing, care for the poor, deliverance from evil spirits, raising from the dead, enlightenment of our hearts and minds, escape from judgment, communion with God, future glory, and present deliverance from sin.

Not all, or even most, references to earlier scriptures by authors of the OT or NT are meant to show fulfillment—very many are about showing parallels, types, similarities, contrasts, illustrations, to show literary dependence, or to provide comments on or

expansions of earlier texts without pointing to any sense of fulfillment. This is called **intertextuality**, and is a universal human occurrence—humans tend to use the language, ideas, structures and examples from their past contexts to inform thoughts about their present contexts. Sometimes you might quote or allude to yourself when you write. Sometimes you might bring in an allusion to a movie (like *Nacho Libre*). Sometimes you might use the language of Shakespeare or of Monty Python without meaning to bring in the context of the original source; sometimes you just want to borrow and use others' words, sometimes their ideas, sometimes their structure, and sometimes you might even quote them. In modern American academic settings one must always cite these references, else it is often considered plagiarism, but for much of human history we have created messages using parts of others' messages without directly citing them as a way of **paying homage to the ancestors of our thoughts**. While such homage cannot completely neglect original meaning (there must be some parallels in meaning between the original texts and our own use of them) it does not require total parity with that original meaning and context—some texts become part of our world and are no longer merely formal quotations, nor do we always mean to interpret texts by our use of them.

Some uses of earlier texts, however, may focus on fulfillment. The idea of the fulfillment of a prophecy seems to require some sense of not-yet-completed meaning of a prophetic text (after all, it is "meaning" something that has not yet occurred, so that the object of its speech is not yet fully existent). When I say "I will wake up tomorrow," the object of my intent is not yet a true event (it is not yet a fact that I woke up on that day), and until it is, the meaning is not "fulfilled." Might it be fulfilled in a way I did not intend and yet still be true? Yes, it might be fulfilled in a way beyond what I intended (though bounded by it) and yet be true; for instance, if I "woke up" tomorrow by dying and being resurrected that same day—this would be a fuller meaning than perhaps intended, but would be related directly to my original message and would still be true, yet this meaning would be beyond the meaning I intended (even while being bounded by that original intent, the intent of expressing my confidence in coming out of sleep tomorrow). The identity of the original meaning is retained and fulfilled by the later event or object, but the meaning might not be identical to the intent behind the original meaning—I did not originally mean to say I would be dying and raising again tomorrow, but this fact would yet fulfill and enlarge the meaning of my previous "prophetic" statement.

Of course, here I am speaking of prophecy as a merely human activity, something which is not true. God may mean, and inspire me to speak, something which I may not fully understand as I speak it, and in that way all true fore-telling prophecy, as God-breathed message, is about events and objects with which a true prophet is not fully acquainted, because these are future events and objects of which they speak. The mind, the understanding and intent of a foretelling messenger—in this case, a prophet—is not fully acquainted with the objects and events of which they speak (**1 Pet. 1:10–12**). The will (or intent) of a human is not the origin of scriptural prophecy, "but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (**2 Pet. 1:21**). That which makes their message true (the **truth-making** object/event)—at the very least true in a fuller sense than intended—is not yet part of the sequence of objects and events in time. On the other hand, we might say that beyond time, i.e. for God, these objects and events are already and always true, so that the truth-makers complete and fulfill the original intent (from an outside-of-time perspective) even as they pass beyond the author's intent and knowledge (as being a time-bound person).

Does this intent-fulfillment still occur in our time? May we see **words of the prophets fulfilled in our time** that go beyond the original meaning of the OT

or NT writers' original intent? If prophecy is to be fulfilled in our time or in the future (for instance, at the resurrection of the dead), it not only *can* do this, it *must* do this. Foretellers cannot know the full meaning of their messages (in the sense of being acquainted with the objects of their meaning), because that of which they speak is not yet fully come for them; the meaning is not yet fulfilled. One might say that they know only by **description** something which when fulfilled will be known by **acquaintance**, even while they might also witness some less full sense of fulfillment in their life and times (for instance, Isaiah's Immanuel passage, which likely referred to the king of Judah's son when it was spoken).

If **meaning might be said to expand with fulfillment**, does it ever contract? Can it ever contract? (Does a meaning ever become more specific and less full as it is fulfilled?) It seems that **possibilities contract in meaning** as the fulfillment of the prophecy becomes bound to specific details (other possibilities are now unwarranted and not true fulfillments). Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and this contracts the meaning of the prophecy to the actual birth of the Messiah in a town of David in the first century—suddenly all other options for fulfillment might be ruled out, and meaning can be said to contract on this one specific event/object. The meaning thus might be said to expand beyond what was

able to be intended by its original author (the author was not acquainted with the actual events/objects of Jesus' birth), and simultaneously to be bounded by that same intent (outside readings are still false, readings which contradict that original meaning, or that do not directly relate and cohere with that meaning). At fulfillment, the possibilities contract (implode) on the details of the truth-makers (now the other options of meaning are ruled out, so to speak).

On Letters & Rhetorical Writings

How are letters different than books, and how are these different than essays (rhetorical[129] writings)?

- Essays are usually singular in focus, following one thesis; Books include multiple chapters, sections, big ideas; Letters may be about a singular topic or many.
- Letters are often written for a specific audience, and are first for that audience and only secondarily for a general readership; Books are usually for a potentially unknown general readership of a certain kind (for instance, adult males, or Christian children); Essays may be meant for general or specific audiences, but are often for a general educated readership.

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129 **Rhetoric** is the art of persuasion through speech or writing.

- Essays are meant to persuade or inform about some one thing; Books are meant to persuade or inform about many things; Letters often inform and persuade about one or more things.

How do letters work? Letters are written to inform and persuade a specific reader(s) about something.[130] In form, they usually begin with an introduction of the reader and the author and a greeting, then move to the reason for writing, then describe the information or present an argument, then provide clarifications about the future, and conclude with exhortations and final greetings. To understand what is written, we must understand why it was written—what is the letter meant to do? How is it meant to affect the story/life of the author and audience?

Questions for Letters[131]

1. To whom is the letter written, by whom, and what do these facts add to the meaning? (What is the backstory behind the writing?)
2. What does the letter mean *as a whole*?

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130 Letters are often **occasional writings**, texts written for a specific occasion—an event or reason specific to the writer, reader, both, or something external to both.

131 Ryken, 1984.

3. Why was the letter written, and what situations does it address? How will the letter change the situation?
4. What are the topics of each paragraph in the letter, and what is the overall logic?
5. What rhetorical patterns are used and for what purposes (rhetorical questions,[132] paradox, repetition, balance, antithesis,[133] and parallels)?

How do essays work? Essays typically begin with an introduction to a problem and/or thesis, and move on to provide examples and evidence in multiple paragraphs and sections, followed by a conclusion based on the evidence and examples, restating what was said and what this means for the reader (what the reader should do or think, or why knowledge of this topic is important). As rhetoric,[134] essays may attempt to persuade the reader by:

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132 **Rhetorical questions** are questions in a text or speech that are not meant to be answered because the answer is obvious—they are asked to force the listener to recognize that they already agree with the author or speaker.

133 **Antithesis** opposes one thing, idea or argument with another.

134 Not all essays are rhetorical—some are merely informative—nor are all rhetorical writings essays—some are longer or shorter, simpler or more complex in form. I have chosen to use the term "essay" here to mean rhetorical writing that is essay-like.

- Making the reader feel **empathy** for a person, cause or idea and/or making the reader feel **antipathy**[135] toward an opposing person, cause or idea;
- Reinforcing the personal **credibility** of the arguer and/or destroying the credibility of their opponents; and
- Using **logic and reasoned arguments**, building premises[136] toward a conclusion (if the reader accepts the premises, then they must also accept the conclusion).

Questions for Essays

1. What is the topic? Why does the author think this topic is important?
2. What is the thesis statement?
3. What is the progression of the essay? (How does each example, explanation, or argument flow into another?)

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135 **Antipathy** is a deep feeling of dislike, hostility, animosity, hatred.

136 A **premise** is a basis for an argument and can be stated as a proposition that is accepted by an audience, such as: "Purposefully killing innocent humans is murder," which might be paired with a further premise: "Human fetuses are innocent humans," with the resulting conclusion: "Purposefully killing human fetuses is murder."

4. What rhetorical patterns are used and for what purposes (rhetorical questions, paradox, repetition, balance, antithesis, and parallels)?
5. Does the author try to draw out empathy or antipathy from the reader? For what purpose?
6. Does the author establish their own or others' personal credibility, and/or attempt to destroy the credibility of their opponent(s)?
7. Does the author build a well-reasoned argument? What are the premises, and what is the conclusion?

On Exegesis: Grammatical-Historical Analysis

Words: How to Understand Language

People tend to interpret only the texts they can read; if a text is written in a language unfamiliar to the interpreter, tough luck. Or perhaps we might say "Happy translating!" since most texts can be translated. **Online translators**[137] may be helpful if the text is digital and modern, but these translations are rough—computers have trouble doing human jobs such as translation, not because they can't process information, but because they don't have minds.

Fortunately, many important texts, including the scriptures of the world's major religions, classic texts of world literature, and law codes from throughout the ages, are available in both their original languages and translated versions in **digital formats online**.

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137 If there were a good example of an online translator, I would mention it here.

These translated versions will be more accurate than automatic online translators, but you will still find variety in quality and in the levels of interpretations. There are so-called "loose" translations, bad translations, and a wide array of different translation practices and philosophies, from so-called "word-for-word" to paraphrases or commentary, in which a large amount of interpretation has already taken place. If you don't know the original language(s) of your text, you are at the mercy of translators, making the use of multiple translations valuable. Some texts also have interlinear or parallel versions available for comparisons.

How to use an interlinear or parallel version of a text

An interlinear version of a text includes original language words along with the equivalent words or phrases from a different language (the translation). Usually the translated words are above, below or beside the original language text, but in digital formats sometimes these are in links or hover-over features. Words in the original language are also usually accompanied by unique word identifiers for easy look-up in a **dictionary** (for possible meanings of a word) or **concordance** (for searching all occurrences of that word in that text or in related texts). These unique identifiers are usually numbers in print, and links in digital formats. **To use an interlinear version of a text**:

1. Find the text you are interpreting;
2. Locate key words or phrases in your text (words that are repeated, that are the focus of the text, that help you understand what is being said—for instance, what are the most important verbs in the text?);
3. Find the original language word(s) beside, above, beneath, or beyond (in case of linking) the translated word(s);
4. Write this down—the original word(s) and the translation of your key words;
5. Look up the original word(s) in a dictionary and/or concordance (see the next section).

A parallel version of a text includes more than one translation (and/or the original language text) side-by-side for comparison. Parallel versions can help an interpreter to see at a glance how different translators have translated individual words or phrases of the same text. **To use a parallel version of a text**:

1. Find the text you are interpreting;
2. Read several modern translations of the text (for the Bible, this might include NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NET, NABRE, etc.);
3. Note important similarities and differences in the translations;

4. Locate key words or phrases in your text, and compare how these are translated;
5. Find other occurrences of the key words by looking up the words in a dictionary or concordance (see the next section).

The Bible has many interlinear and parallel translation tools available, including:

- The Net Bible
  https://netbible.org/
- BibleStudyTools.com
  http://www.biblestudytools.com/interlinear-bible/
- Bible Hub
  http://biblehub.com/interlinear/
- Bible Gateway
  https://www.biblegateway.com/
- Scripture4All.org
  http://www.scripture4all.org/
- The Complete Biblical Library
- The Interlinear Bible
- The Parallel Bible

Classical Greek and Latin texts have similar tools available, including:

- The Perseus Digital Library
  http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/
- Archive.org
  https://archive.org/details/greekclassicslist
- Elpenor
  http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/greek-word.asp
- Loeb Classical Library

How to use a dictionary

A **dictionary** is a list of words in a language along with definitions (the senses in which it is used in the language), sometimes accompanied by each word's parts of speech, uses, and examples. Many words have more than one definition (what the word can mean in different contexts), and sometimes several words together can mean something that the individual words do not (as in "Eat my shorts!"), and these are not always included in every dictionary. Further, **a single word in a text does not mean everything it is defined as meaning in a dictionary** every time it is used in any text—words mean different things based on context. You need to **find which sense of the word is being used** in the text you are interpreting, and you can do this by looking at the context (and at multiple translations of the text, if available).

When you are interpreting a text in a language you don't know, you should **look in a dictionary for the key words in the original language**, not in your own language (for instance, you would look up the Greek word for "love", instead of its English equivalent). This means you will probably need to know the alphabet of the language that your text is written in—you need to be able to find the original words from the text. Latin

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Greek Alphabet

A α	alpha	N ν	nu
B β	beta	Ξ ξ	xi
Γ γ	gamma	O ο	omicron
Δ δ	delta	Π π	pi
E ε	epsilon	P ρ	rho
Z ζ	zeta	Σ σ/ς	sigma
H η	eta	T τ	tau
Θ θ	theta	Υ υ	upsilon
I ι	iota	Φ φ	phi
K κ	kappa	X χ	chi
Λ λ	lambda	Ψ ψ	psi
M μ	mu	Ω ω	omega

is easy because it uses Latin characters that are the same as those used in English, but languages like Greek or Hebrew are a different matter—you'll need to learn their alphabets, at least well enough to recognize letters, and to know which letter comes after and before others. Some languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, are written right-to-left—the words, the sentences, and the pages of books in those languages.[138]

Hebrew Alphabet

א	alef	ל	lamed
ב	bet	מ / ם	mem
ג	gimel	נ / ן	nun
ד	dalet	ס	samekh
ה	he	ע	ayin
ו	vav	פ/ ף	pe
ז	zayin	צ / ץ	tsadi
ח	het	ק	qof
ט	tet	ר	resh
י	yod	ש	shin
כ / ך	kaf	ת	tav

138 Note: reading these languages in a mirror doesn't help. Trust me.

To use a dictionary:

1. While reading your text in your native language, locate key words (words that are repeated, that are the focus of the text, that help you understand what is being said—for instance, what are the most important verbs in the text?) and write these down;
2. Look for each key word in an original language dictionary—some dictionaries list original language words alphabetically by a translated language (such as English) or provide an index that cross-references original language words with their translated language equivalents, but many require you to find the word in the original language;
3. When you find the word you are looking for (or a word in the same family—it may not be spelled the same), read through the definitions and examples and decide which meaning is the right one for your context;
4. Write down important words or ideas from the definition (including important synonyms or antonyms)[139];

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139 A **synonym** is a word that is very similar in meaning to another word; it could be swapped for the other word sometimes and not lose much meaning (examples: amazing, stupendous; fat, heavy; bland, meh). An **antonym** is a word with very different meaning from another word; it might

5. Try writing a short definition in your own words, but don't copy the entire definition from the dictionary;[140]
6. If the dictionary has references to other literature that uses the same word in the same way (you may also use a concordance for this), look at this other literature, and take notes on how the contexts are similar or different from the text you are interpreting;
7. Think about how the meaning of this key word makes a difference for the meaning of your text;
8. Don't mention the definition when you write or speak about your interpretation—it's likely boring, and nobody needs to know (unless it's important … but it's not);
9. For one or two of your key words, write briefly about similar texts that use the same (or similar) words in the same senses. Only do this if it helps to understand the meaning of the text you are interpreting—otherwise, don't waste your time. You might even just include references to these

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be used as the other word's opposite (examples: hot, cold; short, tall; cool, old … uh, I mean lame).

140 Why not? It's not helpful, you aren't going to use the entire definition later, there are no absolute authorities for what a word means, and you need to be using your brain instead of your copy and paste abilities.

other texts and write out some big ideas about how the word is used with this meaning.

In the end, often **dictionary definitions are not very helpful**—you either know what a word means or not, and once you do, it's no longer that interesting. Fundamental, but not interesting. What is most helpful are references to other texts that are like yours and that use the word in the same way (not just the same word, but the same word—or a synonym—with the same or a similar sense). When you begin to see how key words are used across texts in the same way, you begin to see how the author might have thought about and used the word—you begin to "sense" the sense of the word.[141]

Because dictionaries of the kind I am describing are most useful when they are text-specific, I provide an example of dictionaries for a specific text below—the Bible. Examples of **text-specific dictionaries include**:

- New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, The Complete Word Study

141 Like what I did there?

Dictionary of the Old Testament, Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, Dictionary of the Old Testament, Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible
- Free online Bible dictionaries
  http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/
- Other online resources:
  https://trinitybiblecollege.edu/academics/theology-online

How to use a thesaurus

You don't need a thesaurus.[142] Put down that book and find something better to do. If you absolutely cannot live without words that are similar (or very different) from key words in the text you are interpreting, use a digital thesaurus.

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142 A **thesaurus** is a list of words along with each word's synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, and other nyms. The reason you don't need a thesaurus when you are interpreting a text is because a good dictionary will give you similar information without needing to find another book or website. You may need a thesaurus when you are writing, but not likely when you are reading (unless you are building a computer program to process texts for you—then your program needs a thesaurus, not you).

Worlds: How to Understand History & Culture

How did you first come to understand your own history and culture? Did you need help? Did you read history books? Do you watch movies and television shows? Did you receive any formal education (primary or secondary)? It seems like we need help to learn our own history and culture—doesn't it seem like we might need help when we are trying to learn a different historical or cultural context? Further, does understanding your own history and culture help you to understand perfectly everything that anyone has ever written from your own context? It does not seem that understanding the historical or cultural background of a text or author automatically entails understanding everything that was written in texts from that context. Historical-cultural understanding is necessary, but not sufficient for interpretation.

The primary source on how the historical-cultural background of a text may affect its interpretation **is the text itself**.

To find historical-cultural elements in a text:

1. As you are reading the text, look for references to historical-cultural elements—specific people, places, material things, events, practices, and behavior (especially if the behavior seems out of the ordinary to you, or has significance in the

text that is not clear to you)—underline or write these down;
2. Look in the text (and other closely related texts) for other mentions of the same or similar historical-cultural elements, and write down any references you find;
3. Answer the question: "How do these historical-cultural elements affect how the text should be interpreted?"

To understand historical and cultural contexts of a text, you may find the following **secondary resources** helpful (the primary resource is the text itself):

- **Historical accounts** of the period and culture (for instance, to understand the texts of Plato you might read the classical histories of Herodotus, Xenophon, and Thucydides—all writing near the events that they recount, at times using eyewitnesses—as well as modern historical accounts of the period);
- **Literature** from the period and culture (poems, plays, stories, myths, songs, proverbs, philosophical treatises, comic books, etc.)
- **Background resources** such as archeological and historical-cultural **journal articles and books** concerning cultural artifacts, people, events, relationships, literature, and practices from the period and that are related to the text;

- **Encyclopedia articles**;
- **Commentaries** on the text, especially scholarly commentaries, which are excellent sources of knowledge on the historical-cultural background and how this affects interpretation.

To write a summary of the historical-cultural background of a text:

1. Take notes on what the text says about itself (its own historical-cultural elements), giving references for your sources;
2. Take notes on what secondary sources say about the important historical-cultural elements in the text, providing references to your sources;
3. Write a summary of the historical-cultural contexts (your notes) and discuss the effect these have on interpretation of the text, also providing references to what experts say about this (from commentaries and other background resources).

We'll look at how to use secondary sources in the next several sections.

How to use a historical account

A historical account is an intentionally true story about people and events from the past, often using eyewitness accounts and multiple sources (such as geography, cultural knowledge, artifacts, experiential psychological

knowledge of how humans tend to think and act, inscriptions, other historical accounts, and letters). What you are looking for are passages that refer to people, places, things, and events from your text, which will help you to explain the meaning of these elements in the text.

Note that while historians may intend to write the truth, that may not always be the result: historians are ignorant of many things,[143] they have biases which affect not only how they view events and people but also which events and people they focus on, and they want to present a story that is a cohesive whole, one in which every part is essential to a central plot.

If you already live in the historical-cultural circumstances of the text you are interpreting (or very near to them), you may not need to analyze historical accounts of the period or use background resources—you may have this knowledge already, and you merely need to make these elements clear by writing them down for yourself and others. However, if you are not yet familiar with the historical-cultural elements of the text, you will likely need to do some reading.

To use a historical account:

1. Use background resources (see the section below) to identify useful historical accounts

143 Though likely less ignorant than you or me, of course.

from the period in which your text was written, and references to significant historical-cultural elements in those histories (look for citations of historical accounts with page numbers or passage references);

2. Read the relevant sections of primary historical accounts[144]—make sure these were written close to the time in which the events that they recount took place—and read these sections in context (you will need to read before and after the referenced passages);
3. Note any historical-cultural elements in the histories that coincide with historical-cultural elements in the text you are interpreting, and write down any similarities or differences between these elements in the historical accounts and those in your text;
4. Write down important short quotes from primary historical accounts if necessary (if this helps to interpret your text);
5. Summarize in your own words the significance of the history and culture of the period in understanding your text.

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144 If you cannot read all the primary historical accounts of a period, at least read the most important: the histories that later historians repeatedly reference.

Do you want to take things further?

6. Read all primary historical accounts in their entirety, taking notes or underlining historical-cultural elements related to your text as you read;
7. Read several secondary historical accounts of the period in which your text was written—these are accounts written long after the facts that they recount, and that are dependent upon earlier histories.

Examples of important historical accounts include:[145]

- Jewish: Historical accounts in the Hebrew Bible, Maccabees, Josephus
- Christian: Luke-Acts, as well as Matthew, Mark, and John, Eusebius, Theodoret
- Greek: Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle, Polybius, Posidonius, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Arrian, Diogenes Laertius
- Roman: Sallust, Julius Caesar, Livy, Tacitus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Suetonius, Appian, Dio Cassius

145 Various translations of each of these historical accounts are available online.

How to use related literature from the period and culture

Part of the background of a text are other writings from its time and place—these provide information about style, form, and the currency of ideas, as well as historical-cultural context.

Literature seeps into a person, and becomes the way in which each of us express ourselves in words, style, form, organization, feeling, and purpose. The thoughts we eat are the thoughts we speak; literature is the mind-soup to which we add when we ourselves write, and then we become the chefs of the world in which others live.[146] If we do not experience a writer's related literature—the literature they drew from in their writings, even if not consciously—we fail to truly understand them.

To use related literature from the period and culture of the text you are interpreting:

1. Read the passages of literature (in context) that the author explicitly references ("as Pindar says"), quotes or alludes to ("what light through yonder window"), or echoes;[147]

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146 They eat our thoughts? Is this a cognitive zombie stew?

147 A literary **echo** is a looser connection with a previous literature that uses small amounts of language, form, style, or

2. Take notes on important themes from the other literature (what is the other author trying to say?);
3. Make notes on potential parallels with your text in terms of vocabulary, structure, themes, literary forms, ideas, etc.;
4. Answer the following questions:
   a. Is the other literature being interpreted in your text?
   b. Is the other literature being used in your text as a means of communicating a new message not directly related to the original message of the other literature (i.e., your text is not interpreting the other literature, but using it for its own purposes)?
   c. Is the other literature being used as a basis of authority in your text, as a way of speaking the language of the culture, and/or as a means of showing how the new message relates to earlier messages?
   d. Is the other literature being critiqued or corrected or expanded in your text?
   e. Does the point of the other literature cohere with the point of your text's use of it (is your text misusing or transforming the meaning of a previous text)?

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themes, but that points back to the previous literature as a basis of understanding the text.

5. Summarize how other literature is used in your text and what this implies about its meaning—give reasons why the other literature is used; if the other literature does not impact the meaning of the text, don't include it in your interpretation, except perhaps as a small note and reference to the other literature.

Do you want to take things further?

6. Completely read the entire texts that the author references, alludes to, or echoes, attending to the overall themes and forms of the other literature in their own contexts—note any similarities or differences with your text;
7. Read all important literature of the culture and period before and during the writing of the text you are interpreting, and summarize the ideas, themes, forms, historical-cultural elements, and language patterns that directly relate to your text.

Related literature includes:[148]

- Mesopotamian: *The Enuma Elish*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

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148 Various translations are freely available online for these works, each of which has profoundly impacted authors throughout the ages.

- Chinese: The *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Analects* of Confucius, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*
- Indian: The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Bhagavad Gita*
- Jewish & Christian: The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), Psalms, Isaiah, the letters of Paul, Augustine's *Confessions* and *The City of God*
- Greek: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Plato's Dialogues, Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, *Nichomachean Ethics*, and *De Anima*, the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes, Aesop's Fables, the poetry of Pindar and Aratus, the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides and Polybius
- Roman: Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Georgics*, the poems of Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, orations of Cicero and essays of Seneca, the historical works of Livy, Julius Caesar, the *Greek & Roman Lives* of Plutarch
- Muslim: The *Koran*, *Arabian Nights*
- English: *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the plays of Shakespeare, the translation of the Bible known as the Authorized Version (KJV)

How to use a background resource

A background resource is a journal article, book or set of books that provide the historical and/or cultural background most necessary for understanding a text or collection of texts.[149] Historical-cultural elements of a text include: cultural artifacts, people, events, relationships, literature, and practices from the period and that are related to the text. Note that a background resource is a secondary and not a primary source of information on the historical-cultural background of a text—background resources point to or describe primary sources of information on culture and history; you should also read and be familiar with those primary sources. A background resource is just a quick way of seeing what historical-cultural elements may be important to the interpretation of a text.

To use a background resource:

1. Find the references to your text in a background resource, and make a list of any important historical-cultural elements related to your text;

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149 Background resources are also often included as footnotes or endnotes to a text. This is a footnote, while an endnote is at the *end* of a book or article (that's why it's called an endnote).

2. Use this list to look up the historical-cultural elements in other sources (primary sources such as other literature and histories, and secondary sources such as journals, encyclopedia articles and commentaries);
3. Read several historical-cultural introductions or summaries of your text, taking notes on important ideas and historical-cultural elements, including: authorship; date, geography, and purpose of the writing; audience; and relationship of the text to the history of the author;
4. In your own words, give a summary of the most important historical-cultural elements of a text;
5. Write down why it is important to understand the historical-cultural elements of the text you are interpreting—how do these help you to understand the text?

Do you want to take things further?

6. Read and take notes from 2–3 different background resources of your text—not merely on your passage, but the text as a whole (for example, a whole book);
7. Write your own short background resource on the text based on your research from primary sources (do original research on one or more

historical-cultural elements from the text) and respond to any important secondary resources such as commentaries and journal articles.

Background resources are usually specific to the history and culture of a text or group of texts.

Background resources on the Bible include:

- Books on the Bible: IVP Bible Background Commentary, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, The Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, New Testament Background Commentary
- Journals on the Bible: Journal of Biblical Literature (https://www.jstor.org/journal/jbibllite), New Testament Studies, Biblica (https://www.bsw.org/project/biblica/), TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism (http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/TC-main.html)
- Other online resources, including books and articles: https://trinitybiblecollege.edu/academics/library, https://trinitybiblecollege.edu/academics/theology-online

How to use an encyclopedia

While a dictionary is about words, an encyclopedia[150] is about stuff. You want to know about ancient boats, prophecy, monkeys in Africa, 19th Century British

150 **Encyclopedias** are meant to be books with short-ish

politics? You might start with an encyclopedia, where you will find a bird's eye view to help you know where to begin. Often individual encyclopedia articles are written by experts in their subject areas, so that an encyclopedia article on human waste would be written by an expert on human waste—ew. A notable modern exception to this is Wikipedia;[151] even so, Wikipedia may provide you with a very broad surface-level view of a historical-cultural element (such as a city or person's history), and thus serve as a useful place to start (if you end there, prepare to fail miserably in your interpretation).

To use an encyclopedia after you have identified an important historical-cultural element in a text:

1. Write down the words you want to look up, including any synonyms of those words (for instance, if you are looking up "jar", you might also look up "container", or perhaps whatever jars are filled with, for instance "olive oil");
2. Look up each word in an online or print encyclopedia that is specific to the world of the text, and

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descriptions of all human knowledge: culture, artifacts, beliefs, events, SpongeBob SquarePants, etc.

151 Most Wikipedia articles are written by young teenagers or random internet visitors rather than experts in their subjects; it's a good thing teenagers know everything there is to know about everything.

not merely a general-purpose encyclopedia[152]—what you need is information specific to your text's contexts, not merely general information: you want to know what the element meant to the author and audience, not just what it means in general;

3. Remember that the authors of encyclopedia articles are mere humans and not all-knowing gods—they may be wrong and they may be missing information—but write down references to important information you learn (cite it) and restate the information in your own words (don't quote an encyclopedia). Most encyclopedia articles provide references to sources at the end—read and reference these rather than the encyclopedia article if possible.

Text, topic or context-specific encyclopedias (or encyclopedia-like dictionaries) **include:**

- **Religion:** The Encyclopedia of Religion, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Encyclopedia of

152 For Greco-Roman contexts, use an encyclopedia specifically written about the ancient and classical world of Greece or Rome; for modern Jewish religion, use an encyclopedia on modern Jewish religion; for 19th century British law, use an encyclopedia for … you get the point.

Early Christianity, The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature, The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, Encyclopedia Judaica, The Dictionary of Islam, Concise Encyclopedia of Islam

- **Bible:** The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: http://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/, Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, The Anchor Bible Dictionary, New Bible Dictionary, Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, other online resources: https://trinitybiblecollege.edu/academics/theology-online
- **Philosophy:** The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (https://plato.stanford.edu/), Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://www.iep.utm.edu/), The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, A Dictionary of Philosophy, Plato Dictionary
- **Greco-Roman:** The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World, Ancient History Encyclopedia

How to use a commentary

Commentaries are ubiquitous[153] and nearly universal throughout human history: almost every major

153 **Ubiquitous** means everywhere and/or everywhen.

religious, philosophical, or literary text in the world eventually has some form of commentary dedicated to interpreting the text; entire libraries could be filled with commentaries on a single text such as Plato's *Republic*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Koran*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Moses' *Genesis*, Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians*, or Homer's *Iliad*. Commentaries are systematic notes (comments) on a text or texts—they are written interpretations of texts, the fruit of hermeneutics. For almost as long as people have been writing, other people have been writing about their writings (it's easier to write about others' thoughts than it is to think and write your own). The point of a commentary is to reveal the points of the text it comments upon.

Unfortunately, you may find that a commentary author listens to other commentaries more carefully than they listen to the text they are proposing to comment upon (a danger you must also avoid)—commentary writers usually stand in a long tradition of interpretation, and they typically use the thoughts of other commentary writers as the basis of their own thoughts on the text. This is not wrong—we hope that we can build on the knowledge of our predecessors—but if the text is not kept in central focus, we may lose sight of the meaning of the original author in favor of the "meanings" of various interpreters throughout time. A commentary is a secondary source of knowledge on

a text, not a primary; it may help us to understand, but what we should be understanding is the text and not merely commentators' thoughts on the text (as interesting and valuable as these may be). That said, if a commentator does not reference and deal with the ideas of other interpreters while analyzing the text, you may want to find a different commentary.

To use a commentary:

1. Locate 2–5 current[154] scholarly commentaries on your text that deal with historical-cultural contexts, language and related literature, and that organize knowledge in a clear way;
2. Locate 1–2 classic[155] scholarly commentaries on the text that do the same;
3. Find comments about your text in each commentary[156] and skim these, looking for information on:

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154 A good rule of thumb: if a commentary is older than you, it's not current.

155 A commentary that many current commentary authors reference as authoritative and that is perhaps 50 or more years old—note that this is only for texts with a long history of being commented upon (younger texts will have younger "classic" commentaries).

156 In print books, there are usually references at the top of the page that show what passages a page is commenting on; in digital commentaries, you can often search directly.

   a. Literary characteristics of the text,
   b. Related literature,
   c. Grammatical characteristics of the text,
   d. History,
   e. Culture,
   f. Organization of the text and ideas in the text (for instance, philosophy or theology),
   g. Applications,
   h. Evidence for the arguments of the interpreter.
4. Write down what you find in your own words, providing references to your sources—quote only when necessary, and only give short quotes (if someone wanted to read that commentary, they would … but they are reading or listening to you, so give them something of your own);
5. Look for references and interesting information in the footnotes (you should know by now that's where most of the juicy stuff can be found);
6. Summarize what you have found and how this impacts your understanding of the text;
7. If you are writing or presenting a formal interpretation, disperse these notes throughout your own interpretation, where they may help the reader understand some aspect of the text (cite your sources!).

Do you want to take things further?

8. Locate 8–10 current scholarly and popular commentaries on your text that present diverse interpretations (i.e., they disagree with each other);
9. Read 1–3 commentaries of your text in their entirety, taking notes on their approach;
10. Locate 2–4 classic scholarly commentaries on your text (instead of only 1–2);
11. Locate the oldest commentaries on the text to understand how the text was understood at a much earlier period;
12. Focus on an especially contentious part of the text (a passage or element that commentators tend to disagree on most) and offer your own analysis of the arguments of others, giving your own interpretation and providing evidence.

Commentaries are text-specific; examples of **commentaries on the Bible include:**

- The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Word Biblical Commentary, Hermeneia, The NIV Application Commentary, Expositor's Bible Commentary (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/expositors/), Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, The International Critical Commentary,

Eerdman's Critical Commentary, IVP New Testament Commentary, New International Biblical Commentary, Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament, New Testament Commentary, New Bible Commentary

- The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/toc/
- The Net Bible translator notes (at the bottom of the window when note links are clicked in the text of the translation): https://bible.org/netbible/
- Old free online commentaries (many are non-scholarly): http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/
- Other online resources: https://trinitybiblecollege.edu/academics/theology-online

On Organization

If we are to organize what we know, we must know something.[157] Where will we acquire this knowledge? We might come to know based on experience, description, the testimony of an eyewitness (someone else's description of an experience), deduction, intuition, etc. In your interpretation of a text, you have analyzed presuppositions, explicated and exegeted the texts, and understand something about the historical-cultural background of the author and audience. What will you do with this information? How is it all related? How shall we organize our knowledge?

We might organize knowledge based on natural kinds—shared family characteristics.[158] Humans are a natural kind, and so are thoughts about God; **a kind is natural if its members belong together because**

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157 Knowledge is already organized in some sense—it is related to what we already know in some way, it is by organization that we come to know it, and knowledge organizes knowledge.

158 In interpretation, a **kind** might be thought of as a theme or category.

of shared essential qualities. To organize knowledge, we might categorize from the **top down**, and have these kinds in mind when we read and analyze texts, organizing our interpretation of the texts based on these kinds that we already have in mind; or we might come at the problem from the **bottom up**, and discover these kinds by analyzing the information itself in context.

For instance, verbalized thoughts about God might be characterized as theology, and theology might have sub-kinds, for instance, biblical theology and systematic theology. Biblical theology is concerned with analyzing the God-thoughts of individual authors or testaments, while systematic theology is concerned with systematizing all God-thoughts into specific pre-conceived categories like "What we know about angels," "What we know about salvation," "What we know about the Holy Spirit," or "What we know about the church." If we are to organize what we know about the church, we must know something about the church. And to know something about the church, we should probably gather data from texts. If we want to know about dinosaurs, we should look for their bones; if we want to know about stars, we should look to the skies.

As we mentioned earlier, hermeneutics is a means by which we may come to know thoughts, but **most texts are not meant to provide a systematic account of their content**. For instance, the Bible is not meant

to provide a systematic account of "What we know about the church," a nation's laws are not meant to provide a systematic account of "What we know about goodness," and a collection of journal articles on quantum physics may or may not be meant to provide a full and systematic account of "What we know about indeterminacy." If we create a system of knowledge on a topic from a text or collection of texts, we run the risk of misunderstanding and misapplying the original meanings of those texts, because we might be imposing foreign (unintended) categories on the texts instead of discovering what the texts mean—their categories, the thoughts of their authors.

We must systematize, though, if we are to interpret our texts and understand them holistically. If the texts don't include systematic summaries of their own themes, we'll have to do the work ourselves if we want to systematize our knowledge, though we need to avoid proof-texting; we need to focus on individual contexts of passages, and what individual authors meant, if our thoughts are to be like theirs.

Bottom Up Organization (Textual Thematic Organization)

Bottom up organization is a systematic attempt to understand, thematize, and make explicit what individual authors of texts meant in context. When interpreting

the Bible, this bottom up approach is called **biblical theology**.[159]

How to organize textual knowledge from the bottom up:

1. Read the entire text (if it is a book, read the entire book). Think.
2. Read it again. Think again.
3. And again. (Don't stop reading or thinking if you don't yet understand the message.)
4. Now read its parts, thinking about—and taking notes on—how each part, each word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and section is related to every other.
5. What themes stick out? What words, ideas, phrases are repeated? These are important—note them.
6. Outline the text to see how its parts are related.

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159 For examples of biblical theology by modern Pentecostals, see Stronstad (1984; 1995), and Richard Wadholm (2012; 2017). For examples of modern theological hermeneutics, see Yong (2006), Spawn and Wright (2012), Silva (1996), Purdy (2015), McKim (1999), Ladd (1974), Martin (2013), Keener (2016), Fee (1991), Bartholomew (2015), Archer (2004), Adam, Fowl, Vanhoozer, and Watson (2006), Ervin (1981), and Kaiser (1978).

7. Relate the ideas in the book to its historical-cultural background and its literary form.
8. Summarize what you've learned—organize information into themes that you identified in the text.

Do you want to take things further?

9. Outline the entire book.
10. Summarize the thoughts of the entire book in your own words.
11. Read and thoroughly digest several scholarly commentaries on the book (let others' readings inform your own). You would do well to also consult modern and ancient sources of commentary if available.[160] Talk about your interpretation with other readers. You are not the first interpreter of this book, and you will not be the last. (How does your interpretation fit with those of others? If yours is entirely different, why?).

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160 For instance, when interpreting the Bible, you might consult the apostolic fathers, the church fathers, the church councils, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and past interpreters from your own tradition.

At its core, **bottom up organization is analysis of a specific author's ideas**, systematically addressing major thoughts or themes of the author on various topics highlighted throughout their writings, and then outlining the system of thoughts that the author presented. How does an interpreter know what thoughts are the major thoughts of an author? An author may explicitly tell the reader what is important. Note that *where* a thought occurs in the text is significant: in a scientific journal article, look in the Findings section; in a letter, look in the body; in a rhetorical speech, look at the conclusion; in an essay, look at the first and last several paragraphs; in a song, look at the repeated phrases. Each kind of writing demands knowledge of the rules of that kind of writing for true literacy—you only understand what a text means if you understand how the genre of that text functions—so that the genre is a key to telling you what is important in a text, a key to organizing your knowledge of the text.

But what about genres in which the important thoughts are embodied and not explicit, as in stories—**how do you know what are the important thoughts in a story**? One way to identify what is important in any writing is by looking for patterns.[161]

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161 **Patterns** are repeated design elements with variety.

- **Structural patterns** are recurring structures or formulas for the construction of passages.
- **Vocabulary patterns** are recurring words, phrases, synonyms and antonyms (words of very similar or opposite meaning).
- **Episodic patterns** are recurring events that seem to be of the same type.
- **Thematic patterns** are recurring ideas in the narratives.

Part of understanding a text is recognizing and appreciating these patterns. There are also more subtle forms of patterns in narrative texts, including **precedents**, **paradigms**, and **programs**, and these may be positive or negative, implicit or explicit:[162]

- A **precedent** is an example or a model that is later dealt with by the author as a standard or norm for events, beliefs, morals, behaviors, or experiences.[163]
- A **paradigm** is similar to a precedent in that both are examples, but different in that a precedent is something that happened before that serves as the

162 For examples of patterns, precedents, paradigms, and programs in biblical interpretation, see Wadholm (2005b).

163 For arguments against the use of precedents for bottom up organization, see Fee (1976; 1991; 1993) and Fee and Stuart (2003). For arguments in favor, see Stronstad (1984; 1993; 1995) and Wadholm (2005b).

basis of a similar thing happening again, while a paradigm is something that happened before that must or should happen again in that way (but not necessarily in exactly the same way). While a precedent describes something to establish norms, a paradigm prescribes. Because paradigms are prescriptive, they are usually positive and explicit. In stories, paradigms can be part of an explanatory dialogue, a summary, explanatory aside, or narrative description. Paradigms may be set to prescribe belief, morals, behavior, or experience.

- A **program** is a brief outline of how something will be (or should be) pursued by an individual or group, often in a specific order. Programmatic elements provide the reader with insights into the later parts of a story. Programs are often explicit, and are usually positive. Programs set outlines for future behavior and experiences, but not for future beliefs (although they usually transform the beliefs of the individuals involved as the programs are fulfilled). As outlines of future events, programmatic narratives are usually in the context of precedent-setting or paradigmatic events and are prescriptive and/or descriptive.

When you analyze a text for precedent-setting, paradigmatic, and programmatic elements, identify whether they are negative or positive, implicit or explicit, and if they are examples of beliefs, morals, behaviors,

or experiences; then explain what prescriptions and/or descriptions are given. When analyzing patterns, you must **provide sufficient evidence that the author intended the pattern, precedent, paradigm or program**.

In addition to identifying patterns in a text, an interpreter who is doing bottom up organization should continually ask themselves questions such as the following:

- What is this text about—what is most important, and why?
- What does the author want the reader to think, feel or do?
- What questions or problems come to mind as I read?

Top Down Organization (Systematic Organization)

Top down organization tends to begin analysis with general categories of knowledge and too often asks "What does the text say about this?" rather than first asking "What does the text say?" When interpreting the Bible, this top down approach is called **systematic theology**, which is an attempt to synthesize[164] all our knowledge about God and God-related things. If we

164 **Synthesis** is the combination of ideas to form a system of thought.

are to avoid reading into a text, we must *read* the text and attend closely to presuppositions, exegesis and explication, and bottom up analysis—we should construct a systematic organization based on this other work, rather than interpreting texts merely based on our previous categories. As much as possible, an interpreter should allow categories to come from the texts, though secondary categories will naturally inform analyses of the texts and the questions we ask as we read.

How to create a top down synthesis:

1. Read each text related to a topic.[165] Read each of its parts. Interpret them in context. Repeat.
2. Using your mind and pen, make connections. Note themes and categories of knowledge throughout these texts (perhaps writing down references and notes as you go). Start with the texts' categories and themes, rather than your own. (You may need to print texts out and make physical notes as you read, noting themes in the margins of texts.)

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165 If the texts related to a topic are too numerous or lengthy to read them all, find out which texts are the most important or authoritative (i.e., what previous interpreters have identified as the "standard" texts), and read all of those. If this is still too much to read, get a new job.

3. Use the words of the texts as much as possible, in their given contexts, to provide rich, thick description.
4. Summarize thoughts on a theme in your own words.
5. Compare and contrast thoughts on a theme throughout the texts.
6. Bring together your summaries on themes with illustrative examples from the texts (mix your words with those of the texts). Be sure to show your work (as in math problems, how you got to a solution is as important as the solution itself)—provide evidence for your conclusions, and cite your sources.

Do you want to take things further?

7. Consult and become informed by the systematic organization of others, both modern and ancient.
8. Discuss your results with experts and non-experts—listen more than you talk.
9. Present evidence or arguments *against* your conclusions, and show the weaknesses of your interpretations (don't pretend to know without doubt when doubt should be present). If your interpretation is true, it should stand up to the evidence against it.

10. Live your knowledge (if it can't be lived, it's not the truth, though not all knowledge is lived in the same way).

Questions are an essential aspect of systematic top down organization, just as they are at other parts of the interpretive process. Where do the questions come from in top down organization?

- **The texts** themselves (the authors' questions);
- **Our interpretations** of the texts (what we don't yet understand), including categories and themes we identify in the texts;
- **Expert interpretations** of the texts (what the experts want to know from the texts), including categories and themes they identify from the texts;
- **Felt needs** of the community regarding knowledge, beliefs, practices, emotions, experiences; felt needs of the individual interpreter; and felt needs of expert interpreters, including categories and themes not identified in the texts.

We might ask: "Which source of questions is the most important to answer?" I believe we should give greatest importance to the first (texts) and least to the last (felt needs). While it is difficult to put our own needs behind everything else, **interpretation is about just this—putting the thoughts of the other person**

first. We risk not really listening when we put our own needs and desires first. If you think your friend hates you, and when you listen to her talk, if you listen first and foremost with that in mind instead of hearing what she is saying, you may fail to interpret what she means when she talks. Everything might become "She hates me" or "She doesn't hate me"—probably not exactly what she wants to communicate to you. Indeed, in the end, your own (or the experts' or the community's) felt needs may not be real needs at all—it might be that you are asking the wrong questions, that your "needs" are nothing more than mistaken desires, and you'll never know this unless you listen. For instance, you may want to know an answer about fate or freewill, but this does not entail that a text can provide this for you, and you may miss out on the meaning of a text by interpreting it through the overarching question: "Do I have freewill?" Try shutting up and listening; you'll be surprised about what you find.

Felt needs may still be important—you shouldn't hide these, or shut them up forever (hiding your felt needs is like hiding your emotions: it's a perfect recipe for an explosion). **Think about felt needs when you are analyzing presuppositions** at the beginning of interpretation (make these needs clear to yourself) and **set this aside until you are analyzing and organizing the meanings of the text**—you need to know what the text says before you can see if it meets your needs

(or those of experts or the community). Ask questions of the text based on your own categories and themes (in a top down manner) only after you have listened to it. But don't let answers to questions like these define the meaning of the text for you—if these questions or answers aren't based on the intentions of the text, they will require different data (other than the text), and then you are no longer interpreting but organizing your knowledge at large, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but leave the text out of it. What I am saying is that, as in a conversation with a friend, to the extent that you only care about yourself and your own needs, you are a bad interpreter (and a bad friend). Be a good friend of the text's author. Please.

The following list includes example questions for a biblical top down organization of the topic "What we know about Christians and the law":

Questions Concerning Christians & the Law

- Are Christians (Jews and Gentiles) required to follow God's law, in whole or in part?
- Jesus didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17–20), and Christians are not to have other gods (Rev. 21:8), not kill (I Pet 4:15), not commit adultery (Rev 21:8), not steal (I Pet 4:15), not lie (Rev. 21:8), and not covet (I Jon 2:16); are Christians supposed to fulfill the law like Jesus?

- What does Paul mean when he says that Christians are "dead to the law" and "delivered from the law" in Romans 7:1–6, but also that we uphold or establish the law through faith (Rom. 3:31)? How can we uphold the law if it is a "yoke" we are "unable to bear" (Acts 15:10).
- Is it the law of God that is "nailed to the cross" (Col. 2:14; Eph. 2:14–16)?
- Are Christians no longer under the guidance of God's law (Gal. 3:19–25)?
- Are Gentile Christians under food and drink and Sabbath restrictions (Col 2:16; Rom. 14:5–6)?
- Are Jewish Christians, like Paul, required to live in obedience to the law (Acts 21:24), while Gentiles are not (v. 25)?
- Are Gentile Christians only under the requirements given at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28–29)? Further, are those requirements still in force?

Our textual and systematic organization of knowledge from a text should at times also properly inform our **philosophy**. Philosophy can be thought of as a love of wisdom (though not all that goes by that name is loving or wise). If you love wisdom, you will desire it (wisdom), you will follow it, you will give your life for it. Philosophy begins with wonder and its end is the good, the beautiful, the true, the real. **To philosophize**:

1. Ask questions. Truth stands up to hard questions. Don't ask questions merely to ask—ask to find an answer, and don't give up until you find it. When you find true answers, live in the truth you find (and ask how the truths are related).
2. Ask simple questions. The simplest questions are often the most deep … and the shortest. What could be more deep than the question "Who?" In the answer is the source of all goodness, all beauty, all truth, all reality.
3. Ask yourself questions. You believe many things, and you think many things. Perhaps you are wrong about something? Perhaps you are ignorant? Perhaps your knowledge is incomplete or in need of refinement?
4. Ask other people (and texts) questions. You are not the only person with a mind. How will you receive wisdom if you do not ask? Be open to being wrong, to being surprised, to being enlightened.
5. Ask questions about **what is, how we know, what is beautiful, and what is good**. The authors of texts have ideas about these things—what are their ideas?

Interpretation also relates in a direct way to our worldview. **A worldview is the sum total of our presuppositions** (linguistic, political, historical, cultural,

philosophical, religious, psychological, technological, experiential, biological, etc.); it is how we see the world, the tinted glasses through which we view reality. As presuppositions, we have already dealt with worldviews at the beginning of our hermeneutic—now is where we adapt our presuppositions to what we have found, hopefully spiraling in toward the presuppositions of the author and audience. We scrutinize how we view the world, and start to pick away what is false, what does not fit the way the world is.

It is not that the worldviews of the authors of texts are more correct than our own (though they may be), nor are their worldviews necessarily the standards by which we judge our own (though they may be).[166] Rather, if we notice the difference in worldviews, this will help us to recognize that we have a worldview (which is usually invisible to us), and to perhaps change our worldview in repentance if we see that it does not fit the way the world works (if our view is tainted, we may have been seeing all purple when the world is full of color). Trying on others' glasses by attempting to see through their presuppositions (rather than merely our

166 The ideal might be for our worldviews to spiral in toward God's in Christ, because his is the standard, the perfect, the objective vantage point over all creation—complete knowledge.

own) may help us to empathize and to acknowledge our own incomplete vantage points.

To see **how worldviews might affect interpretation:**

1. Imagine you are the author of the text: What are your presuppositions, and how do these help to shape the text? (Historical, cultural, and literary homework will need to be done if you want to be thorough.)
2. Imagine you are the original audience of the text: What are your presuppositions, and how do these help you to understand the text? (Again, homework.)
3. Note any presuppositions you have that are different than those of the author and audience, and summarize how these might affect your understanding of the text.

On Application & Verification

How do we apply the meanings of texts? What is the difference between a message, its meaning, and application? It might help us to unpack several problems with the relationship between meaning, message and application by looking at a very simple example. Take, for instance, the text "The boy sat on a chair": what does it mean? We might restate the message thus: there was a young male human, a specific boy, who in the past sat upon a thing meant to be sat upon. As clarification, we might describe what it means to sit for those who have never sat before, but sitting is such a common thing, and boys and chairs are such common objects, we may need little to no further clarification or historical or cultural background information—we are already acquainted with things of this nature.

At this point, however, we could be said to know what the sentence means, and yet not know what it

means as a message: what is it trying to tell us as a whole text?[167]

Why was the message written? If it was written as an explanation in answer to a question, such as "What did Jimmy do last night after dinner?" the meaning changes—it is meant to provide missing details to answer a question. Or if it were a lie or a misrepresentation—say, if the boy was a suspect in a murder case in which the culprit was known to be standing at the time of the murder—the message might mean something else beyond the data contained in the text—it would be purposely misrepresenting the truth in order to save the boy for some reason, and that is part of the meaning of the message, even though it is not contained in the message itself. Or perhaps the boy suffered from a disease that made it impossible for him to sit on chairs up until this point. The meaning is now wonderful: how can this be that the boy who could not sit, has been described as being a person who sat? A miracle!

What I am getting at is that we must know facts about the author and their context and history, to whom they are writing and why, and perhaps in response to what, as well as the subject (the content of the message,

167 This assumes that there is no larger text directly related to this one by the message creator; for instance, the text is not a small part of a larger text that is a story, and has no other texts intended to make its meaning clear.

for instance, details about the boy described in the message). Complete knowledge of these extra bits of data are probably not possible, nor would all of the data clarify our understanding of the text, but some of this information outside of the text provides us with essential information with which to understand and apply the meaning of the message. How can we know what other information is important to the meaning of the text?

Every text is created within some context—a meaning always exists in the text yet also around and beyond it, such that every message is part of a larger story (the story of real life—even non-textual life). **Every text is part of a story**, a story that includes the author, the text (and how and why it was composed), the audience (potentially including you), and their settings and actions. As part of a larger story, **every text is meant to do something**, to function in some way.

What is the application for a simple message such as "The boy sat on a chair," given that we know what it means? This brief description of an action by a boy does not seem at face value to be applicable to a reader. It does not tell us to sit; it does not seem to tell the reader to do anything (not directly, anyhow). Or does it? It seems to tell us something by means of description, and as such, it tells us to *know* something. To know is to do—knowing is an activity, a cognitive

(thinking) activity. By describing the simple action of a boy sitting on a chair, the message calls on the interpreter to think about a boy sitting on a chair in the past (the word "sat" is used in the text, not "sit"). By thinking about a boy sitting on a chair in the past, the reader is applying the meaning of the text, at least to some extent. Thus, it seems that descriptions do not always call on the reader to do something other than rethink the message that was written. If you think these thoughts, and your thoughts cohere[168] with and do not contradict the author's original thoughts, the application is valid; if not, it is invalid.

How can we verify the validity of an interpretation? We can **falsify an interpretation** (that is, prove it to be false) by showing that one or more essential elements or structures within the interpretation do not fit with the original expressed thoughts of the author or that these contradict the essential elements or structures in the text. If there is an essential misfit between your interpretation and the text, your interpretation is a misinterpretation.

If upon reading the text "The boy sat in a chair," we come to think about a girl standing on the floor

168 By **cohere**, I mean that the thoughts between the creator and interpreter overlap in essentials, so that there is genuine correspondence of structure and elements between the thoughts of both.

with a lollipop in her hand, we may be shown quite simply to be interpreting the text incorrectly. A girl is not a boy—they are mutually exclusively categories, as are sitting and standing. The lollipop in the girl's hand is extraneous and inessential (the boy might have a lollipop in his hand, but we don't have any way to know this from the text itself). The standing girl in our thoughts does not fit with the sitting boy in the text. Misinterpretation.

Similarly, if a person writes "Do not murder," and we murder, we misapply the text; we not only think wrong, but act in a way essentially contradictory to the text. From a positive standpoint, if we read the text "God is love, and anyone who loves is born of God and knows God," and our thoughts cohere with the elements and structures in the text and we go on to love, we will verify not only that our interpretation of the text is valid, but that the claim contained in the text is true—we will find that we know God and are born of God in our loving, and we will see first-hand how this love is from God and how it is a part of his nature and is not merely from ourselves. We may describe tongues or healing or resurrection of the body, but speaking in tongues or witnessing one's own healing or seeing someone be resurrected are knowledge of a different kind, knowledge by acquaintance, and this kind of knowledge acts as a verifier of our interpretation

(in addition to acting as a verifier of the truth of the claims of the text). **Knowledge by acquaintance can verify knowledge by description.** When God speaks through humans, we show God's revelation to be God's revelation by acting on it, whether God's revelation describes something and we think the thoughts of the original author, or it is meant to be known also by acquaintance, by doing what is meant to be done as the purpose of the message.

One might argue that we should therefore do whatever we find being done or described in a message to confirm that the activity or its effects are true. While it is true that we could verify that betrayal makes a person feel bad like Judas Iscariot, the description of Judas in the gospels is not meant to make us act as he acted—it is meant as an example for us, to describe a truth about the world without requiring the reader to be acquainted with the evil of the particular circumstances first-hand. **Some truths are meant to be learned by description**. We live the simulated reality of Judas by reading about his actions and their effects, and do not need to do his deeds to recognize the evil that comes from them. This shows us that not all actions described in texts are meant to be carried out by every reader—application is not mere doing of what is done in a text or even what is encouraged to be done, but **doing what is meant to be done** (and sometimes what is meant to

be done is only meant to be done by an original reader and not the current reader).

What about texts with meanings that are contrary to the truth? You might read a falsified report of a robbery and murder, in which the author intends to mislead the reader about the facts of a past event. Or you might read a text by an author that truly believes humans are made entirely of cheese. **Should a reader apply all texts?** Must the reader verify every text by believing and acting on the intentions of the author? Yes (and no). As readers, we must charitably give other persons—including authors—the hearing they deserve, a hearing that includes belief and application, even if only virtually. You might say to yourself: "If this text is true, and I believed and acted on it, what would be the result, what else would be true about the world, and how does this relate to other knowledge I have about the world?" Imagine a world in which it is true (for instance, that you are made entirely of cheese), and imagine acting on that truth. What is that world like (mmm, delicious)? **In the presence of evidence to believe in something, and in the absence of greater evidence to the contrary, believe**. Doubt requires evidence—do you have enough evidence to doubt a text after you have heard it? Then disbelieve. But you will need to hear a text first if you are to disbelieve it, else what will you disbelieve? However, you don't

need to continually hear a voice that has been shown untrue—you might have reasons to stop listening to authors whose thoughts have been falsified, or at least to stop listening (and applying virtually) the thoughts that have been falsified.

Interpretation as Communication

Interpretation often takes the form of communication: hermeneutics is for us, but also often for others. We don't just want to understand the message; we often want to communicate our understanding to someone else. If we want to communicate our interpretation, we've got to create a new message—our interpretation—and encode it for other people (or ourselves later) to receive and decode. Remember: your message, your interpretation, is not the original message—if the original message is inspired, this does not mean that your message is also necessarily inspired (it might be uninspired and uninspiring, or it might be inspired by the devil or your own ignorance). Take care with your messages!

To communicate someone else's message:

1. **Bring in the wider story** surrounding the message (both in the text and beyond it in the world of the original author and audience);

2. **Describe and explain the elements and structure** of the original message **that are uncommon** (for instance, if someone doesn't know what chairs or boys are, you must describe or explain them) as you also **describe those which are common** (retell the stories, reteach the teachings, reintroduce the arguments—allow listeners and readers to rehear and recognize the content);
3. **Provide evidence that your interpretation is valid** (provide some ways for your audience to verify your interpretation—give others reasons to believe that the elements and structure of your interpretation fit with those of the text);
4. **Do what the message means for you to do** as an example of how it is to be applied. Like a good cook, you should be tasting the food you are making along the way;
5. **Show and tell others how to do what is meant to be done**. Provide examples and illustrations of what should be done and why. This will be a challenge to think and act in accordance with the message of the text.

Of course, this is only if you care about communicating the original message. If you think the original message is wrong, or is not useful, or is not enough, then why bother interpreting or transmitting it? If that

is the case, however, you should not speak as if you were interpreting and applying the original message (if you are not willing to correctly interpret and apply the actual message). Leave texts out of your message—don't refer to them if you really don't care. Don't lie and say you are communicating a message from someone else (or make it seem as if that is the case) if it is only your own. And don't think that a lazy interpreter is a good one, or that you can acquaint others with a truth that you do not already know by acquaintance. Pause and pray—you need it.

Afterword

Done. Now start over—keep reflecting, keep reading, keep exposing yourself to the thoughts and world of the text—spiral in toward the meaning, change the direction of your presuppositions, listen with an open mind. And do.

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