HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE THE AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING?

by ANDY WOODS

My view regarding how to derive the author's intended meaning is based upon the theological doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and illumination. These three doctrines each encompass differing facets of the Holy Spirit's role in communicating the divine message to man. Revelation involves the divine disclosure of truth to a human instrument who records His message. Thus, God as the divine author reveals truth to a human agent who in turn becomes a human author in the communication process.

Inspiration entails God using the human instrument so that the human author ends up recording the very message that God intended to convey (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 2:20-21). In so doing, the divine author does not completely override the human instrument. Rather, the divine author uses the human author's own unique style, personality, language, and culture in such a way that the human author records the very message that the divine author intended. The human author records the message through the norms of conventional language of his own day. Because the message is given in a fixed historical setting, the message's meaning is isolated and permanently bound to its initial historical context.

Illumination involves the Holy Spirit's guidance as He allows the reader to comprehend the message that the divine author intended (John 16:12-13; 1 Cor 2:10, 14; 1 John 2:20, 27). As the Holy Spirit illuminates the message of the divine author to the reader, He does not bypass the exegetical and hermeneutical process (2 Tim 2:15). Thus, by diligent application of proper exegetical and hermeneutical procedure to the message that is recorded by the human author, the reader is able to derive the divine author's intended meaning. After the divine author's intended meaning is derived through proper hermeneutical procedure, others can share in the message. Despite the fact that the original meaning is permanently bound to the original historical time period in which the message was delivered, readers can find multiple significances or applications of the divine author's meaning in their own contemporary setting.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS TO MY VIEW

At least eleven potential objections can be raised against this understanding of how to ascertain the author's intended meaning. <u>First, those adhering to later Hirsch's concept-extension theory of meaning model would maintain that the Scripture's meaning is not isolated to its original historical setting as long as it can be demonstrated that it was the divine author's intention that readers share in the text's meaning.</u> Early on Hirsch postulated that the meaning of a text must be limited to the intention of the human author.[1] However, he later revised his view so that it would also encompass a concept theory of extension, which says that verbal meaning with a future directed intention becomes applicable to an indefinite number of unforeseen future situations.[2] Hirsch appeals to the U.S. Constitution as an example of such a document that its drafters intended to be applicable to (or allegorizable to) unforeseen situations.[3] Glenny maintains that Scripture is also such a future directed intended writing because various biblical texts seem to indicate that the Bible had a referential aspect of meaning beyond the original author's intention (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Cor 10:5-6; Rom 15:4).[4]

However, it remains debatable as to whether the authors of either the Constitution or the Bible intended either of these documents to be future directed in the later Hirschean sense. Originalist Bork observes that the existence of the amendment process within the text of the Constitution itself demonstrates that the founders intended the document's meaning to be fixed in time. Thus, this meaning can only to be changed when the people follow the procedure in Article V and alter the Constitution's meaning by amending the document.[5] Scalia also adheres to such a fixed meaning of the Constitution

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[1] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1967).

[2] E. D. Hirsch., "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 549-67; E. D. Hirsch, "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (December 1984), 202-25.

[3] Hirsch, "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," 552. Even back in 1967, Hirsch seemed to indicate that the content of both the Constitution and the Bible went far beyond the original authors immediate intention when he said, "Yet certain texts such as the Constitution of the United States and the Bible do seem to require that meaning go beyond anything that a human and a historical author could possibly have willed" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 121-22).

[4] W. Edward Glenny, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 4 (December 1995): 496.

[5] Robert H. Bork, *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 171.

when he observes that it is not an "empty bottle" but rather is like a "statue" whose meaning does not change.[6]

It is also possible to see the various texts cited by Glenny to demonstrate the future directed intention of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Cor 10:5-6; Rom 15:4) as simply application texts rather than meaning texts. In other words, rather than taking these texts to mean that modern readers participate in Scripture's meaning, they could simply mean that the historical meaning of Scripture is to be derived and then applied to the contemporary situation by the preacher and reader. Ramm seems to be viewing these texts in this light through his trite expression, "Interpretation is one, application is many."[7] Although Ramm's maxim no longer remains popular among modern hermeneutical theorists, it at least demonstrates that some have not categorized Scripture as a future directed intended document as called for by the later Hirschean model.

Second, others would argue that application of exegetical and hermeneutical procedure to the message recorded by the human author in order to derive the divine author's intended meaning is too simplistic a formula because of the dual authorship characteristic inherent in Scripture. For example, Bock asks, "The reality of inspiration requires that any discussion of the meaning of the biblical text brings into view multiple authors (the human and divine), as well as the speaker or the historical event associated with their message. Whose intent is to be pursued? Are they always the same?"[8] Elsewhere Bock states, "in Scripture we are dealing with the unique circumstance of dual authorship. This means that although we are concerned with the meaning of the human author in his setting, we are also to be sensitive to the meaning of the divine author, who knows the whole story and the entirety of canonical

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[6] Elliott E. Johnson, *Application* (unpublished Class Notes in BS 1003 Hermeneutics, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2003), 7. Hirsch's repeated reliance upon statements made by Marshall in order to verify the future direct intention of the Constitution (Hirsch, *Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory*, 549-66) exemplifies an unbalanced historical approach. Most legal scholars would concur that Marshall was one of the most activist jurists in American history. In fact, the very quotation of Marshall that Hirsch relies upon in order to demonstrate the supposed true intention of the Constitution (Hirsch, *Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory* , 549) comes from the controversial case *McCoulloch v. Maryland* (17 U.S. 316 [1819]). In this case, Marshall used the power of the bench to create a national bank despite the fact that existence of such a bank is never called for in the text of the Constitution.

[7] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 113.

[8] Darrell Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock Craig A. Blaising (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 63.

promise."[9] Glenny echoes this theme when he cites several reasons substantiating his suggestion that it is best not to limit the divine author of Scripture to that of the human author. One such reason cited by Glenny involves the unrealized mysteries contained in the Old Testament prophecies that were not made clear until they were realized in Christ (Rom 16:25-26). Glenny also appeals to the various instances in Scripture where the prophet or speaker did not understand his own utterance (Dan 8:27; 12:6-9; 1 Pet 1:10-12).[10]

While it is difficult to deny the reality of dual authorship in the Bible, it is important not to overstate the case. For example, it is possible that the Old Testament's unrealized mysteries spoken of by Glenny are in actuality *unrevealed* in the Old Testament rather than *unrealized*. Such an understanding would be consistent with the New Testament definition of mystery.[11] In addition, it is possible to interpret the "prophetic Scriptures" in Romans 16:25-26 as referring to the utterances and or writings of the New Testament prophets.[12]

Furthermore, Kaiser rejects interpreting the various texts, which are typically relied upon to prove dual authorship in Scripture, as teaching that the initial speaker or writer did not understand his utterance. After dealing with these passages in detail, he concludes that the only thing that the Old Testament writer did not understand was the time of the fulfillment of his prophecy. Regarding Daniel 8:27, Kaiser says, "So clear was Daniel's understanding of the meaning of his prophecy and so dramatic was its effect on him that he 'was overcome and lay sick for some days.'"[13] When commenting upon Daniel 12:6-9, he says, "the fact that these words of the angel were to be 'closed up and sealed until the time of the end' was no more a sign that these events were to remain *unexplained* until the end time than was the equivalent expression used in Isaiah 8:16, 'Bind up the testimony, seal the law.'"[14] Finally, in

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[9] Darrell Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 90.

[10] Glenny, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations," 485-86.

[11] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 428-34.

[12] F. L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (1883; reprint, Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1977), 504-5; J. M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Chicago: Moody, 1960), 254-55.

[13] Walter C. Kaiser, "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 127.

[14] Ibid.

interpreting 1 Peter 1:10-12, Kaiser notes that the Old Testament prophets understood the following five topics: the Messiah, His sufferings, His glory, the sequence of events (His suffering was followed by His glorification), and that the salvation announced in those pre-Christian days was not limited to the prophets audience, but it also included the readers of Peter's day. Thus, Kaiser concludes that the prophets' search was not for the meaning of what they wrote but rather simply the timing of the subject.[15]

However, to Kaiser's interpretation of 1 Peter 1:10-12, Johnson responds, "But even if Kaiser's model of shared meaning is right, aren't there passages like Daniel 9:24-27 that involve meanings of time? It seems that Daniel was ignorant of the date of 'the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem' even though he wrote about it. So it must be that Daniel wrote more than he understood."[16] Thus, the concept of dual authorship cannot simply be eradicated, as Kaiser seems to prefer. Kaiser's admirable attempt to deal with these passages has failed to convince most scholars that he is correct in uniting the authorial intent of the human and divine authors.[17] On the other hand, Kaiser's work shows that dual authorship does not seem to be nearly as prevalent as Glenny intimates. Human authorial ignorance typically revolved around the issue of timing rather than subject matter. In sum, in order to remain credible, my view of meaning must take into consideration the reality that the divine author may have a broader scope in mind by intending through the words of the human author more than the human author fully understood. However, "an exegete can know that God has done this only when further revelation shows that he did."[18]

Third, others would argue that application of exegetical and hermeneutical procedure to the message recorded by the Old Testament human author in order to derive the divine author's intended meaning is too simplistic a formula because New Testament citations of Old Testament texts often alter the meaning

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[15] Ibid., 125-26.

[16] Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 52.

[17] Darrell Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New (Part 2)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142, no. 568 (October-December 1985): 308.

[18] Philip B. Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20, no. 3 (September 1977): 243.

of these texts by pouring new meaning into them. For example, Bock observes, "To reuse a text to discuss subsequent events is to bring that text into a new context and thus add to its meaning by associating fresh levels of reference and context to the earlier context."[19] Elsewhere, Bock notes, "Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning?…The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add the revelation of a promise is to introduce 'change' to it through addition."[20] In another publication, Bock and Blaising contend, "the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise."[21] In class, Bock also described this process as a magnet moving through space, which attracts increasingly more metallic substances as it moves along its trajectory. He also described this phenomenon as putting "progress" into the term "progressive revelation."

However, Johnson's understanding of the progress of revelation is entirely different. As an example of progress of revelation, Johnson observes the possible range of meanings emanating from the word "you" in the phrase "through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" found in Genesis 12:3. Such a range of meanings includes Abraham, Christ, and saved Israel. Rather, than seeing this range of meanings as representing a change in textual meaning in the progress of revelation, progress of revelation involves a development of a text's original meaning and the range of meanings that are implied in the scope of the original promise even though they may not be initially recognized.[22] Lightner notes this crucial distinction: "'Complementary hermeneutics' must not be confused with the historic orthodox doctrine of progressive revelation. The latter truth means that God revealed His truth gradually,

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[19] Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," 67.

[20] Darrell Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and Old Testament Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and Old Testament Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15, no. 1 (1994): 71.

[21] Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392-93.

[22] Elliott E. Johnson, *In Defense of the Author* (unpublished Class Notes in BS 1003 Hermeneutics, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2003), 1-2.

sometimes over a long period of time. What was revealed later never changed the original revelation, however. The meaning and the recipients of the original promise always remain the same."[23]

Moreover, not all evangelicals have embraced the idea that the New Testament adds kernels of truth unknown to the Old Testament author when it cites Old Testament texts. Drawing from the work of Emil Schurer, Fruchtenbaum is convinced that the New Testament writers (almost all were Jewish) quote the Old Testament in the common Jewish first century way.[24] Fruchtenbaum cites four ways that the New Testament quotes from the old and notes that Matthew 2 contains an example of all four uses. The first example involves messianic prophecies that are directly fulfilled in Christ, such as Matthew 2:5-6 which quotes Micah 5:2. The second example involves typology. Matthew 2:15 quotes Hosea 11:1 for the purpose of demonstrating that the national Son of God coming out of Egypt becomes a type of the individual Son of God coming out of Egypt.[25]

The third example involves application. In the New Testament event, there is one point of similarity with the Old Testament event while the rest of the details between the New and Old Testament events remain different. This example is found in Matthew 2:17-18 which is a quotation of Jeremiah 31:15. The obvious point of similarity between these two events involves the Jewish mothers weeping for their sons that they will never see again. The other details between these two events remain different. In Jeremiah,

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[23] Robert Lightner, *Last Days Handbook*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 210.

[24] Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998), 146-52; Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 38-41; Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "Rabbinic Quotations of the Old Testament and How It Relates to Joel 2 and Acts 2" (an unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, December 2002). Fruchtenbaum cites Schurer who noted that later Judaism discovered that there is a fourfold meaning of Scripture. This fourfold sense includes: 1. *pshat* or the simple or literal reading, 2. *remez* or the meaning arbitrarily imported into it, 3. *drash* or the meaning deduced by investigation, and 4. *sod* or the theosophic meaning. Schurer goes on to observe that the New Testament writers also applied these same four ways in quoting the Old Testament. Schurer also issues the following distinction, "In saying this however it must be remarked, that the exegetic method practiced in the New Testament, when compared with the usual Jewish method, is distinguished from it by its great enlightenment. The apostles and the Christian authors in general were preserved from the extravagances of Jewish exegesis by the regulative norm of the gospel…Jewish exegesis however, from which such a regulatory was absent, degenerated into the most capricious puerilities. From its standpoint, e.g. the transposition of words into numbers, or of numbers into words, for the purpose of obtaining the most astonishing disclosures, was by no means strange, and quite in accordance with its spirit." Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, trans. Sophia Taylor and Peter Christie, 2d and rev. ed., 5 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1891), 3:348-49; Fruchtenbaum, "Rabbinic Quotations of the Old Testament and How It Relates to Joel 2 and Acts 2," 1.

[25] For a development of the typological relationship between Israel and Christ in Matthew's gospel see Charles Dyer, "Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 54-57.

the event takes place in Ramah, north of Jerusalem. In Matthew, it takes place in Bethlehem, South of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah, the sons are still alive and going into captivity. In Matthew, the sons are already dead.

The fourth example involves summation. The citation found in Matthew 2:23 is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. This verse is simply summing up what the prophets said rather than directly quoting them. In this case, the prophets said, "that he should be called a Nazarene." In the first century, Nazarenes were despised people (John 1:45-46). Thus, Matthew is saying that the prophets predicted that the messiah would be a despised and rejected individual. Fruchtenbaum believes that every quotation of the Old Testament in the New will fit into one of these four categories. If Fruchtenbaum's approach is accurate, then there is no basis to conclude that the New Testament reinterprets or changes the meaning of Old Testament texts when it cites them. In each instance, the Old Testament meaning is kept intact as these texts are applied anew.

Fourth, others would argue that application of exegetical and hermeneutical procedure to the message recorded by the Old Testament human author in order to derive the divine author's intended meaning is too simplistic a formula because much of the information contained in these texts does not become clear until the reader approaches Scripture from a canonical perspective rather than an exegetical one. Poythress, building on Waltke's canonical process approach to interpretation, argues that the divine meaning of Scripture is more fully understood as its canonical context develops.[26]

Using Psalm 22 as an example, Poythress suggests that there are the following three progressively larger contexts in light of which a given passage may be read: the historical circumstances of the book in which the passage occurs, the context of the available canon up to the time the book containing the canon was compiled, and the context of the completed canon.[27] Bock similarly suggests three levels of reading that he calls historical-exegetical, biblical-theological, and canonical-systematic.[28] Bock also

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[26] Vern S. Poythress, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 241-79.
[27] Ibid., 267-71.
[28] Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," 100-102.

describes these three readings as reading the text in its original setting, in light of the biblical book, and in light of the canon.[29] Elsewhere, Bock suggests that identification of the serpent as Satan (Gen 3:1) and the identification of the protoevangelium (Gen 3:15) only emerge after these texts are read from the canonical perspective.[30] Chisholm similarly argues against an exegetical interpretation of the protoevangelium.[31]

But is this the only way of understanding the meaning of Old Testament texts? Interestingly, Bock and Johnson reach many of the same conclusions although Bock reaches them from a canonical perspective while Johnson reaches them from an exegetical one. Johnson claims that the proper meaning of many of these ideas begin to emerge from an exegetical study of the Old Testament texts. For example, Johnson believes that it is possible to identify the serpent of Genesis 3:1 as Satan without the assistance of the New Testament. Johnson argues that Genesis 3 identifies the serpent as "*the enemy of God*" rather than "*an enemy of God*" because of the book's genre as the book of beginnings. Thus, the introduction of the ultimate source of evil would be an appropriate topic in the early chapters of such a book. At this point, Bock may accuse Johnson of engaging in a canonical reading of the text without realizing it. However, Johnson is not alone in contending that the proper definition of important biblical ideas begins to surface at the exegetical level. Fruchtenbaum sees the protoevangelium (Gen 3:15) as well as the New Testament understanding of Immanuel (Isa 7:14) emerging at the exegetical level as well.[32] While no one disputes the fact that the New Testament adds clarity and specificity to Old Testament concepts, it is probably an over statement to suggest that one cannot arrive at a proper identification of Old Testament concepts until the third reading of the text.[33]

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[29] Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 90-91.

[30] Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," 81.

[31] Robert Chisholm, *Genesis 3:15* (unpublished Notes in 103B Principles of Hebrew Exegesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, Summer 2001).

[32] Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology*, 14-18, 32-27.

[33] The argument that the proper identification of Old Testament concepts cannot be obtained until the third reading of the text also seems odd in light of the fact that Christ held Israel responsible for recognizing His identity as well as the timing of His coming at His first advent (Matt 16:1-3; Luke 19:42; Rom 9:31-10:9). These texts seem to indicate that one of the bases for such accountability was the information given about the coming messiah in the Old Testament. However, if these Old Testament messianic ideas remained unclear until the completed canon made a third reading of the text possible, then it would hardly be fair for Christ to hold the Jews responsible for the messianic prophetic truth that they had already received.

Fifth, the goal of pursuing authorial intent poses its own unique problems in the area of biblical studies simply because we do not know who the biblical author is in some cases and in other cases we know very little about the author. The Book of Hebrews and certain Psalms represent particular instances where authorship is uncertain. This problem is compounded when certain works are attributable to more than one author. For example, some of the Psalms are attributed to the sons of Korah. However, Bock seems to answer this objection when he says, "Even in a book like Hebrews or certain Psalms where authorship is uncertain, we have access to the author and his message in the text that was left to us. It was the desire to communicate that produced these texts, and so the starting point for interpretation is the pursuit of that message."[34] Payne expresses a similar sentiment when he says, "Ultimately all argument about meaning or the author's intention must be rooted in the text...."[35]

Sixth, the practicality of obtaining the author's intent is often challenged on the grounds that comprehending the author's intended meaning involves understanding the psychological aspects of the author's thoughts. Because we can never fully understand the author's psychology, the authorial intent is deemed inaccessible. Schleiermacher stressed the creative role within the human mind within the process of understanding.[36] Thus, he proposed that priority should be given to the psychological aspects of the author's thoughts in understanding authorial intent.[37] Payne presents a similar line of reasoning when he argues that the human author's intention cannot be known beyond question. Payne points out that subconscious thoughts and perception are influential on human language and that we have no way of knowing these thoughts.[38]

However, Hirsch rebuts this objection by pointing out whether one knows or does not know the author's mind is irrelevant because what he wrote is what ultimately conveys meaning since verbal meaning is shareable by others.[39] Erickson also helps rebut this objection by suggesting a clarification of

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[34] Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," 63.
[35] Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," 251.
[36] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 205.
[37] Ibid., 204-33.
[38] Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," 244-45.
[39] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 31-40.

terminology. He notes that instead of speaking of the original author "intention"–a term fraught with ambiguity–it is better to speak of the author's "affirmation" or "assertion" in the text. These latter terms focus on the authorial product rather than the process and "avoid the appearance of conscious intention as a prerequisite for meaning."[40]

Seventh, some may argue that the author's intent is unknowable because of its lack of historical reproducibility. In other words, the author's meaning is encapsulated in a precise historical, cultural, and linguistic setting which must be reconstructed before the author's meaning can be known. Because such an exact historical reconstruction is impossible, the author's meaning is forever lost. However, if precise historical reconstruction were the standard for ascertaining authorial intent, finding such intent would indeed be impossible. But no one can reasonably assert that exact historical reconstruction is a prerequisite for understanding the past. Hirsch seems to acknowledge this when he says, "We can never be sure that we have 'truly' understood a text from the past any more then we can be sure that we have understood one from our own time."[41]

Interestingly, one finds this same debate in the area of constitutional interpretation. Bork provides the following quotation made by Justice Brennan while Brennan was criticizing an originalist understanding of the Constitution: "It is arrogant to pretend that from our vantage point we can gauge accurately the intent of the framers on application of principle to specific, contemporary questions."[42] To Brennan's assertion Bork responds:

> Of course the view described by Justice Brennan is arrogant, or would be if anyone took such a position. The requirement that the judge know what the specific intention of the lawgiver was regarding the case at hand would destroy all law. Judges almost never know intentions with such particularity in applying statues, contracts, or other judges' opinions. If they had to have such knowledge they could never decide. If such specific knowledge were available, judges would never disagree with one another, there would be no need to allow appeals from the trial judges decision, and no court would need more than one judge. Justice Brennan demolished a position that no one holds, one that is not only indefensible but undefended….

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[40] Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 23.

[41] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 44.

[42] Bork, *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law*, 162.

…We must not expect too much of the search of original understanding in any legal context. The result of the search is never perfection; it is simply the best we can do; and the best we can do must be regarded as good enough.[43]

Eighth, some may challenge the reasonableness of attaining authorial intent on the grounds that the text is not fixed and immutable but is rather changeable throughout history. Herder postulated the philosophy of radical historicism when he noted, "Every cultural era was another melody in the divine symphony, and every melody had its own divine individuality."[44] Hirsch comments that "this philosophic form of radical historicism lent intellectual respectability to a prevalent and popular form of historical self consciousness which had already created an atmosphere of skepticism regarding the genuine knowability of past cultures."[45] Johnson observes that "the result of this challenge was a view of history called 'historicism,' which holds that a text's meaning changes in essence from era to era."[46] Hirsch counters this objection by contending that author's meaning conveyed through the text is immutable because it is communicated through a willed type, which has verbal meaning that has boundaries. Only after the author's bound meaning is properly understood, can readers find multiple significances or applications in their own contemporary setting.[47]

Ninth, because of the Gadamerian notion that interpretation can be compared to works of art, playing a game, and interpreting law, it is difficult to identify meaning with the author's intention alone. Gadamer proposed that works of art exist in concrete form only in being viewed or read.[48] He also proposed that because a game takes on a concrete existence only in being played, it ultimately finds its true meaning when players engage in it.[49] The implication of this philosophy is that meaning changes with the circumstances of the reader. Gadamer also finds an illustration of this principle in the

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[43] Ibid., 162-63.
[44] Herder; quoted in Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 40.
[45] Ibid., 41.
[46] Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 56.
[47] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 49-51.
[48] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 51; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d rev. ed. ([No city]: Sheed and Ward, 1975; reprint, New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 42-169.
[49] Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 51.

hermeneutics jurists use for legal texts. When a jurist interprets a law, he is seeking validity for a certain case only.[50] Gadamer advocates this method of interpretation for Scripture as well. He writes, "The text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application."[51] Hirsch responds to these assertions by redrawing the line between meaning and significance. Thus, an appropriate Hirschean response is that "despite the essentiality of the performers to the presentation of certain works, the meaning presented is still bound to its author's intentions and hence that the performers cannot be considered the creators of the work in a sense that would allow them to change its meaning."[52]

Tenth, some may argue that the limitations inherent in language itself prevent the reader from adequately grasping meaning. Modern linguistic theory recognizes many limitations regarding human language and through further assumptions puts the language of the Bible into the same categories of usage as modern language. Caird notes that opacity, vagueness, and ambiguities are common limitations in language.[53] Another limitation commonly cited is redundancy.[54] The question becomes do these linguistic limitations prevent the reader from deriving meaning? Perhaps it could be argued that the Spirit's role in illumination allows the reader to ascertain scriptural meaning in spite of linguistic shortcomings.[55] Thomas believes that the argument of scriptural linguistic fallibility overlooks the uniqueness of the Bible. He observes:

> Further, even if the same linguistic principles are applicable to ancient languages, who would dare say that the words written by divine inspiration would show the same redundancy that allegedly characterizes modern communication? To be sure, God used normal language when He inspired the Bible, but the ultimately divine origin of that language certainly puts it into a unique category.[56]

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[50] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 324-30.
[51] Ibid., 309.
[52] Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 53.
[53] G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 85-108.
[54] E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (March 1972): 74; Moises Silva, "Let's Be Logical," in *An Introduction to Hermeneutics*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 60.
[55] The discussion regarding the Spirit's role in illumination will receive more detailed treatment below.
[56] Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 210.

Thomas' point seems particularly poignant especially upon considering that the language of Scripture is inspired down to the minutest linguistic particle (Matt 5:18).

Eleventh, some may see the reader's attempt to ascertain the intent of the author as an unrealistic goal because the reader's prejudices and pre understandings inhibit him from objectively interpreting the text. Many in the post-Kantian age would deem as naïve the assumption that the interpreter can approach the text with objectivity.[57] The principle of the *tabula rasa* or "clean sleight" interpretation is seen as an impossible ideal. For example, Lonergan claims that we cannot find the meaning in a biblical text if we approach it on the basis of the "empty head."[58] Thiselton agrees with Smart who states, "claim of absolute scientific objectivity in interpreting scripture involved the interpreter in an allusion about himself that inhibits objectivity."[59] Elsewhere, Thiselton endorses Gadamer's observation that "traditional hermeneutics …limits the horizon to which understanding belongs, and pays insufficient attention to human facticity."[60] Because of the existence of the reader's anthropological finitudes, Gadamer proposed that genuine understanding takes place only when there occurs a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) between the past and the present, or between the text and the interpreter.[61]

However, it remains debatable how much of Gadamer's theories should be incorporated into evangelical biblical interpretation. If Gadamer's insights are deemed as indispensable to biblical hermeneutics, then one must conclude that pre-Kantian interpreters of Scripture were erroneous in their conclusions. Thomas observes:

> If this point is valid, one wonders how the church's interpretation of Scripture accomplished anything worth while prior to the time of Kant. The integrationists must entertain a sort of

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[57] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 27, 315.

[58] B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 157.

[59] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, 27.

[60] Ibid., 304.

[61] Darrell Bock, *Gadamer: Key Concepts* (unpublished Class Notes in BS 1003, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2003).

camouflaged disdain for meaning extracted from the Bible prior to the "Enlightenment" and its provisions of techniques for synthesizing the Bible with discoveries of modern philosophy.[62]

Furthermore, the indispensability of Gadamer's insights for biblical hermeneutics is also questionable due to the Holy Spirit's illuminating ministry. Thomas notes, "The Spirit can erase improper preunderstandings in the minds of the persons possessing a new nature in Christ and enable exegetes to approach the text in an objective manner."[63] The testimony of Scripture is that God ultimately brings about His purposes in the lives of imperfect people through divine enablement. Can biblical interpreters expect no less enablement from God in order to overcome their anthropological limitations? It is for reasons such as these that Bernard Ramm[64] and even Martin Luther[65] believed that objective study of the biblical text was an attainable goal.

However, within evangelicalism, a discussion continues concerning the scope of the Spirit's illuminating ministry. Bock contends that the Spirit's illumination pertains only to the core content of the gospel message without necessarily spilling over into other areas of biblical revelation and systematic theology. Bock contextualizes many of the passages that speak of the spirit's illumination (John 16:12-13; 1 Cor 2:10, 15; 1 John 2:20, 27) and thus argues that they pertain only to the basic message of the gospel. According to this view, although the Spirit's illumination was involved in Luther's retrieval of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, similar illumination was not necessarily involved in Darby's retrieval of the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture. Consequently, Bock establishes a rating system for the purpose of ranking doctrines according to their degree of certainty. Such a ranking system is similar to rating systems found in textual criticism. Those doctrines pertaining to the basic Christian message receive the highest ranking while others doctrines beyond the basic Christian message receive a lower ranking.[66] Bock places a strong emphasis on dialoguing with other

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[62] Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 128.
[63] Ibid., 52.
[64] Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 116.
[65] D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994), 94.
[66] Darrell Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How We Read Texts," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock Craig A. Blaising (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 70-71.

members of the Christian community, especially outside one's tradition, in order to gain insight into those doctrines deserving of a lower ranking.[67] Bock contends that claiming the Spirit's illuminating ministry is insufficient in order to claim accuracy of a doctrine of secondary importance because believers outside of one's tradition are also filled with and illuminated by the Spirit.

However, these ideas are based upon the assumption that the Holy Spirit has a limited role in illumination. It is interesting to observe the numerous occurrences of the word "all" in the texts describing illumination. Examples include "all things" (John 14:26), "all truth" (John 16:12-13),[68] "all things" (1 Cor 2:10), "all things" (1 Cor 2:15), and "all things" (1 John 2:20, 27). Repetition of such universal terminology seems to imply a much broader illumination ministry of the Spirit than Bock advocates. On its face, it seems odd that the Holy Spirit would reveal truths in the Bible while simultaneously not giving believers the necessary enablement to understand what He has recorded. Moreover, the New Testament does not seem to indicate that the reader encounters vast degrees of uncertainty when reading Scripture. Luke's purpose in his gospel was "that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). Paul believed that his readers could "know with certainty" (Eph 5:5) as well as be "convinced" of certain truths (2 Tim 1:12).[69]

It is also important not to overstate the Spirit's role in illumination. As Thiselton correctly points out, "appeals to the Holy Spirit do not bypass hermeneutics. For the Spirit works *though* human understanding and not independently of it…Hermeneutics cannot bypass semantics and traditional language-study."[70] Moreover, a more encompassing view of illumination does not mean that all

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[67] Ibid., 60-61; Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," 104-105.

[68] It should be observed that this text specifically points out the Spirit's desire to illuminate "things to come." Thus, the Spirit desires to illuminate the eschatological truths developed throughout Scripture. Therefore, the Spirit's role in illumination extends beyond the basic Christian message and covers other areas of systematic theology as well.

[69] Brian A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 179. In private conversation with Bock, I sensed that part of his reluctance to acknowledge a more expansive role of the Spirit in illumination emanated from a desire to rectify an "ex cathedra" mentality among some interpreters who feel that their interpretation is infallible because they feel that the Spirit led them to a particular interpretive conclusion. While this is a proper diagnosis of a legitimate problem within the body of Christ, for reasons stated above, I believe that a limited view of the Spirit's illumination is an improper solution to this proper diagnosis.

[70] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, 440.

scriptural obscurities are cleared up or else Peter would not have said of Paul's writings "some things are

hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16). Believers in this age will continue to live with some degree of

uncertainty. In addition, one should not deny that dialogue with those whom you disagree could be

helpful. Sometimes the Spirit uses dialogue to illuminate believers (Acts 15:28; Prov 27:17).[71] On the

other hand, it is also best not to explain the differences in interpretation between different traditions

based on a limited illuminating ministry of the Spirit. These differences have more to do with

hermeneutical considerations than with a limitation on the Spirit's illumination. Amillenarian Albertus

Pieters succinctly summarized the issue when commenting upon the differences between literal and non-

literal methods of interpretation. He noted, "as long as there is no agreement on this point the debate is

interminable and fruitless."[72]

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[71] Elliott E. Johnson, *The Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation* (unpublished Class Notes in BS 1003 Hermeneutics, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2003), 3.

[72] Pieters; quoted by John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom: A Basic Text in Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 128.

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