

Contemporary Hermeneutical Theory and Conservative Interpretation

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In this essay I want to examine some of what is happening in the world of philosophical hermeneutics so that we can better understand the influences that are being seen in evangelical textbooks on the subject. Still more, we shall start to understand why evangelicals are jumping ship from grammatico-historical interpretation; a situation that threatens dispensationalism even more.

1. Definitions: Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Application

In any discussion, but especially in those involving foundational matters, it is crucial to define ones terms. Hermeneutics has been given a few different definitions. Many are covered by Robert Thomas in his

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This essay is an extract, slightly adapted, from the author's dissertation.

book, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*.²For the moment it will suffice to borrow from a standard conservative manual.

As a theological discipline hermeneutics is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible...It seeks to formulate those particular rules which pertain to the special factors connected with the Bible. It stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game.³

The definition above draws a helpful comparison between a book of rules that acts as the control over what is admissible and what is precluded in playing a game. All ought to play by the same rules. If they don't; if each player thinks they can make up their own rules, the game is spoiled. This has been a good assumption of Bible interpreters, which has yielded excellent sermons, commentaries and theologies in the past. It has also been the operating assumption of those modern scholars whose hermeneutics books advocate a more subjective, reader-response attitude to the text of Scripture. As E. D. Hirsch noted,

² Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 28.

³ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1975), 11.

“Most authors believe in the accessibility of their verbal meaning, for otherwise most of them would not write.”⁴ It would seem to be safe policy to define hermeneutics in a reductionistic fashion so as to leave room for clear roles for exegesis and application. Thus, we may begin by agreeing with Thomas’s classification of *hermeneutics* as “a set of principles” for right interpretation.⁵ In the picture of the bridge across the frozen river (obtained from Servant’s Place) the two banks of the river are connected by the structure. Hermeneutics is the bridge between the author and the interpreter. It should be the best way to get from the one to the other.

Once hermeneutics has been so narrowly (and properly) labeled, it is alright to proceed to define exegesis. *Exegesis* is the implementation of the rules of hermeneutics to the Biblical text. As such, it involves the use of sanctified reason, as well as a certain finesse wrought out of a familiarity with the contents of Scripture. It is the act of investigative interpretation, which comprises adherence to hermeneutical principles along with a certain artistry brought by the subject. One should not speak of art or imagination when one is defining hermeneutics.⁶ Hermeneutics does not

entail active engagement with a text. That is where exegesis takes over.⁷

To understand how the definition of *hermeneutics* has become confused, consider these definitions:

Hermeneutics: Theory and principles of interpretation; for writings, correctly understanding the thought of an author and communicating it to others.⁸

Hermeneutics: The “science” of understanding the significance for a new audience of a text originally intended for a different audience⁹

The first definition proceeds from formulation to implementation without batting an eyelid. Indeed, it moves beyond that and incorporates application within the actual process of interpretation, so that whereas *application* should be associated

⁴ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 18.

⁵ Thomas, 27.

⁶ As e.g., William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson,

1993, revised and expanded), 5. There is much fine material in this work.

⁷ It is unfortunate that even some dispensationalists confound hermeneutics and exegesis. This is somewhat due to the employment of an inclusive designation of hermeneutics as including “observation, interpretation, and application.” Such a definition is, of course, far too broad for a dispensationalist.

⁸ Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, Grant Lovejoy, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 367.

⁹ Richard J. Erickson, *A Beginner’s Guide to New Testament Exegesis*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 222.

with the end-product of exegetical-expositional communication, here it is being read into the text.

In the second definition authorial intention is displaced by a preoccupation with present-day significance. Application is king! But by what rules is application guided? We see then that a precise and exclusive delineation of hermeneutics is mandatory for accurate guidance in scriptural comprehension.

2. Why Hermeneutics is Important

God has given us the Bible so that we can know about Him, about ourselves, and about our world. We understand from Scripture that we need a Savior, and we discover who the Savior is, what He has accomplished on our behalf, and what we must do to acquire salvation.

All of this presupposes that we can understand what God is saying in His Word. Indeed, without the Bible, it is not possible for fallen man to interpret his life correctly. As one recent book explains it, “the Bible provides us with the basic story that we need in order to understand our world and to live in it as God’s people.”¹⁰

Every time a child opens up a story-book and starts to read he or she takes for granted certain rules of interpretation; rules about spelling, basic grammar, context, and so on. As grown ups we do the same. Whenever we read or write something we presuppose certain norms of communication. Without them we could neither read nor write intelligibly. In the

¹⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew & Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 21.

biblical philosophy of life, God gave human language so that He could converse with His creature, man, and so that man could obey Him dutifully. Language was also given in order that man could converse with God and verbalize God’s praise back to Him. Thirdly, language was given so that man could communicate with his fellow man.¹¹ This view of language should be taken with us when we attempt to devise a set of principles for Biblical interpretation. The whole aim of Biblical hermeneutics is spelled out by Ramm when he says, “we need to know the correct method of interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man.”¹²

The Starting-Point of Interpretation

Obviously, we must ascertain what the right set of principles is with which to interpret the Bible, and for this we must ask ourselves where the starting point of hermeneutics is.

Before hermeneutical principles can be clearly ascertained the reader of Scripture must realize that either he/she is the starting-point of interpretation or God is. Interpretation is grounded in the internal musings of man or it is grounded in the external Word of God *to* man. Any sound biblical philosophy will stipulate that the Christian heart and mind must begin from a

¹¹ A thought-provoking treatment of language from a Christian perspective is Quentin J. Schulze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

¹² Ramm, 2.

transcendent point – the mind of God expressed in His Word.¹³

Liberal hermeneutics, falling in line with man-centered thought forms, always assumes an immanentistic outlook. The Tübingen scholar Gerhard Maier supposes that the question of whether one takes man as the starting-point or revelation itself as the starting-point is “the most significant hermeneutical decision.”¹⁴ If that is the case then the Bible-believer has no choice but to adopt a transcendent starting-point. If such a view goes against the grain of the interpreter it should be pointed out that this is the only position to take if one is going to take the Bible’s own attestation seriously. When an immanent standpoint is taken, the interpreter places himself under the dictates of Cartesian foundationalism, and when that step is taken “truth” is no longer derived from God through Divine revelation, it must be found out somehow by men whose wisdom it would be to declare, because of their finiteness and ignorance, that the task is beyond them.¹⁵

We are left, then, with dependent reason, guided by faith in the God who has graciously revealed Himself to us. To cite Maier,

If we have rightly defined our task, namely, to understand the Bible in accordance with its own basic claim, and if we have rightly observed that

the Bible is the most unique “object,” then our guiding principle must be to proceed consistently from the revelation that encounters us in the form of the Bible. The starting point must strictly and consistently be revelation itself.¹⁶

Once we have decided which comes first, the mind of the interpreter or the mind of God as revealed in Holy Scripture, we can look into the rules of interpretation themselves. Some evangelicals (e.g. Jonathan Edwards) have argued that because the Bible is inspired it ought to be interpreted by a different set of principles from a normal book. Maier is one of those who believe a special biblical hermeneutics is necessary. He puts forth four good reasons for his opinion.

First, the Bible is unique in the world of literature by the very fact that it is inspired. In here alone God speaks in written form.¹⁷

Second, Maier very perceptively says that “the biblical writers seek consciously to recede into the background. They point away from themselves to God as the author of their message.” This being the case, Maier thinks that to begin with a “normal hermeneutic” would be to set up the banner of human reason over the whole process.¹⁸

In the third place, in order for the proper distinction between Creator and creature be kept, it is imperative that the Holy Spirit help us to comprehend His meaning. Surely this implies that a deeper understanding does

¹³ See chapters 4, 6 and 7 of the present writer’s dissertation, *Method and Function in Dispensational Theology*.

¹⁴ Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 29.

¹⁵ Ibid, 30.

¹⁶ Ibid, 34.

¹⁷ Ibid, 20–21.

¹⁸ Ibid, 22–23.

not come through reading the bare words on the page, but from Divine illumination.¹⁹

Then finally, one cannot disregard the deleterious effects of sin upon our reason, not to mention the problem of preunderstanding that makes impartial interpretation impossible. Sin is shaping the reader of the Bible in some way²⁰

Our response to these issues is that although we see the truth in them all we do not believe that this clears the way for a special kind of hermeneutical engagement²¹ -provided reason is subordinated to revelation. The first two points have been pivotal to the thesis we have been presenting. And the third grows naturally out of those points. Even the last matter is granted to some extent, although we think that properly conceived grammatico-historical rules of interpretation, employed by a regenerate and obedient person will reduce the risk of “noetic contamination” considerably.

3. The Hermeneutical Landscape

The philosopher of religion Gregory Clark admits that, “[some] sources regularly describe the variety of hermeneutical approaches practiced today as ‘dizzying’.”²²

In closing his article Clark writes:

¹⁹ Ibid, 24.

²⁰ Ibid, 25.

²¹ Maier recommends a Biblical–Historical hermeneutics. Ibid, 375–409.

²² Greg Clark, “Contemporary Hermeneutics,” in Scot McKnight & Grant Osbourne, editors, *The Face of New Testament Studies*, (Apollon, 2004), 115.

Hermeneutics as a discipline is as wild and woolly as it has ever been, and its future shape and even its existence are impossible to predict.²³

Reading the “movers and shakers” in evangelical hermeneutics today is a little foreboding. It might be well to start off then by reminding ourselves of a standard definition of hermeneutics:

Hermeneutics...is both a science and an art. As a science, it enunciates principles, investigates the laws of thought and language, and classifies its facts and results. As an art, it teaches what application these principles should have, and establishes their soundness by showing their practical value in the elucidation of the more difficult Scriptures. The hermeneutical art thus cultivates and establishes a valid exegetical procedure.²⁴

It would be helpful to add to this Ramm’s observation that it “stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game.”²⁵ In addition, Ramm added that what the interpreter is looking for is the single-meaning of any passage: “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one; application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning

²³ Ibid, 117.

²⁴ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 20.

²⁵ Ramm, 11.

to a passage of Scripture, which is determined by careful study.”²⁶

Contrast Ramm’s words with those of the prominent British Old Testament scholar David J. A. Clines who writes:

I have been impressed in this study [of Esther] by the value of as many strategies as possible for reading a text. As a critic of the text, I should hate to be restricted by a methodological purism. What I have noticed is that different strategies confirm, complement or comment on other strategies, and so help develop an integrated but polychromatic reading.²⁷

Or again,

My experience with Psalm 23 was enough to convince me that ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ are not categories to be applied to interpretations, that, as far as I could see, a text can mean anything at all, and that I myself was (oxymoronically) an absolute indeterminist.²⁸

Clines exults that he can explore the text of the Bible with complete methodological abandon. This freedom has not come to him

through the mere exercise of the imagination. It is a result of studying the philosophical hermeneutics of people like Roland Barthes and Richard Rorty, both of whom teach that subjectivity is desirable in reading a text.²⁹ Objectivity is a mirage, a dream perpetuated by the sort of naïveté demonstrated only by intransigent ultra conservatives.

It behooves us then to briefly chart some of what has been going on in the world of mainline hermeneutics so that we might better access what conservative interpreters are being influenced by, not to mention what dispensationalists are increasingly likely to come up against.

Schleiermacher

Modern hermeneutics started with F. D. E. Schleiermacher (d. 1834). Operating from a background that mixed German Pietism and Kantian Idealism, Schleiermacher believed that to confine biblical hermeneutics to a set of previously drawn up “rules of interpretation” was to decide the outcome of one’s exegesis before the text had been analyzed. He stated that for any interpretation to take place the interpreter must provisionally know something about text itself. This he referred to as “preunderstanding.”³⁰ There must, he said,

²⁶ Ibid, 113.

²⁷ Quoted by Craig G. Bartholomew, “Postmodernity and Biblical Interpretation,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 604.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See W. Randolph Tate, *Interpreting the Bible: A Handbook of Terms and Methods*, (Peabody, MT: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006).

³⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, (Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 103. This book, more than any other, is responsible for much of the re-thinking about hermeneutics that has

be some preliminary understanding of a subject, say, “love,” before that subject can be comprehended from the page. As R. E. Palmer puts it,

Is it not vain to speak of love to one who has not known love, or of the joys of learning to those who reject it? One must already have, in some measure, a knowledge of the matter being discussed.³¹

Schleiermacher, then, proceeded to divide hermeneutics into two components, the linguistic and the psychological.³² The linguistic or grammatical approach, with which we are all familiar, whereby, “the reader needs to use objective, grammatical methods to acquire an exhaustive knowledge of original languages and the historical and literary contexts of a text.”³³ This he believed in strongly, and, in fact, he made several important clarifications along this line.³⁴ But this was not enough. For

been going-on within evangelical scholarship. Thomas contends, “This... work radically altered the way that many evangelicals interpret the Bible.” – Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 18.

³¹ Cited in Thiselton, 104.

³² David K. Clark, *To Know And Love God: Method For Theology*, (Wheaton, Ill, Crossway Books, 2003), 104–105.

³³ Greg Clark, “General Hermeneutics,” in, eds., Scot McKnight & Grant R. Osborne, *The Face of New Testament Studies*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 109.

³⁴ David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, (Grand Rapids: Baker,

Schleiermacher, and for many mainline interpreters since his time, the reader has to become connected with the original author’s psyche at the time and place he wrote. This psychological aspect he called “divination.” As he himself said, “The divinatory is that in which one transforms oneself into the other person in order to grasp his individuality directly.”³⁵

There must be an attentive acculturation of the reader to the personality of the writer. The reader must “reexperience the thoughts of the author”³⁶ He must not only enter his world but, with imagination and empathy, read the author’s intellectual and emotional experience, even his sub-conscience.³⁷ If there is any sympathy between subject and object there is an “inspiration” already in the reader which allows him to do this.³⁸

Schleiermacher didn’t believe the interpretation ended at a certain point in the process. There would be constant interplay between the reader and the text and the

1994), 163. Hirsch called Schleiermacher’s aphorisms, found in the first part of his lectures on Hermeneutik, “among the most profound contributions to hermeneutics.” – E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 263.

³⁵ Cited in Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 107.

³⁶ Greg Clark, “General Hermeneutics,” 109.

³⁷ Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 163.

³⁸ Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 72–73.

world of understanding of both.³⁹ Not only that, but the new understanding generated by the process teaches the reader's understanding (that is, his "preunderstanding") before he sits down to reread.

The fuller (or more accurate) understanding "speaks back" to the preunderstanding to correct and to reshape it. This revision contributes to a better understanding. Hence, to reread a "difficult" book, or even to undertake successive readings, may bring about a deeper understanding of it.⁴⁰

There is no doubt about Schleiermacher's influence upon hermeneutical theory. He prepared the ground for all the

hermeneutics theorists down to the present day.⁴¹

Gadamer⁴²

Hans-Georg Gadamer (d. 2002), was a student of both Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. His work on hermeneutics, particularly his tome *Truth and Method* have been enormously influential. Gadamer is responsible, perhaps more than any other, for shifting the emphasis of interpretation away from authorial intention and on to the reader.⁴³ He did this through the rhetorical device of the "two horizons" – the horizon of the biblical text and the horizon of the modern interpreter. The horizon of the reader (also called the "Horizon of Meaning") involves not only the reader, but the methodological parameters set down, usually unconsciously, by the community of which he is a part. Possible meanings, then, are circumscribed by the interpretive

³⁹ Thiselton, 104.

⁴⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, "Hermeneutical Circle," in Gen. Ed., Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 281. Note. Schleiermacher spoke of a hermeneutical circle, but the idea of a "spiral" was seen as closer to the mark. A good definition of the hermeneutical spiral is found in Thiselton's conception of it when he states that "the emphasis lies not only on the inter-action between the parts and the whole, but on a process of revision which modifies the interpreter's exploratory understanding in the light of the text." – Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), 222.

⁴¹ Schleiermacher gave hermeneutics a much wider brief than it had enjoyed prior to his time. He basically made it a way of knowing, not just the text before the reader, but the reader's world. He moved it into the realm of epistemology.

⁴² I move straight from Schleiermacher to Gadamer to save time. A fuller study would have to take into account the work of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Bultmann.

⁴³ Gadamer emphasizes the text as a distinct voice independent of the author. In his hands this ends up handing interpretive authority to the reader. Hence, the radical form of "reader-response" theory.

community. As the complexion of the community changes, so do the parameters of viable interpretation and thus the range of possible meanings.⁴⁴ By contrast the “Horizon of the Text” is that “set of assumptions that underlie a text and establish its point of view within its own historical circumstances.”⁴⁵

The aim of hermeneutics is to seek “for the place where the horizons of the text and the interpreter intersect or engage.”⁴⁶ This concept may at first seem innocent enough, since one cannot deny that because of the different historical, cultural and psychological life-situations of ancient author and modern reader one can never be certain that one has fully understood the author’s meaning, only that one has very probably understood it.⁴⁷

But this isn’t what Gadamer means, for he goes on to say that each reader’s situation is different: One cannot affirm the existence (and importance) of one horizon and not others. When we – as twenty-first century American evangelicals – understand Scripture, we do so on the basis of our own horizon.⁴⁸

Thus, one must take into consideration the cultural context of the reader, and, since we all have a cultural context, my interpretation of a biblical passage has no more right to validity than, say, a different interpretation by someone from India.⁴⁹ As one writer illustrates the matter,

A linguist asks a group made up of Africans and missionaries to tell him the main point of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. The Europeans speak of Joseph as a man who remained faithful to God no matter what happened to him.

Hirsch and Husserl on Authors’ Intentions,” in eds., Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguez and Dennis L. Okholm, *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 189.

This is the text of a Symposium held at Wheaton College in 2001. The essays in the book clearly illustrate the kind of “downgrade” which is in process within at least some evangelical institutions.

⁴⁹ Thus, there arises the problem of “contextualization.” Upon which see, David K. Clark, *To Know And Love God*, 99–131. In my opinion Clark goes too far in his development of an “Evangelical” approach to contextualization by not sufficiently seeing the need to critique differing evangelical “cultures.” An even more surefooted appraisal of contextualization which takes the whole “Seeker-sensitive” phenomenon into consideration is David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴⁴ Tate, *Interpreting the Bible*, 170.

⁴⁵ Ibid, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Harvie M. Conn, “Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism,” in ed., Harvie M. Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 188.

⁴⁷ Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 17–18, 255, 263.

⁴⁸ Bruce Ellis Benson, “Now I Would Not Have You Ignorant”: Derrida, Gadamer,

The Africans, on the other hand, point to Joseph as a man who, no matter how far he traveled, never forgot his family.⁵⁰

Where does this leave us as interpreters? For many followers of modern hermeneutical theory it casts more or less doubt upon the idea of objectivity in Bible interpretation.⁵¹ For this reason Gadamer has been described as standing “on the boundary-line between modern and post-modern thought.”⁵²

Ricoeur

Alongside Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005) stands as the most important philosopher of hermeneutics in the last hundred years. His work is often to be found discussed in evangelical circles today, and for that reason we shall devote a little more space to his work. Ricoeur is concerned with how language is used not with how it is structured.⁵³ As human existence is communicated through language, the study of the use of language is, therefore, the study of human existence. What is language but existence communicated in symbols or signs? Hence, the study of the way linguistic signs are used (semiotics) becomes a way to study the human being and his significance and self-understanding

(semantics). It is hardly surprising to learn that for Ricoeur “man is language.”⁵⁴

He believes that contemporary man has become desensitized to symbol and metaphor, and so he is missing in some measure, the hub of his own significance by his failure to experience life in its fullest terms.⁵⁵ Ricoeur is a phenomenologist – stressing the activity of the reader once he is impacted by a text.⁵⁶ But he utterly rejects man as the starting point in interpretation, preferring a transcendent beginning.⁵⁷ His influence is to be seen in several areas.

First, his overall philosophical outlook was hopeful (in contrast to that of the existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre). This meant that he tended to read texts “optimistically” – as, for example, the story of the Fall, which he said contained nothing like “Augustine’s doctrine of original sin.”⁵⁸ Second, he ironically stressed “the hermeneutics of suspicion” whereby one recognizes that, “preunderstanding does indeed influence every interpretive conclusion drawn with reference to the biblical text. Because the baggage brought by an exegete to the reading of Scripture can potentially hinder the hermeneutical

⁵⁰ Conn, “Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism,” 188–189.

⁵¹ One might think of postconservative theologians like F. LeRon Shults.

⁵² Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 314.

⁵³ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 281.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 298.

⁵⁵ Tate, *Interpreting the Bible*, 264.

⁵⁶ In this he is indebted to the work of Wolfgang Iser.

⁵⁷ Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 33.

⁵⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Ricoeur, Paul,” in, Idem., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 694. Much help has been gained from this fine article.

process, one must always question every exegetical perspective.”⁵⁹

The third thing Ricoeur is known for is calling particular attention to creative language such as metaphor, narrative and parable.⁶⁰ Through careful examination and reflection on these language forms he has produced some important thoughts on some important issues within philosophy of religion such as the sort of relationship that exists between God and time.⁶¹ He believed that these ways of expression point us to a fuller appreciation of ourselves and our significance. “The manifesto of hermeneutic philosophy is “existence via semantics”: self-understanding via textual interpretation.”⁶²

Lastly, Ricoeur is noted for his focus on genre (the world of the text) and the impact of the text upon the reader’s world (the world in front of the text). The interplay of these “worlds” means abandoning what he calls “the first naivete”: the literal sense, in order to make way for “the second naivete”: finding oneself in and through the world of the text.⁶³ In other words, the reader must go through a sifting of his faith from a position of fear and emotion to a more level-headed critical understanding of the text (and so the world) in order to have a rational faith.⁶⁴ The literal sense cannot supply the truth of existence!

Of course, to comprehend signs truly one must move beyond the signs themselves and concentrate on discourse, hence his focus upon semantics as the key to self-understanding.⁶⁵ Ricoeur also finds himself on the “conservative” side in his rejection of the Kantian idealism of liberalism, which forced churchmen into vainly trying either to prove Christianity to be inductively scientific⁶⁶, or to show that Christianity’s “inwardness” made the effort to make it scientific an exercise in missing the point.⁶⁷ And he strikes a chord when he insists that the text must always take

⁵⁹ B. Keith Putt, “Preunderstanding and the Hermeneutical Spiral,” in, eds., Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, Grant Lovejoy, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 209.

⁶⁰ Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge, MS: The MIT Press, 1987), 352.

⁶¹ Gregory J. Laughery, “Evangelicalism and Philosophy,” in Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West, eds., *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 266–267.

⁶² Vanhoozer, “Ricoeur, Paul,” 692. “In his Gifford Lectures, Ricoeur completes his project by arguing that self-understanding comes precisely from appropriating a narrative identity.” – 693.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Tate, 330.

⁶⁵ Harrisville and Sundberg, 281–282.

⁶⁶ For an example of this in evangelical circles see, e.g., R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 122–123.

⁶⁷ This was the approach of men like Schleiermacher, Dilthey and the liberal theologians who followed them.

precedence over the interpreter.⁶⁸ But he does not believe in the possibility of discovering authorial intention. There is and always will be a “distance” between reader and author. Moreover, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that he learned from Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, always makes interpretation a risky business, with “truth,” in a sense far less than certainty but above doubt, being the final goal.⁶⁹

The Postmodern Critique: Derrida

It would be remiss indeed if in a treatise such as this the subject of postmodernism was not broached along the way. We have chosen to include it here because it is in the realm of interpretation that it is, perhaps, at its most menacing. Postmodernism, in fact, seeks to demolish much of the framework around which this present work is constructed. This includes an aversion to metanarratives, or grand narratives under which other (typically western) narratives and thought-forms are housed.⁷⁰ These metanarratives are seen as sustaining forms of oppression within society.⁷¹

Without a doubt the leading postmodernist thinker in the world of hermeneutics is Jacques Derrida (d. 2004). Influenced by the Structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure,

which saw language as bearing no necessary relation to anything outside of itself (therefore to understand one had to examine the structure of language), and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (who was critical of the history of Western philosophy all the way back to Plato and Aristotle), Derrida takes the further and more radical step of questioning the positions from which any metaphysical pronouncement is made.⁷² Any such concept (called a “signified”), such as God, self, truth, reason, etc., is no more than an illegitimately and arbitrarily imposed external context upon which other ideas can rest (what Derrida named a “transcendental signified”).⁷³ The western preoccupation with these primary contexts he called logocentrism.⁷⁴

What Derrida sought to expose is the underlying contradictions which are embedded into texts. He did this by showing up the dualisms or binary oppositions like God/Satan, man/woman, which, he thought, gave prominence to the former and undermined (oppressed) the latter. This is where his idea of deconstructing texts comes into view. Derrida concentrates not on what is said, but on what stays unsaid yet remains implicit in the communication.⁷⁵ A text is not to be taken at face value, but is to be suspected of promoting ethnocentric

⁶⁸ Harrisville and Sundberg, 297.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 291.

⁷⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 15.

⁷¹ Cf. Craig G. Bartholomew, “Deconstruction,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*.

⁷² D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 109.

⁷³ Tate, 91.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy*, 121.

ideas.⁷⁶ In deconstructing texts the interpreter is getting behind the surface prejudices and retrieving those things that have been suppressed.

A major part of Derrida's thought is his insistence that writing (by which he means all unspoken language signs) is actually prior to speech.⁷⁷ Apart from going against the intuition, not to mention the dictates of common sense⁷⁸, this seems to founder on the rocks of historical contingency, for no one prior to men like Nietzsche or de Saussure, not to mention Derrida or Roland Barthes, saw things their way. As Plantinga perceptively notes, "Had Einstein been born in the eighteenth century, he would not have believed special relativity..."⁷⁹

Nobody should misconstrue Derrida as a second-rate philosopher; his thought is extremely complex, if not more than a little obtuse.⁸⁰ But the fact remains that his philosophy cannot escape the charge of contradiction any more than those he critiques. After all, he must himself assume some privileged starting-point or "transcendent signified" from where to launch his volleys against those with whom he disagrees. In the end he falls into the

⁷⁶ James Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 39.

⁷⁷ Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 104.

⁷⁸ As has been pointed out by any number of critics, e.g. Carson, 112–113.

⁷⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 428.

⁸⁰ Some reasons for this have been set forth both by Derrida's supporters and his critics. See Erickson, 216–217.

very same self-contradiction to which all immanence philosophies are fated.⁸¹

What all this work by these philosophers means is that the old Grammatical-Historical or literal sense hermeneutic is considered impossibly outmoded. And seeking the single-sense of Scripture (as advocated by, e.g. Walter Kaiser, along with many dispensationalists) is described by Stanley Porter and Lee Martin McDonald as "Simplistic exegesis for the simple minded."⁸²

4. Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation

On a more positive note overall is the matter of whether language is merely descriptive or whether it can be said to actually do something. This gets us into the subject of language as "speech-acts." This view has been defined as follows:

Speech-act theory is a set of pragmatically based principles that were developed at the edge of philosophy and linguistics. The major assumption is that language is not so much concerned with saying as with doing. That is, the use of language is in fact a way of accomplishing things.⁸³

Speech-act theory was introduced by the British philosopher of language J. L. Austin in his 1955 Harvard lectures, posthumously

⁸¹ Ibid, 131–132.

⁸² Stanley E. Porter & Lee Martin McDonald, *New Testament Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 19.

⁸³ Stanley Porter, in I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond The Bible*, 112.

published as *How to do Things with Words*. Austin's insights, being rather puzzling in places, were improved by John Searle.⁸⁴ Both scholars divided speech-acts into locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forms.⁸⁵ A locutionary utterance is any act of saying something. Illocutionary acts are what is done in saying something, while perlocutionary acts are what is done by saying something.⁸⁶ An illocutionary speech-act, for example, "It's time to go" affirms that something is so. So when God makes an illocutionary speech-act, He is affirming the truth (since He cannot lie) about something. Obviously, identifying God's illocutionary speech-acts helps a person to pay more attention to what God is saying. Thus, illocutions are often considered to be the most important kind of speech-acts.⁸⁷

Although many postmodernists, with their preoccupation with language as a manipulative power tool, will often place more emphasis upon perlocutionary

⁸⁴ Richard S. Briggs, "Speech-Act Theory," in Vanhoozer, Gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 763.

⁸⁵ These are sometimes categorized as utterance, performative, propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. See Tate, 350–351. It is quite usual however to find propositional included in locutionary. "Utterances" in Tate's taxonomy are just reactive sounds.

⁸⁶ Daniel Hill, "Proposition," in Vanhoozer, Gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 632.

⁸⁷ Briggs, 763.

utterances – those expressions which get a person to act or attempt at least to alter the actions of the hearer.

Hill states that propositional sayings ought not to be separated from narratives because "in a sense a narrative just is a set of propositions, albeit about events in time."⁸⁸ But he does say that the Bible contains more than propositions, it "also contains questions, injunctions, and wishes."⁸⁹ While this is true, it does appear that each of these other sayings may be converted into a proposition.⁹⁰ The main problem (according to Hill) in biblical hermeneutics is to work out what God is affirming. Speech-act theory's analysis, particularly of the illocutionary act, is of real help in reaching that goal.

However, there is a word of caution. Briggs points out that since one locution (or simple uttering of words) may entail several illocutions, and some perhaps unintended, in fact, "most locutions are multilayered in some way, and will often admit of unintended illocutions."⁹¹ For that reason, some interpreters are wary of recommending the theory, at least as a way to get at the message.⁹²

Notwithstanding, one must not minimize the obligation to the text as it is understood by

⁸⁸ Hill, 632.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ I have discussed the matter of propositionalism in chapter 4, "The Revelation of the Triune Creator," of my dissertation.

⁹¹ Briggs, 764.

⁹² Tate, *Interpreting the Bible*, 351.

the believer.⁹³ Vanhoozer, in an essay entitled, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts" calls attention to the possibility of "an illocutionary act performed on the level of a literary whole."⁹⁴ This is certainly intriguing, especially when Vanhoozer shows the effectiveness of the approach in reading John 21:20-24.⁹⁵

It seems that responsible speech-act analysis is amenable to an attentive form of grammatico-historical interpretation. It involves the reader in the text more because it raises his expectancy.⁹⁶ And that is surely a good thing.

5. Summary in Nine Points

From our survey of some of the major players in modern hermeneutics we can quickly take stock of the main issues:

1. To define hermeneutics as a set of rules decides the issue beforehand.
2. Some preliminary understanding (preunderstanding) of a text (both its whole and parts) is unavoidable in every reading.⁹⁷
3. The ongoing process of a reader's preunderstanding shaping the text and the text shaping the reader creates a "hermeneutical spiral."
4. In this "spiral" the two horizons of text and interpreter "fuse" to some degree, though utter objectivity is never arrived at.
5. Each individual's horizon is his or her own. This implies that valid interpretations will differ according to the social, historical and cultural situation of the reader.⁹⁸[98]
6. This could be taken to mean (and often is) that complete objectivity is an impossible dream, and that, therefore, talk of propositional revelation (wherein truth is situated in the Bible's propositional teaching) is implausible.
7. The "hermeneutics of suspicion" further renders propositional truth out of place.
8. Standard Grammatical-Historical interpretation might be seen as slipping into redundancy, being unable to integrate the findings of modern hermeneutical theories. However, this

⁹³ This is where Vanhoozer brings in a covenantal obligation.

⁹⁴ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 192. He is talking about the Book of Jonah.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 257ff.

⁹⁶ Briggs, 766.

⁹⁷ We include Maier's opinion of preunderstanding, which we think is very helpful. Although he rightly holds to presuppositions, he sounds a note of sanity amid the cheers for "preunderstanding."

"All these and other considerations do not exactly encourage us to cling to philosophical preunderstandings or to take them as our

guideposts in listening to revelation. As already stated, conscious and unconscious philosophical influences will always accompany our hearing. But they are present in order to be divested of their leading role." – Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 36.

⁹⁸ This is where one encounters various special interest groups like Eco-Feminists, Marxists, and Gays interpreting the Bible according to their agendas. Remember, in postmodern interpretation there are no metanarratives, only individual community narratives. Thus, each interpretation is as valid as another (unless it stakes a claim to be a metanarrative).

is untrue. But also, it must not be supposed that anything close to the last word has been said about speech-acts. {Moreover, as Craig Blaising correctly observes: "To postulate a "fulfillment" of...covenant promises by means of a reality shift in the thing promised overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise..." –

Craig A. Blaising, "Israel and Hermeneutics", in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, eds., Darrell L. Bock & Mitch Glaser, 161}

9. On a positive note, we can explore the promise of responsible speech-act theory to help us to be more attentive as we read Scripture, and thus, compose our theology.



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org