CHAPTER 3

Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament

MAX TURNER

Recent trends have tended to play down the significance of the "behind the text" questions that dominated biblical scholarship until the 1980s. This essay provisionally reassesses the question of the relevance of "behind the text" questions and approaches in theological readings of NT texts, and how these might be weighed in relation to "in the text" and "in front of the text" questions and approaches. Of course, how they might be weighted will depend very much on whether the reader is simply engaging in spiritual meditation, or whether she is preparing a sermon, or writing a book on "the message of Ephesians" or on "the biblical view" of healing. My principal concern is with the last kind of reading — that is, with the sort of publicly accountable explanations of biblical texts that seek to guide the church at large. As I understand it, the primary task of "theological hermeneutics" in the public domain is an ethically "responsible" reading of the text for its most critically transparent sense and significance.

That, of course, begs such questions as: What is a text? Is there a meaning in this text? How do we grasp and appropriate (or "create") the meaning(s)? and, How secure are the "results"? Some progress has been made in answering these questions, especially through the two major critical reviews of contemporary controversies offered by Thiselton and

Vanhoozer.[1] These provide a convincing critique of the extreme deconstruction/reader-response positions of Derrida and Fish, which collapse the two hermeneutical horizons (those of author/text and reader) into one and throw the reader into a bog of interpretive relativism. Author, text, and reader all have their different parts to play, albeit with differing roles in the variety of writings.

How, then, do we weigh "behind the text" issues with competing "in the text" and "in front of the text" questions? Again, we cannot answer that question in the abstract. Indeed, the attempt by some advocates of the New Criticism to do so (i.e., to treat all texts as though they were works of art, pieces of "literature") has very much been part of the current problem concerning the nature of interpretation. Discernment of authorial meaning, for example, may not be very important in reading C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces,* but it is rather more important in reading his critical academic works (cries of "incompetence!" would greet any misrepresentation of him), and it is all-important for his executors in interpreting his last will and testament. In Eco's terms, some texts are "closed," others more "open" to the interpreter. The different types of biblical texts suggest their own agendas and project their own "model readers."[2] This suggests that we should distinguish narrative works, letters, and the book of Revelation (or Apocalypse), and divide the questions of "meaning" accordingly. We shall raise most of the issues first in respect of historical criticism and theological interpretation of the letters, then deal more briefly with the narrative texts and the Apocalypse. Despite some recommendations to abandon the term "meaning" altogether, I propose to retain it with all its potential fuzziness and polysemy (sense, reference, implicature, illocution, significance, etc.), clarifying at different stages which sense(s) of "meaning" we are dealing with.

1. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

2. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts,* AS (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979; London: Hutchinson, 1981), esp. pp. 4-8.

1. Historical Criticism and the Letters: "Behind the Text" and "In the Text" Issues

We can be clear that the "text" of (say) a Pauline letter is the record of what in semantic terms would be called an "utterance."

> The words "The cat is hungry" form a sentence that could be uttered in many different contexts, and so with quite different meanings — e.g., *(a)* as an excuse to break off conversation (= "Excuse me, I must feed Tibbi!"); *(b)* as a request to someone else to feed the cat (= "John, I am busy; could you please feed Tibbi!"); *(c)* as a warning to keep well clear, for the lion is hunting; or *(d)* as a laconic comment on the impatient twitching of the scourge in the master-at-arms' hand as a hapless sailor is being tied to the gratings for a flogging. Contextless sentences are thus nearly always ambiguous. "Utterance" is the speaking of sentences, which thus embeds the sentence(s) in the specific context of the speaker, the addressee, and what is being spoken about. Utterances are thus relatively determinate in meaning (even when the speaker is deliberately ambiguous). Spoken by a ranger (in a particular tone of voice) following the roar of a lion and spoken to an overconfident tourist armed with a camera, meaning *(c)* would be evoked.

Contra Derrida, for example, a letter is not a collection of polyvalent text "sentences," but the transcription of an extended speech event (often literally, because dictated and read out) in which cotextual and contextual factors provide determinate meaning (= fixed sense, referents, and conventional illocutionary force).[3] To suggest all texts *inevitably* become "detached" from the author and her meaning by time and distance (so Ricoeur) is least convincing with respect to letters. Ricoeur's point, of course, is that, in contrast to the dialogue situation, when the author is absent the reader has no direct access to authorial meaning; he has only "text." But the situation is not essentially different from that of listening to the broadcast of a recorded statement made at the White House earlier in the day. One may not be able to ask the president what he means, but one

3. The "cotext" of an utterance is the text before and/or after the utterance. The "context" of an utterance is the real and/or imagined world in which it takes place. The illocutionary force of an utterance is the action conventionally performed through the words said. In the examples of "The cat is hungry" above, *(b)* performs the illocutionary act of *requesting*, *(c)* that of *warning*, etc.

still listens attentively for the *president's* meaning (which may, of course, be subtle and ambiguous on sensitive issues).

It is virtually the universal experience of reading letters that one reads for the writer's intended meaning. Letters function as an intentional projection of the *presence* of the author, in dialogical *communication*, when she must otherwise be absent for some reason. Of all types of writings, letters are among those that most immediately address readers and perform intended actions toward them. Paul's letter to Philemon and his household performs the speech act of publicly *requesting* Philemon's reconciliation with his runaway slave Onesimus (this main "request" being backed by other speech acts taking the form of subtle reminders of obligation, promises to cover financial loss accrued, appeals to love and "fellowship," and so on). Author-less "texts" cannot "request," "promise," and so forth; only *people* can.

It is in this context of the performance of speech acts that we should understand the role of "authorial intention" in relation to the "meaning" of letter texts.[4] When we ask concerning authorial intention, we are not seeking information about Paul's unexpressed psychological motivations (interesting though they may be), which may or may not have been realized. We are inquiring rather about what *intentional acts* he has indeed *performed* in and through what he has actually said, understood within the linguistic/cultural world in which he uttered/inscribed the words of the letter.[5] Essentially the same applies to anonymous texts, such as Hebrews, or letters from authors we know little of, such as Jude.[6] The significances of Paul's letter to Philemon for a theological understanding of slavery, reconciliation, or the nature of Christian community may be plentiful, and po-

4. Among those invoking speech-act theory to relate text and author are Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics;* Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* In practice, rigorous use of speech-act theory is usually limited to discussion of short utterances. Longer, more complex dialogical discourses used to effect results are usually referred to as "speech events." Cf. George Yule, *Pragmatics*, Oxford Introductions to Language Study (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 56-58.

5. Here we find the answer to Derrida's complaint that one can never get "outside" language/writing into a world of determinate meaning. Such speech acts "count as" set meanings in the "game" of life (so Wittgenstein, Thiselton, Wolterstorff, and Vanhoozer).

6. See Thiselton, pp. 261-67. In Paul's case, however, what we know from earlier letters may throw light on later letters (and perhaps vice versa).

tentially upbuilding Christian rereadings may even be legion. But the speech acts that Paul actually inscribed or authorized provide the first horizon of meaning. Any fusion of the horizons that occurs without careful delineation of these speech acts may result rather in a *confusion* of horizons — i.e., a failure to locate the more determinate authorial "meaning" that is to be "interpreted" (and thus to become part of a broader "readers' meaning").

In emphasizing the interpreter's task as that of establishing the illocutionary acts actually performed by the writer through the text, we are evidently giving a central place to "in the text issues." All serious exegesis must start there, but it cannot stop there. We need to press on to "behind the text" issues, because (as the disciplines of discourse analysis and pragmatics have abundantly shown) *a large part of discourse meaning* (whether oral or written) *is not actually brought to verbal expression.*[7] All communication would grind to a halt if speakers or writers had to articulate every aspect of their meaning. As it is, speakers do not usually articulate those parts of their meaning that they can assume of their hearers (unless for some special rhetorical function).

> If my car is coughing and spluttering and I wind down the window and shout, "Excuse me, I'm right on empty!" to a sympathetic-looking passerby, she is unlikely to be paralyzed by the potential ambiguities of my utterance. She will probably call back something like, "There is a Shell just round the corner on the left," and continue her way. If one analyzes the "text" of these two utterances in the abstract, there is virtually no formal connection between them. One can imagine the fun a good deconstructionist could have. Yet the conversation would have been eminently successful. I would have been able to assume that the passerby shared with me a sufficient "presupposition pool" about petrol indicators and garages (or gas gauges and stations!) so as to make further explanation unnecessary. And we would both have kept Grice's maxims of cooperation (essentially, Be truthful! Be brief! Be relevant! Be clear!).[8] Intuitively working back from them, the passerby can be expected to understand not only the effective propositional content of my utterance (= I am nearly out of petrol), but also (operating Grice's third maxim) that it constitutes an (indirect) illocutionary act of requesting instructions to the nearest garage. And on the basis of the same principles of cooperation, I would assume her reference to "a s/Shell" had nothing to do with the proximity of the seaside, but everything to do with a location where I might fill up. Similarly, Paul does not feel obliged to "explain" Onesimus's potential peril, the enormity of his own request, the irony of his apostleship from prison, and the obligations hinted at in Philemon 19b-22 against the background of the Greco-Roman social understanding of such matters, because he knows his readers share that knowledge.

If speakers and writers leave much unexpressed, that does not mean that it is the hearer/reader who "fills in the gaps" and thus *creates* meaning; rather it means that the speaker/writer assumes his addressees share with him a presupposition pool — which includes an encyclopedic understanding of the shared social world (including its linguistic and rhetorical conventions) as well as the specific "context" of the communication. It is engagement between the writer's utterance and the implied presupposition pool that establishes the (determinate, even if sometimes ambiguous) authorial discourse meaning. It is important, then, fully to recognize that — insofar as it seeks to elucidate the elements of the first-century presupposition pool directly evoked by a piece of NT discourse — study of so-called "behind the text issues" establishes a substantial part of the discourse meaning itself. The "text" of Philemon (like the text of any utterance) is simply the tip of the iceberg of Paul's discourse meaning. It would only be comprehensible to Philemon at all because he already knows the gospel and quite a lot about Paul and his associates before he receives the letter — and Paul assumes Philemon knows these things. So Paul can leave them as unarticulated elements of their shared presupposition pool. Significant misunderstanding occurs both when the reader/hearer fails to recognize the implied but unarticulated presuppositions and when she brings different presuppositions.

To recognize the importance of rightly identifying the presupposition pool, one only has to imagine Paul's letter being intercepted en route and read by a pagan innkeeper. The latter will have no idea who "Christ Jesus" (v. 1) is, or why Paul (who is he anyway?) is a prisoner for him (v. 1). He will assume this Paul has quite a large family of brothers and sisters (vv. 1, 2, 7, etc.), and probably that Paul himself and his coworkers (vv. 1, 24)

7. See Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), chaps. 2-3; more recently, John Lyons, *Linguistic Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pt. 4; Yule, *Pragmatics*.

8. For critical discussion of Grice, see Lyons, *Linguistic Semantics*, chap. 9.

are a band of (mercenary?) soldiers (cf. *sustratiōtēs*, v. 2), and that the *ekklēsia* in Philemon's house is perhaps some "assembly" for deciding strategy. He will have no idea what kind of "grace" and "peace" (vv. 3, 25) Paul might anticipate from his gods, nor how many gods he has — but Paul certainly worships at least the *two* first identified in verse 3. There is little point in pursuing the innkeeper's reading further. We are only spared his gross misunderstanding because — from our reading of *other* NT texts — we come to Philemon with some important elements of the presupposition pool shared between Paul and Philemon's household. (Indeed, the so-called "clarity" of Scripture rests largely on this: that the whole of Scripture is part of the presupposition pool we *potentially* engage in reading any single text.) But to say that is to recognize that the "text" (in the sense of the pure wording) of Philemon is only a *part* of the utterance/discourse meaning. And it is the unarticulated and/or allusive (i.e., "behind the text") components that are often *decisive* for correct understanding of the writer's speech act.

To avoid any possible confusion here, let us be quite clear that when pragmatics speaks of "presupposition pools," it is not driving us back to the hidden psychology of the author or reader, but to things that are known by speaker and hearer, writer and reader, because they are conventional to the society of the dialogue partners, or because they are situational elements shared by them. The content of "presupposition pools" is thus a matter of what is in the public context of a speaker's utterance, and so may be taken to count as part of the utterance meaning. This becomes clearest, perhaps, in indirect speech acts. If I utter the "text" "I *do* like the view of your back!" in a context where my son has come to stand in front of the television I was watching, my utterance meaning would situationally be recognized as ironic and conventionally taken to "count as" the request "Please move out of the way." In such instances, to play off any allegedly independent "textual meaning" against authorial discourse meaning (or utterance meaning) would generally be perceived as profound *mis*understanding. In normal discourse, text + relevant situational and conventional elements of the presupposition pool (including maxims of conversational cooperation) together generate the only "meaning" usually taken seriously.

Extensive study of "behind the text" issues will thus inevitably continue, and commentaries filled with scholars' findings will always be with us. Even the very "texts" of the letters — written in *koinē* Greek — are inaccessible for most readers without detailed text-critical and linguistic work. And because these texts represent dialogue with real addressees in particu-

lar circumstances, what some imagine as the "interpreter-neutral" preliminary act of translation needs to be informed by careful assessment of the implied situation and presupposition pool, including the rhetorical conventions of epistolary writing. One has only to compare the very different translations of, say, 1 Corinthians 7 to become aware how much "translation" depends on the understanding of the author's discourse meaning in its historical context. Does 1 Corinthians 7:1b-2 affirm that it is good "not to marry" (so NIV, GNB) or that it is well for a man "not to touch a woman" (NRSV), and is this a euphemism for "not to have sexual relations" with one's wife (NIV mg)? Is this advice Paul's, or is he quoting a Corinthian view, only in order to modify or even to demolish it? Similarly in verses 25-27 and 36-38, the translations necessarily divide on the basis of whether they think Paul is speaking about *(a)* how fathers should treat their virgin *daughters* (the traditional translation), or *(b)* how Christian husbands should keep their *wives* in celibacy (NEB), or *(c)* how believing men should relate to their *fiancées* (NRSV).

A nuanced understanding of the "discourse meaning" (including the propositional content and illocutionary force of each passage, and of the letters as wholes) demands a wide-ranging and multidisciplined analysis — or, as Vanhoozer puts it, a "thick description" of the text. Deciding such "in the text" issues as lexical choice, syntax, text-linguistics (discourse structuring), discourse coherence and cohesion, and "implicit" development of theme/argument may be the simplest part of the task, but they are not necessarily the most revealing. We have only to remember the quite radically different readings of (say) Galatians that result from construing it against a "background" of Jewish legalism, Gnosticism, or covenantal nomism to recognize the decisive significance of such issues. Similarly, socio-anthropological insights may heighten our awareness of the "distance" between ourselves and first-century writers on the relation of the individual to the community, the importance of honor/shame values, or ways in which group belonging/exclusion were demarcated and supported, and these may greatly sharpen our perception of a variety of traits explicit or implicit in the letters.[9] The study of ancient rhetorical conventions may tune our ears to powerful overtones we had not suspected.[10]

9. For good examples, see Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998).

10. For the problems involved in applying rhetorical conventions (which belonged to three specialized kinds of public speech) to letters, see R. Dean Anderson, Jr., *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, CBET 18 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); Esler, chap. 3.

Historical criticism also attempts to trace a "history" of Christian origins that provides a coherent framework within which to understand the contribution of each letter, and in the case of an author of multiple letters, the "mind of the writer" that may be discerned across the correspondence and allowed (in a controlled way) to "clarify" ambiguous contexts.[11] For all such reasons — but chiefly for the decisive relation of "behind the text" issues to what the text *meant*, understood as a deliberate communicative act — historical criticism (in the inclusive sense) will undoubtedly remain a close handmaid of exegesis.[12]

2. Theological Interpretation of the Letters and "In Front of the Text" Issues

Under this heading we need to comment on (1) the interpreter's role in the *description* of authorial meanings, (2) the implications of accepting the letters as "canon," and (3) the relation of both to the task of confessional systematic theology.

2.1. The Interpreter's Descriptive Role

Historical-critically informed exegesis has the appearance of great objectivity, especially at the level of morphology, syntax, and sentence. The further we move up the semantic hierarchy (to paragraph meaning, "chapter" meaning, and letter meaning), however, the more subjective becomes the interpretive enterprise, and the more complex the meanings of "meaning." Wrede anticipated one might give a full account of Paul's "religion" that one could file confidently in the drawer of "objective historical criticism," but this would now almost certainly be regarded as naive optimism. As Schlatter pointed out, the categories one chose to analyze and how one related them dynamically to each other would inevitably reflect the scholar's own decisions as to what was important, and of what motivates what. Far from being "objective," Wrede's account of Paul's religion would thus bear the imprint of his own liberal Protestant, history-of-religions, anti-theological, and anti-ecclesial agenda. Similar points had been made by Schleiermacher earlier, and were to be made by Bultmann later.[13] Since Gadamer, the essentially *dialogical* nature of interpretation is generally acknowledged. The problems of deciding the "text" of 1 Corinthians 7, alluded to earlier, are those of deciding which of a set of possible senses is justified by a careful mirror-reading and exegesis of the whole letter, rather than of the chapter in isolation. This in turn involves a set of intuitive explorations and exegetical confirmations/disconfirmations that together make up the hermeneutical spiral. Our initial hypotheses about 1 Corinthians are inevitably connected with our preunderstanding of Paul and the issues he addresses, and this preunderstanding involves a matrix of confessional tradition, awareness of the state of NT scholarship, and so forth. Although commitment to the significance of authorial discourse meaning may suggest that there is a determinate meaning to discover, critical self-awareness, the existence of multiple competing interpretations of the letter, and the hermeneutics of suspicion all remind us how difficult it is to recover.

When we turn to the significance of 1 Corinthians (in parts and whole) within a construal of Paul's theology or religion, we meet a host of further complications. One need only call to mind the history of attempts to locate the "center" of Paul's thought over against its "periphery." Or again, the intricacy of the task is well brought out by a recent attempt to define Paul's theology in terms of a series of dialogues between Paul's Judaism (and his Greco-Roman past), his understanding of the Christ event,

11. This is not intrinsically more problematic than clarifying an obscure passage of Bultmann from his other writings, whether earlier or later, as long as due allowance is made for development. In principle it corresponds to requesting a speaker to clarify her own utterance.

12. John Christopher Thomas is suspicious that invoking historical criticism in the name of clarifying presupposition pools actually provides a Procrustean bed on which to distort the text (see his *The Devil, Disease, and Deliverance: Origins of Illness in New Testament Thought*, JPTSup 13 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998], pp. 15-16). When badly practiced, no doubt it does, and often has. But the cure is not to abandon the search for such "behind the text" issues, but to do it more thoroughly, more critically, and in continuous dialogue with the text. In fact, the history of historical criticism suggests that as a corporate exercise it is self-correcting. Failure to clarify ambiguities in the text from *background* study will often simply mean that the interpreter "fills in the gaps" from his own, contemporary presupposition pools instead (see Max Turner, "Readings and Paradigms: A Response to John Christopher Thomas," *JPT* 12 [1998]: 23-38, esp. pp. 26-34).

13. See Edgar V. McKnight, "Presuppositions in New Testament Study," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 278-300.

and the traditional kerygma brought about through the Damascus road experience on the one hand, and on the other, the contingent argumentation and development of his thought in specific pastoral and polemical contexts.[14] To take due note of all this risks being all but overwhelmed by the complexity involved in speaking of the apostle's "meaning" in 1 Corinthians, when "meaning" now has more to do with potential significance of what has been said for some more general system of thought than merely "what has been said." This has led some to despair. It need not, however. While we may never be able to give an exhaustive account, we can still recognize false interpretations, and we can rank good ones while recognizing their limitations and provisional status.

2.2. The Significance of Canonization

The acceptance of the letters into the canon is perhaps the most significant "in front of the text" issue. On the one hand it is to adopt a specifically confessional stance, and on the other it is to pluck those who penned the letters out of the interpretational limelight and to sit them at a roundtable with other biblical authors. Neither step need require abandoning critical integrity,[15] providing we remember we are talking about a discussion table (in Caird's terms, an "apostolic conference")[16] and not Procrustes' preferred furniture. We must hear each writer give his distinctive and full-blooded witness, yet also make due allowance for undergirding unities (so often played down by historical criticism) and for the canonical principle expressed, e.g., in Paul's affirmations of the *one* gospel shared with the other apostles (Gal. 2; 1 Cor. 15:5, 11, etc.) over against "false" believers and their gospels.[17]

14. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chaps. 1, 9.

15. See Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), chap. 9; Markus Bockmuehl, "Humpty Dumpty on New Testament Theology," *Theology* 101 (1998): 330-38.

16. G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), chap. 1.

17. See I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), chap. 2; Robert W. Wall and Eugene E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism*, JSNTSup 76 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), chaps. 8-10.

But how does a canonical perspective relate to "behind the text" concerns discussed above? For a growing number of interpreters, it means that we may safely marginalize the question of authorial discourse meaning. It is not *Paul's* meaning of 1 Corinthians that is significant when we identify the letter as the church's Scripture (so, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas).[18] Either we are saying it is the *divine* voice addressing us through it or the *church's* meaning in accepting this letter (with the rest of the OT and NT) that is significant (and many would say both). Here we must tread cautiously.

1. The canonization process did not clearly marginalize the human authors. Rather the opposite. Had any work been recognized as *not* written by an apostle (or coworker, in the case of Mark and Luke, or brother of the Lord in the case of James and Jude), it would not have gained entry.[19] Moreover, it is hard to believe that 2 and 3 John (say) were eventually accepted as canon for any other reason than that they were thought to have been written by the apostle John (or by the elder John, a close disciple). This is because their contents hardly give these letters some broader "apostolicity of worth," and the history of interpretation shows they have had little influence on the life of the church. Nor may we argue that the canonizing process necessarily marginalized the authorial meaning on the grounds that the letters were now being read by other than the original addressees. The Catholic Epistles were already addressed to a very broad range of Christian communities (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1; James 1:1) or even all such communities (2 Pet. 1:1 and Jude 1), and Paul could anticipate that the letter he had written to Laodicea would be of benefit to the Colossians too, and vice versa (Col. 4:16; even letters such as Romans, Galatians, and the Corinthian correspondence addressed different parties at various points, leaving the others "to listen in"). Although the Colossians' reading of the letter to the Laodiceans would inevitably involve a slightly different interpretive strategy from their reading of the letter addressed to themselves, there is no reason to think their reading of it bracketed out questions of authorial meaning and other background issues.

2. On any view that the letters, appropriated as canon, represent *divine* discourse, we would need to ask about the relationship between God's speaking and (say) Paul's. The major discussion of this issue by Wolterstorff does not suggest any marginalization of authorial discourse

18. For discussion of Hauerwas's position, see Vanhoozer, p. 411.

19. It is also widely agreed that any work that had been *known* to be pseudonymous would almost certainly have been excluded.

meaning. Wolterstorff hesitates over whether the Pauline letters should be regarded as occasions of "representation" of God by an appointed prophetic messenger/ambassador, or whether the model of "appropriation" would not be better (God "identifies" with the position spoken by Paul, but less directly — as I might identify my position by saying, "I agree with what Jane and Gregory said"). Either way, however, there is no reason to believe that to speak of divine discourse implies that God abstracted Paul's "text" from his context-embedded discourse meanings in such a way that we can cheerfully refill his words with substantially different meanings, or limit the text's meaning to such as might be provided by canonical cotexts alone.[20] Had Paul written interpreter-open psalms/proverbs/wisdom-speech, designed for all to use in different ways, we could readily make a break with whatever he meant in the context in which he first coined such utterances. But divine appropriation of writings of the *letter* genre itself implies that the context-embedded issues remain relevant to discourse meaning (for that is the very nature of letters).

3. That the Pauline "contextual" meanings are pivotal for canonical/contemporary meaning can be approached another way. Let us propose that a reader for some reason decides that 1 Corinthians 7:25-38 should be taken as a commendation of asexual platonic marriage (the view attributed to Paul by NEB). If it could be demonstrated to him exegetically that such a view was actually contrary to Paul's own intended meaning — that it was indeed something he intended to correct — would we not expect the reader to relinquish the interpretation?[21] In short, while Paul's discourse

20. Wolterstorff, esp. chaps. 3, 11, 12.

21. It is a different case when Christians refuse to attribute to God himself the literal authorial meaning of Ps 137:8-9, and so treat it in canonical context as a metaphor cluster expressing God's opposition to whatever opposes his reign. In this case of what Wolterstorff calls "appropriated" (= oblique) divine discourse, conviction that the God revealed in Christ could not express the literal wish of the psalmist (without an inconsistency incompatible with divinity) leads to a distinction between authorial discourse meaning and "canonical" meaning. Similarly, when Paul says, "I, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ . . . ," such affirmations are not appropriated directly in "divine discourse"; indeed, Wolterstorff maintains that "it will typically be the case that not everything said by the agent of the mediating discourse is also said by the agent of the mediated discourse" (p. 210; cf. John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* [Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], chap. 18). But Wolterstorff insists that any theology of divine "appropriation" of human discourse will necessarily start from the assumption of concurrence between authorial and divine meaning, and only modify it when there are strong reasons for so doing (see chaps. 11-13).

meaning may be *less* than the divine/canonical meaning, it is arguably still a fundamentally relevant part of it.

In sum, we may agree with Stephen Fowl that we cannot simply equate authorial meaning with "the whole and determinate meaning of the text" (a phrase itself to which he would strongly object);[22] canonical cotext (or "dialogue partners") and present-day context highlight important aspects of "meaning" (in different senses) of a biblical text. We can nevertheless affirm *(a)* that the authorial discourse meaning (as defined above) of the NT letters is a relatively "determinate" meaning; *(b)* given the reverence accorded to the apostolic circle (within and outside Scripture), their discourse meanings might be expected to be of greater interest/significance for the church than (say) Augustine's or Calvin's (let alone Joe Bloggs's) readings; and *(c)* as other claimed "meanings" of text are in varying degrees moot, it would not be "merely arbitrary" to use the apostolic authors' meanings as a benchmark against which to test twentieth- and twenty-first-century meanings, perhaps even as the most important single benchmark.[23]

2.3. Authorial Meaning, Canonical Meaning, and Theology

When we bring the biblical writers to the roundtable, we also come there *ourselves* — to listen in and to learn. A number of aspects of this invite brief clarification.

1. We come to the table as Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and more. Our creeds, confessions, traditions, heroes, and hymns have all provided us with different frameworks from which to read the letters, and inevitably lead us to prioritize different aspects of the theology and ethics of the writings. That this can enable creative and penetrating insight can be seen from, e.g., the Lutheran expositions of Paul by Bultmann and his students. Indeed, we should rather expect that a committed Pentecostal

22. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), chaps. 1-2.

23. See Esler, pp. 24-25. Commenting on Morgan's widely quoted epigram that "texts, like dead men and women, have no rights . . . it is the interests . . . of interpreters that are decisive . . . ," Esler retorts, "While our deceased parents certainly have no rights, who would deny that we have a duty to honour their memory?" Accordingly, there is a case that we should honor our "ancestors in the faith" who composed the NT writings and who received them.

NT scholar might provide a more nuanced pneumatology of the letters than his noncharismatic colleague, all other things (critical powers, mastery of the literature, etc.) being equal. But the same commitments may also lead to eisegesis, selective blindness, and dubious ranking of elements as central or peripheral. So it is hardly surprising that Lutheran interpreters tend to give a more commanding position to "justification by faith alone" in theology and ethics than would their Wesleyan-Holiness colleagues, and their respective views of sanctification differ accordingly. Similarly, a Calvinist's "clear" texts on election and predestination tend to be regarded as "difficult" or "obscure" texts by Methodists and Pentecostals.[24] This does not mean, however, that we are locked up in a tight hermeneutical circle, provided that we both listen and talk *at the table.* It is largely introspective and isolated denominations/groupings that are in that dangerous confinement, and who risk betraying the very principle of the table.

2. We return time and again to the canonical writings. This would itself be strange if all we were doing was an endless and narcissistic reading back of ourselves (and our traditions) into the text. Rather, it has been the church's experience that God has used the letters (and other parts of Scripture) dramatically and innovatively at the beginnings of great new movements (the Reformation, the Radical Reformation, Pentecostalism, etc.), breaking down old (mis)understandings, "shedding new light" on his word, and challenging the church. Such would not be anticipated by a purely reader-response account of hermeneutics (however true may be the claim that changing social factors breed new readings). But believers come to the letters in the hope of learning from them, and experiencing them as the locus of transformative relational grace. That is, the churches have largely understood the letters (and the Bible more generally) as a form of divine discourse that affects (even subverts) and redirects the understanding and the will of the attentive reader.[25] To say that churches come to the letters/Bible to learn (and not merely to remember) is also to say that new readings are not merely different readings, but may constitute advances in reading. Luther's reading of Romans and Galatians was an advance on contemporary ecclesial readings, partly because it afforded greater coherence to central traits of Paul's discourse. That Catholic exegesis has conceded important aspects of Luther's reading of Paul is a measure of the

24. See Thiselton, pp. 237-47.

25. See Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse;* Thiselton, chap. 14; Vanhoozer, pt. II.

critical "advance" involved. Similarly, much of the wider church has come to acknowledge important aspects of Pentecostal/charismatic readings of NT spirituality. But to say so suggests there is a stable discourse meaning to be discovered, of which one reading may provide a more convincing account than another.

3. Protestant emphasis on personal faith and the centrality of the Bible has brokered many individualistic and divisive readings. The confession of the diverse letters and other writings as together one canon of Scripture embodies the ecumenical principle of listening to and learning from other partners at the conference table. This applies both to listening to the full range of the biblical witnesses and to giving a critical but patient hearing to their modern disciples. The danger of many attempts to locate a canon within the canon becomes evident in this context. The idea that one might tease out a general principle (whether salvation history, justification by faith, Christ's lordship, liberation, or some other) or a restricted set of texts to guide readers to the heart of the Scriptures may be sound (though most versions of the "grand vision" turn out to be perilously incomplete). If it becomes a way of silencing other participants at the apostolic conference, however, it is in breach of the canonical principle itself. Not just the voice of the undisputed Paulines, for example, but also the voices of the so-called deutero-Paulines[26] and of the Catholic Epistles have a claim to be fully heard — especially, perhaps, where their voices seem to differ from that of the undisputed Paulines. The principle of the table may also be imperiled by selective methods of reading, which do not command a broad consensus and do not necessarily relate to the usually accepted "literal" meaning of the writings — e.g., by "Pentecostal" and "charismatic" hermeneutics (which are in truth only variations of the "spiritual readings" found more broadly in various brands of pietism).[27]

26. The historical-critical exegesis of a suspected pseudonymous letter is interestingly complicated, for the illocutions performed by the real author (effectively a commendation of what an implied author might be *imagined* to say to a projected world) are not straightforwardly those of the implied author. From a canon-critical perspective, however, the inclusion of Ephesians and the Pastorals with the other Paulines begs reading Ephesians as "from Paul." Cf. the discussion by Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, "Canonical-Critical Perspective and the Relationship of Colossians and Ephesians," *Bib* 78 (1997): 57-86 (esp. pp. 69-73).

27. For Pentecostal hermeneutics, see the essay by John Christopher Thomas in this volume (below, chap. 6). Such communitarian and experience-based interpretation usually keeps much closer to the literal meaning of Scripture than the kind of

4. We come to the canonical table with our questions about what it means to confess Christ and live for him in our day. As people informed by twentieth-century understandings of the cosmos and humanity, as well as by the history of Christian thought, we naturally have questions both about matters the letters talk of (such as cosmic powers, anthropology, preexistence and divine Christologies, the morality of atonement, the relation of the church to the "Old Testament" and the consequent status of Judaism, and the ethics of authority and the use of force) and about matters they do not — or talk of only so obliquely, and from such a different context, that what is said appears inadequate (such as cosmology, trinitarian relations, feminism, contraception, and monogamous homosexuality). Scholars have queued up since Gabler to tell NT specialists that their task is purely descriptive (so, especially, Wrede, Räisänen, and even Balla), but there is now also a growing recognition that NT scholars need not abandon all hope of taking theological responsibility for their findings.[28]

3. History, Historical Criticism, and the Theological Hermeneutics of New Testament Narrative Texts

We have argued above that in the interpretation of letters — at least of genuine letters — issues of authorial discourse meaning are of fundamental relevance to Christian interpretation. As Thiselton tartly observes, one can read them in other ways, just as one can use a chisel as a screwdriver. But a craftsman would not.[29] There is an ethics of reading letters (wills, academic works, etc.) that cannot dismiss the author.[30] But does the same apply to the writers of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles? With the exception of allusive references to the "beloved disciple" in the Fourth Gospel, these works are all but anonymous. Even if the traditions about their authorships were substantially trustworthy, the author does not become a "real presence," dialoguing with the reader. Rather he tells a story as a form of witness to Christ, and launches it into the church.

For the postliberals Frei and Lindbeck, the significant issues are thus now the "in the text" and "in front of the text" ones. Rejecting both the old liberal foundationalist claims and their confidence in "objective" historical criticism, Frei has spoken of "the eclipse of biblical narrative."[31] By this Frei and other postmodern liberals mean four things: (1) the attempt to ground religion in historically objective "facts" or in universal realities/truths has led to the analytical approach of historical criticism that has stifled the witness and authority of the canonical narratives; (2) the canonical witnesses together create a narrative "world" in which we (as Christians) are called to live, and which we should use to interpret our world (not the other way around, as in modernism); (3) the canonical witness and the ongoing traditions/confessions of the church are intrasystemically true and binding for us, who read from the Christian tradition of the church, and no objectivizing approach can turn them into more universal truths; (4) the canonical witnesses and the church's confessions are mutually interpretive — so, e.g., it is not Luke's meaning of Luke-Acts that is important, but what the church has come to take it to mean (by accepting it into the canon and its tradition).[32]

While we may applaud the concern to allow Scripture to have its due authority, and its narrative (sharpened by literary approaches) to shape

---

charismatic exegesis proposed by Mark Stibbe, "This Is That: Some Thoughts Concerning Charismatic Hermeneutics," *Anvil* 15 (1998): 181-93 (cf. John Lyons, "The Fourth Wave and the Approaching Millennium: Some Problems with Charismatic Hermeneutics," *Anvil* 15 [1998]: 169-80). Stibbe, however, does not regard such prophetic reader-response interpretation as a substitute for more conventional exegesis.

28. Cf. A. K. M. Adams, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995); James D. G. Dunn and James P. Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990-95); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979); Werner G. Jeanrond, "After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993), pp. 85-102; et al.

29. Thiselton, p. 562.

30. On the ethics of reading, see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and Vanhoozer, esp. chap. 7.

31. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

32. See, e.g., Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), chaps. 2, 9. Frei refers to the Gospel accounts as "realistic narrativity," and as containing some historical reference. But for him, they consist primarily not in report but in "history-*like*" portraits of the indispensable savior, which conflate the earthly Jesus and the risen Lord. Frei remains very unclear about the relation of the individual accounts to events in Palestine — i.e., of the Gospel utterances to things-in-the-world to which they appear to refer.

our lives, there are problems with the postliberal approach and its purely confessional reading.

1. The author may be more distant to the reader, but redaction, composition, and narrative criticism have taught us that this certainly does not mean a total absence of the author. It is the author who has selected, shaped, and interpreted the tradition he offers; it is he who has provided the plot, characters, and the narrative insights and asides. It is he who also, no doubt, has published his account, with the intention of being read and thus influencing widely scattered communities.[33] As with the letters, the composition has thus the properties of an utterance, with definable noetic content and illocutionary force.[34] From Luke 1:1-4 (cf. Acts 1:1-2) and John 20:30-31 we even hear the writers' intended perlocutions. And again, as with the letters, the Gospel writers' discourses are replete with allusions and engage culturally determinate presupposition pools. This suggests that to establish the discourse meaning of the parts of Luke-Acts, or of the whole taken as a communicative act, the interpreter needs not only a keen eye for the text's "implied reader" but will also need to pay careful attention to "behind the text" issues that form the most probable joint presupposition pool. Indeed, one only has to note some of the hair-raising interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain to recognize the problems raised by detaching the texts of these discourses from the essentially Jewish "background" of their rhetorical conventions and the more specifically Palestinian context of Jesus' ministry and of the earliest communities. Similarly, the history of interpretation (scholarly and otherwise) suggests that those who attempt to discern, say, Luke's teaching on reception of the Spirit and conversion-initiation in so ambiguous a narrative as Acts are liable simply to fill in Luke's many "gaps" with the content of their own ecclesial paradigm — whether this be sacramentalist, confirmationist, Pentecostal, or whatever.[35] The postliberal agenda provides no basis for resolving disagreements arising from different readings. Attention to the presupposition pool shared between author and implied reader (in Luke's case, someone sufficiently conversant with Jewish Scriptures and hopes to catch the complex of apocalyptic/Isaianic new exodus allusions) may at

33. Cf. the thesis of Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chaps. 1, 4, 5.

34. So Wolterstorff, chap. 14.

35. Cf. Turner, "Readings and Paradigms," pp. 29-31.

least be expected to highlight more probable interpretations of Luke's discourse meaning.[36]

2. The lack of theological interest in historical issues in the postmodern, postliberal confessional agenda reminds us too closely of Bultmann's kerygmatic emphasis. Believers today cannot remain faithful to the biblical narrative by detaching it from all historical questions and from more universal truth claims. The NT narratives (including those embedded in the letters and Apocalypse) themselves point to a proclamation concerning the one God's ultimate revelation in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and resurrected from the dead. In addition, they tell a story of a mission to call people away from alternative "confessions," be they Jewish or pagan, which are quite unequivocally branded as false ways and idolatries in the new light of the Christ event. To be true to these NT stories, the confessing community will certainly need to ensure that its life is stamped by them. It cannot afford simply to deliver the Gospels and Acts to historical criticism and then be content to believe and live merely on the basis of the tattered remnant left over as its "assured results." At the same time, the Gospels and Acts belong to a biographical and historical genre of witnessing tradition.[37] If they are to perform their function of witness in the public arena, their truth claims need to be assessed. This certainly does not require the fundamentalist insistence on interpretation-neutral, one-to-one correspondence between narrative detail and reality: ancient

36. This raises interesting questions about how Gentile believers might be expected to grasp the nuances of Luke-Acts. The probable answer is that most Christian communities contained Jews and God-fearers who would contribute to the interpretive reading.

37. For the genre, see now Richard Burridge, "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences," in *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 113-45. For the category "witnessing tradition" and its implications for the varying relations between narrative account and factual history, see Goldingay, pt. 1. For the Gospels as "*narrated* history" (with the implications of fictive plot, etc.), see, e.g., Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chap. 1. Against the view that the Gospels should be compared with historical novels and other more generally fictional genres, see Wolterstorff, chap. 14. Against the early redaction-critical view that the Gospels are primarily theological tracts, using and editing the (generally unhistorical) tradition of Jesus circulating in the churches to address the theological interests of individual churches or related groups thereof, see Francis Watson, "Toward a Literal Reading of the Gospels," in *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 195-217.

historical/biographical writings did not work that way.[38] As even Bultmann's own students recognized, however, there needs to be an adequate bridge between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith: hence the so-called "second quest" of the historical Jesus.

3. Believers who confess that "the Word became flesh" can hardly lack interest in what it was about the whole life and ministry of Jesus which led to his rejection and crucifixion, and why it was that the earliest, predominantly Jewish church, which claimed him to be the fulfillment of all OT hope, separated from Judaism. These are the questions that dominate the so-called "third quest" of the historical Jesus, and its chief method is the critical realism of *(inter alios)* Ben F. Meyer and N. T. Wright.[39] This is a brand of "historical criticism" which is (in Stuhlmacher's terms) "open to transcendence," and it is one seeking the inner coherence of Jesus' ministry in the aims/intentions revealed by his words and actions in the real social, political, and religious context of the Palestine of his day. It is undoubtedly a demanding quest, but unless we attempt it we risk not really understanding Jesus' central agendas, and so being less able authentically to interpret his story for our day and into our lives. People who think they can understand Jesus' words and acts, stripped of the historical Jewish context in which he uttered and performed them, condemn themselves to misunderstand him at least as comprehensively as do those who suppress major emphases of the Gospel narratives (let alone of the church's confessions) in the name of the earlier rationalistic and naively objectivizing kinds of historical criticism.

4. The canonical process asserted the essentially apostolic origin of the Gospels (i.e., that they derived from the circle of apostles and their co-workers), and this was undoubtedly seen as assurance not merely of their theological significance but also of the essential trustworthiness of their historical portraits of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:1-4; John 21:24).

In sum, if Frei was right in 1974 to complain about the eclipse of the narrative by historical criticism, Watson may have had justification in 1997 to complain about the eclipse of history by at least some "narrative" approaches.[40] Fortunately, there are clear signs that literary approaches are

38. See Goldingay, pt. 1, esp. chap. 5.

39. See Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, PTMS 17 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989); Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979); N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

40. Watson, *Text and Truth*, chap. 1.

also being used to complement historical and redaction-critical interests rather than to supplant them.[41]

Many other issues pertinent to our title have been discussed, at least in principle, in dealing with the letters. Brief mention, however, may be made of four matters. First, on discerning the authorial discourse "meaning" of the Gospels and Acts, it is important to remember that the authors' meaning is far more open-ended than in the letters. It is telling, for example, that Wolterstorff largely restricts his long discussion of the "illocutionary stance" of biblical narratives to an insistence that (Job and Jonah excepted) they involve statements made in the assertive mood, about real worlds, rather than invitations to imagine projected worlds. Whereas the authorial meaning(s) in letters may be read off their many and varied speech acts, and the complex relation between them, the narratives merely "assert" a described world, ostensibly, e.g., to provide assurance (Luke 1:1-4) or to encourage belief (John 20:30-31). Of course, there is far more to it than that. To "assert" that Jesus taught the content of the Sermon on the Mount, with all its sharp challenges and warnings, in a broader cotext where the speaker is revealed as the Son of God who gives the great commission of Matthew 28:19-20, is to perform an indirect speech act (or rather, speech event) exhorting discipleship. To "tell" the story of Jesus' compassion for the "poor" (outsiders, the sick, the demonized, etc.), and to put that in the cotext of *(a)* invitations to disciples to lay down their lives in service and *(b)* an extensive passion narrative and resurrection vindication/commission accounts, is to commend the world described to the reader, and to invite her to step into it. But the point remains that the speech acts (other than of assertion) remain indirect, and often so subtle as to be ambiguous. That need not lead to despair, however, over our capacity to recover the main features of the discourse meaning. This is easiest in John, but it is possible in Matthew, Mark, and Luke too. It can hardly be doubted that the generation of major commentaries from the 1960s onward have together (i.e., in mutually correcting and complementing combination) made significant advances in clarifying authorial discourse meaning.

Second, literary-critical approaches will highlight features of plot,

41. See, e.g., the careful blend of narrative-, historical-, and redaction-critical approaches in David D. Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God's People in the First Gospel*, SNTSMS 90 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and note his methodological discussion of these issues in chap. 1; cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 11-20; John R. Donahue, "The Literary Turn and New Testament Theology: Detour or New Direction?" *JR* 76 (1996): 250-75.

parallels, characterization, thematic "connections," etc., that the author intended, but also (almost inevitably) some or many of which the writer would *not* have been conscious. Such occasions might readily be treated as a type of *sensus plenior* and/or as subconscious workings of the writer's major conscious intentions. They are in any case not problematic for a high view of authorial discourse meaning.

Third, on the relation of the four Gospels, much radical redaction criticism has highlighted the apparent differences between the Gospels in such crucial matters as eschatology, the Law, miracles, Christology, relation to the Gentiles, and so on. It has explained these differences primarily in terms of dialogues between the Evangelists and the distinct theological needs of their particular communities. Such an approach treats the Gospels as theological tracts, where the account of Jesus and his teaching is a subtle allegory of the church's situation. This now seems improbable on purely historical and exegetical grounds.[42] Whether or not that is so, the canonical process certainly subverts such an analysis. The Gospels and Acts are placed before the letters, as the account of the origins of the church. And Luke is separated from Acts and placed with Matthew, Mark, and John as the fourfold Gospel of Jesus, who bridges the Testaments, and whose ministry launches the church. Unruffled by minor disagreements, the church read the Gospels as complementary portraits of their Lord and Master. A canonical perspective will invite the interpreter to spend as much time investigating the unity of the Gospels as has so far been spent on their diversity, and perhaps to give the former the more weight.

Fourth, on relating NT narrative to systematic theology today, narrative is not at first sight a promising resource for systematic theology, even if the Gospels and Acts are much more theologically oriented than, say, Ruth and Esther. But all biblical narratives display a "world" in a way that comments on facets of it, whether on the nature of humanity, the immanence/transcendence of God, the place of "religion" in society, the ethical expectations appropriate of a "people of God," or whatever. And these are all the subject of systematic theology, if the latter is understood sufficiently comprehensively to include practical and applied theology, and the in-depth study of particular aspects of theological discourse, not merely the ranking and logical relationships of cardinal Christian doctrines. Whole monographs have been written on the "theology" of the Gospels and Acts.

42. See Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, and the more moderate redaction critics.

There is no theoretical problem in discussing, say, the anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and pneumatology of Acts, and how these relate to each other.[43] Equally there is no problem in saying what these may be considered to contribute to (and what Luke might have learned from) a broader NT theology at the apostolic conference table. Similarly, it is possible, indeed appropriate, to bring Luke-Acts into dialogue with theology today. What would the contribution of its somewhat charismatic and missiologically focused pneumatology be? And how would systematic theology today in turn bring searching questions about the relationship of such a theology to a broader soteriological conception of the Spirit in the community (on which Luke has less to say), or concerning a panentheism of Spirit in creation and humankind (on which Luke, like other NT authors, has nothing to say, but on which the OT and IT literature are more suggestive)? It is appropriate to ask these questions. But theology today can only "dialogue" with Luke when the first horizon of Luke's own perspective has been established as carefully as possible — i.e., when Luke's voice is able to speak clearly as *his* voice.

4. "Behind the Text," "In the Text," and "In Front of the Text" Issues in the Theological Hermeneutics of the Apocalypse

Space precludes more than the very briefest comments. The book of Revelation combines the genres of apostolic letter (cf. the form of 1:4-6; 22:21), prophecy (1:3; 22:18-19), and apocalypse (1:1 and passim). John anticipates that his work will be received as from a true martyr/witness (1:9), well known to the churches of Asia, but also as prophetic revelation (cf. 22:18-19). Accordingly, his authorial role varies between direct address, oracle-reports (e.g., to the seven churches), narrations (e.g., of visions, and of his own responses), and final editing of the whole. The history of the interpretation of Revelation suggests it has been sadly misconstrued by those without adequate grasp of such "behind the text" issues as the nature and symbolism of Jewish apocalypses from Daniel onward.[44] Similarly, the so-called "letters to

43. Cf. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

44. Cf. Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK; New York: Crossroad, 1982); Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), chap. 2.

the seven churches" (2:1–3:22) reflect local detail best illuminated by contemporary Greco-Roman literature and by archeology,[45] and the whole writing assumes an awareness of, and provides a radical challenge to, the oppressive Roman sociopolitical, economic, and religious culture of the cities.[46] Equally important, however, are such "in the text" literary-critical issues as structuring, gaps, pauses, repetitions, and parallels — which have perhaps not yet received the attention they deserve,[47] and the internal unfolding and explanation of the symbolism.[48] Turning briefly to "in front of the text issues," we acknowledge that Revelation's place at the end of the canon eminently suits its nature, for the Apocalypse is fundamentally concerned with how the God of all creation fulfills the totality of OT eschatological hopes through the cross, through the (authentic) witness of the church to the nations, and in the final messianic triumph and restoration of creation. Its vivid and profound challenge — both to the church and to the dominant ideology — assures that it will continually and fruitfully be recontextualized (as it has in the past).[49] But the challenge will probably be the sharper and the more authoritative if it is informed by the detail of John's discourse meaning (text + presupposition pool), rather than if this is abandoned in the name of the liberated "text" alone.

5. Conclusion

The absolute rule of historical criticism may be over. This essay has briefly assessed the relation of "behind the text," "in the text," and "in front of the text" issues in theological hermeneutics of NT writings in the light of this claim. The different kinds of writings — letter, narrative, and apocalypse

45. See especially Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTSup 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

46. Cf. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, chaps. 6, 10, 11.

47. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, chap. 1; Alan Garrow, *Revelation* (London: Routledge, 1997).

48. See Rowland, *The Open Heaven;* Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy;* Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

49. See, e.g., Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), chap. 4; Bauckham, *Theology*, chap. 7; Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), pp. 85-102.

— call forth different answers. Contrary to fashion in some quarters, however, we have found no reason to believe questions of authorial discourse meaning and its closely related "background" issues are dead. They are most vitally relevant in the hermeneutics of letters, but still significant in the other forms of NT literature. The main reason for this is that discourse meaning depends not merely on "text" but greatly on the invoked presupposition pools. Much of what we mean by the "clarity" of Scripture rests on this — that is, we read a "text" such as Philemon against a presupposition pool informed considerably by other biblical (especially Pauline) texts. But we cannot arbitrarily restrict the presupposition pool to the content of biblical texts and to facts about Greek language (a "behind the text" issue!), bracketing out all the rest of our knowledge of the contemporary Greco-Roman and Jewish history and culture in which the NT texts are embedded. Moreover, most would agree that the relation of the Gospels to history is a question with which we can never dispense.

We must welcome the introduction of a variety of literary-critical approaches, which, along with other disciplines such as discourse analysis and structuralism, provide insight into "in the text issues." These are more important for the narrative writings and for the Apocalypse, perhaps, than for the letters, but still significant there too.

We need fully to appreciate the importance of "in front of the text" issues, and how much they can, do, and must shape, not merely our appropriation of texts, but also (to a lesser extent) our exegesis of them. We can thus learn from even the most radical reader-response critics and ardent postliberals — though, in the final analysis, we need to avoid their temptation prematurely to fuse the horizons of author/text and reader. The canonical principle bids us join the apostolic conference table with the NT writers and give them due hearing. It does not invite us to gag and bind the apostolic authors and hustle them into our century, and into our churches, where they are able only to stutter out, in stifled whispers, the things we have already told them to say. We potentially learn perhaps more from those believing communities whose experience of the Spirit and in the world has given sharp insight into aspects of Scripture elsewhere too readily ignored. To mind immediately come (*inter alia*) the Pentecostal/charismatic experience of the Spirit, the African experience of spirits, the South American grassroots experience of oppression and poverty, and women's experience of male domination.[50] But (of "in front of text" ap-

50. On spirits, see Keith Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective*

proaches) we learn perhaps most by listening respectfully to our various church theological traditions — based in years of experience and reflection — and to the critical discussions of their strengths and weaknesses in the literature of theology. It is these we need to bring back into open dialogue at the apostolic conference table.

(Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999). On grassroots communities, see Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*. More generally, see John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, "Global Perspectives on New Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the New Testament*, pp. 329-48.

CHAPTER 4

The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

STEPHEN E. FOWL

Debates over the role, significance, and status of authors for interpretation have been hotly contested over the past fifty years.[1] Those who have attacked authors have focused on two main issues. The first concerns whether and how one might uncover the intentions of the author. The other revolves around whether and how authors might be thought of as having some claim or control over how their works are interpreted. Among these critics it is not uncommon to hear people speak of "the death of the author." The French literary critic Roland Barthes has noted that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."[2]

1. The classic essay which began this was William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 1946 essay, "The Intentional Fallacy." An edition of this can be found in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 3-18.

2. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image — Music — Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 148. Two other names most often associated with this claim are the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. While the views of these two are very different from each other in most respects, they do share an antipathy toward authors. Foucault does leave room for what he calls the "author function" (see "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon, 1984], pp. 101-20). On the other hand, the attack on "man" as subject, which concludes *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), makes one wonder whether Foucault did not have his sights set on a much bigger enemy than authors. For a good overview of Derrida on authors, which focuses on Derrida's engagements with John