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The Authority of the Bible as a Hermeneutical Issue

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Key words: authority, Bible, hermeneutics, inerrancy, interpretation, New Testament.

In this paper,¹ I wish to address the topic of the authority of the Bible as a hermeneutical issue.² I do not attempt to solve the many issues related to the authority of the Bible and, in particular, inerrancy. Rather than engage this range of issues, I wish to go a step further and show that many of the disputes are to a large extent misdirected, and that by shifting the ground of discussion we can enter into a more appropriate, even if murkier, realm of discourse. I believe that the issue of the authority of the Bible has continued to be as problematic as it is because of, at least in part, confusion over the major terminological issues. By this, I mean that the issue of the authority of the Bible, with all of its attendant and concomitant implications, is primarily, if not exclusively, a hermeneutical issue, rather than, as it is usually framed, an interpretive issue.³ As a result, I first address the major problems with the traditional realistic (perhaps even naively realistic) view of the authority of the Bible, I then discuss the issue of hermeneutics and interpretation more fully, and, finally, I discuss some recent developments in biblical studies in light of the distinctions that I am making, to see if they are ad-

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- 1 This paper was a plenary address delivered by invitation at the inaugural meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society Ontario/Quebec Region, on 14 September 2013. I wish to thank the organizers of that conference for the invitation, those who responded to the paper for their questions, and several who offered constructive comments. I dedicate this paper to my former student, Andrew Rozalowsky, who also delivered a paper that day, but also that day discovered the relapse of the leukemia from which he died on 6 January, 2014, aged 29.
 - 2 Stanley E. Porter, 'The Implications of New Testament Pseudonymy for a Doctrine of Scripture', in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 236–56.
 - 3 The recent volume on inerrancy – *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, edited by J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), with contributions by R. Albert Mohler Jr., Peter Enns, Michael F. Bird, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and John R. Franke – touches on many of the issues I raise. However, the book is framed in such a way as to make biblical inerrancy a question of interpretation – note the debate over the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and mandatory discussion of three problem passages – and many of the hermeneutical issues are lost, even by those contributors who are more philosophically attuned to such things.

equate interpretive models consistent with the hermeneutical view of scriptural authority that I am advocating. I will then conclude with some guidelines for a hermeneutics of the authority of the Bible.

I. The problem of biblical authority

The problem of biblical authority concerns the grounds for belief in the authority of the Bible for faith and practice. For the sake of discussion here I take biblical authority to include the notion of an inerrant Scripture (one of my presuppositions or pre-understandings). Whereas it might be easier to discuss biblical authority without assuming the argumentative burden of inerrancy, I think that this has inherent problems that I will pass over here in order to discuss the more relevant issue of what I consider to be the proper framing of the question of biblical authority. The problem essentially boils down to the fact that, for those who maintain an inerrantist view of Scripture, there are passages in the Bible that are hard to explain while retaining an inerrantist perspective – that is, there are passages that, if we are honest, realistically appear to have some significant discrepancy or even contradiction. It is not hard to find some examples of such passages, because they are often discussed by both those who wish to question such a view of the Bible and those who wish to defend it.

Before I list several examples – not to discuss them at length but to illustrate their problematic nature – let me iterate that I am fully supportive of efforts to harmonize and explain such problems, refine interpretive approaches to such texts, or explore new avenues of explanation not previously undertaken. I especially support the last, because I believe that we have often been lulled into accepting interpretations that are perhaps supported only by longevity (and usually an accompanying translation). I have attempted to offer such explanations on several occasions, such as Luke 18:35 and being in the vicinity of Jericho or Luke 2:1–7 and the Lukan census.⁴ Though I do not hold to the same position (as already noted above, with my affirmation of inerrancy), I am very much in sympathy with a position like that of William F. Moulton, the translator of Georg Winer's grammar, as described by his son, James Hope Moulton, the even better known Greek grammarian. James says that his father did not hold to a mechanistic view

4 Stanley E. Porter, "In the Vicinity of Jericho": Luke 18:35 in the Light of its Synoptic Parallels', *BBR* 2 (1992) 91–104; repr. in Stanley E. Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament: Theory and Practice*, SBG 6 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 125–38; and Porter, 'The Reasons for the Lukan Census', in *Paul, Luke, and the Graeco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Alexander J.M. Wedderburn*, edited by Alf Christophersen, Carsten Claussen, Jörg Frey and Bruce W. Longenecker, JSNTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 165–88; and now Porter, 'The Witness of Extra-Gospel Literary Sources to the Infancy Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels', in *The Gospels: History and Christology. The Search of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVII I Vangeli: Storia e Cristologia. La ricerca di Joseph Ratzinger-Benedetto XVI*, 2 vols. edited by Bernardo Estrada, Ermenegildo Manicardi, and Armand Puig i Tàrrach (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 1:419–65.

of inspiration, and did not aver belief in inerrancy, 'But it would have been hard to get him to acknowledge an error in a New Testament writer as *proved*. His unwillingness does not seem to have arisen from an *a priori* conviction that errors could not be; rather, minute study had convinced him that the documents were trustworthy, and if trifling discrepancies were pointed out he would simply reply that completer knowledge of the details might very well remove the contradiction.⁵ Nevertheless, when all is said and done, there are still passages that remain unsatisfactorily explained to this point and make it difficult, even if we ourselves are convinced, to maintain an unqualified inerrantist position.

Craig Blomberg has offered a detailed treatment of an extensive list of such problematic examples.⁶ Whereas many of his explanations are reasonable – in conjunction with his observation that other ancient authors for whom we have parallel accounts, such as Josephus and the Alexander stories, evidence similar discrepancies – there are examples that remain difficult if not impossible to explain according to the knowledge that we now possess. One such example is whether Jesus commanded his disciples to take a staff and sandals with them on their outreach mission (Matt. 10:10//Mark 6:8–9//Luke 9:3). Blomberg's explanation, relying upon Grant Osborne's proposal, is that Mark's sending of the twelve is conflated with Luke's sending of the seventy in Matthew's account, with the first permitting and the second prohibiting carrying the staff and sandals.⁷ I will allow you to judge whether this explanation is satisfactory. For many, I believe it has not proved persuasive. Blomberg's article contains many more such examples for consideration.

As a result of such difficulties, in which it is difficult if not impossible to prove an inerrantist view of the Bible simply or solely from the scriptural text, it makes it very difficult to prove the complete inerrancy of Scripture from the Bible itself. It is even more difficult, solely upon the basis of marshaling comments from the Bible itself, to arrive at such a conclusion. This is a procedure that Wayne Grudem has undertaken, in what must be – though I have not scoured all possible sources – the most thorough accumulation of biblical data in support of the authority of Scripture ever assembled. In his chapter, entitled 'Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture', Grudem marshals voluminous evidence of the reliability of God's speech and the Old

5 W. Fiddian Moulton, *William F Moulton: A Memoir. With a Chapter on Biblical Works and Opinions by James Hope Moulton* (London: Isbister, 1899), 228. The quote appears in chapter 5, 'Biblical Works and Opinions', 181–237.

6 Craig L. Blomberg, 'The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 139–74.

7 Blomberg, 'Legitimacy', 154–55, citing Grant R. Osborne, 'The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology', *JETS* 22 (1979), 305–22, esp. 314. This is one of the six examples cited by Stephen T. Davis as a 'real error', in *The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 95; cf. 96–106.

Testament.⁸ There is no doubt from his survey that God is depicted as speaking through the Old Testament, that the New Testament authors believed that God had spoken authoritatively in Scripture (which for them would have been the Old Testament, even if we are not entirely clear what would have constituted the parameters of the Old Testament at this time), and that in the New Testament, especially in Jesus, God spoke and his revealed word was taken as truthful and reliable. Grudem has even shown that the New Testament evidences a developing consciousness of New Testament authors having scriptural status – in particular 1 Tim. 5:18, citing words of Jesus found in Luke 10:7 (and similar words in Matt. 10:10) as Scripture along with Deut. 25:4;⁹ and 2 Pet. 3:16, which refers to Paul's letters along with the 'other Scriptures'. As even Grudem however admits, 'It is possible to show that some of the New Testament writings are thought to be God's words, but one cannot prove conclusively that all of the New Testament writings were so regarded, at least not by using the data of the New Testament alone.'¹⁰ On top of this, Grudem has not responded to the major problem posed by Blomberg's article – that despite the cumulative evidence regarding the authority of the Bible, on the basis of the Bible itself one cannot prove beyond doubt its inerrancy and therefore complete and unqualified authority.

The two articles by Blomberg and Grudem are, I believe, fairly typical approaches to the major issues raised regarding the authority of the Bible. One is the attempt to answer all of the issues raised by such a position by refuting attempts to find errors within the Bible (without the original documents) and the other is to marshal all of the Bible's own comments regarding itself, in effect to make the Bible a self-authenticating document. Neither has proved to be successful, virtually by the proponents' own admissions.

II. Hermeneutics and interpretation

Within evangelical circles (and possibly others, but that is not my concern here), there is confusion over the notions of hermeneutics and interpretation, especially interpretation when seen as technique for objective interpretation of the text. In many circles, hermeneutics and interpretation are treated as synonymous terms, when they are not. This confusion is seen in a variety of volumes that have both hermeneutics and interpretation in their titles, using them as if they are interchangeable.

A case in point is the volume by Grant Osborne entitled *The Hermeneuti-*

8 Wayne A. Grudem, 'Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture', in *Scripture and Truth*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 19–59.

9 There is plenty of discussion of this passage in the commentators, but I think that the indication is that 'Scripture says' covers both passages, contextually bestowing a scriptural status on the quotation from Luke 10:7.

10 Grudem, 'Scripture's Self-Attestation', 45.

cal Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation.¹¹ Osborne makes it look as if hermeneutics, especially encompassed within the metaphor of the hermeneutical spiral, is simply a way of labeling a comprehensive view of biblical interpretation. Within the volume, Osborne focuses upon preliminary issues of textual interpretation, such as intention, genre, and the like, before launching into more detailed treatment of issues of grammar, semantics, syntax, and historical backgrounds, and then the various genres of the Bible illustrated book by book, before concluding with discussion of what he calls 'applied hermeneutics', including theology and homiletics. This volume clearly seems to be trying to offer a comprehensive introduction to biblical interpretation. By way of comparison, the similar volume by William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard is entitled *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.¹² The contents of the volume are surprisingly similar to the contents of Osborne's. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard begin with the need for hermeneutics, where they define it as the art and science of interpretation, especially of texts, and then, after a short history of interpretation, deal with various issues in interpretation, such as literary approaches, the role of the interpreter, and basic interpretive issues for prose and poetry, before engaging in an extended genre-based approach to interpretation, and then concluding with use and application of the Bible. Even though they do not use the term hermeneutics in the title, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard do introduce the topic, even if only to move into the specifics of biblical interpretation. In fact, for all intents and purposes, the overall focus, content, and even organization of these two volumes is very similar. A helpful contrast is found in the recent volume by Petr Pokorny, entitled *Hermeneutics as a Theory of Understanding*.¹³ Even though Pokorny also talks about matters of language and text, his framework is noticeably different from that of either Osborne or Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard. He is concerned with language as an encoding system, the relationship of syntax and pragmatics, and symbol and metaphor. The text is not simply an object to be interpreted, but a graphemic representation of a world of discourse, one that is silent, can be misused, is fixed, and stands between the past and future. Only at this point, after fully engaging some hermeneutical issues, does Pokorny introduce matters of interpretation, including its methods. From these three examples, we can see that the confusion of hermeneutics and interpretation is a common mistake – one made more often than not in evangelical circles (witness courses called either 'Biblical Hermeneutics'

11 Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006 2nd ed. [1991]). I admit that the book that Beth Stovell and I edited on hermeneutics in some ways falls victim to this as well. See *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, edited by Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

12 William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004 rev. ed. [1993]).

13 Petr Pokorny, *Hermeneutics as a Theory of Understanding*, translated by Anna Bryson-Gustová (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011 [2005]).

or ‘Interpretation’ that end up teaching essentially the same thing – how specifically, by method, to interpret the Bible).

I realize that I have not fully defined the difference between hermeneutics and interpretation, so at this point it may appear that there is no clear distinction between them or that there is no harm in conflating or even confusing them. However, failing to distinguish hermeneutics and interpretation has had a number of detrimental consequences through the years. In fact, the failure to distinguish them has been evidenced in matters directly related to the authority of the Bible in two well-known confrontations that the American-based Evangelical Theological Society has experienced in its distant and recent past. The first episode concerns the New Testament scholar Robert Gundry.¹⁴ In 1982, Gundry published a major commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, where he argued that Matthew was a creative author who redacted his sources. As a result, he claimed that Matthew, as a Jewish author, used a Jewish literary technique called midrash in his Gospel. Thus, in the infancy narrative, Gundry contended, ‘Matthew [turned] the visit of the local Jewish shepherds (Luke 2:8–20) into the adoration by Gentile magi from foreign parts’.¹⁵ This notion – which today would probably be received with relative equanimity even at a national ETS meeting – resulted in a thorough investigation of Gundry. (It did not help that the commentary was apparently originally written for the Expositor’s Bible Commentary, and rejected by the New Testament editors, Merrill Tenney and James Boice, despite extensive revisions.) The investigation focused upon whether Gundry could affirm inerrancy – which he did – while holding to such a position, in which he apparently did not take all of the matters represented in Matthew’s Gospel as literal or factual (however these terms are construed) on the basis of genre and interpretive technique. Although at first exonerated by the executive of ETS, under pressure from others, a vote was taken to have Gundry resign from ETS and he did so in December 1983. The matter here appears to have been a dispute over two issues: historical criticism and literary genre. In other words, what is the role of redaction criticism in exposition of a Gospel, what constitutes a genre, and how does an interpretive technique such as midrash relate to it? Gundry claimed that they fit well together and produced a commentary to show that they could; his opponents in ETS argued that they did not – and they voted him out to show that they were right. The answer to the problem clearly was not more or better interpretation – a matter of interpretation became a problem of inerrancy and authority, and a question of hermeneutics.

The second incident began in 2010, with Michael Licona’s publication of *The*

14 For a more expansive and detailed treatment of this instance, in conjunction with an earlier episode, see the article in the previous issue of *Evangelical Quarterly* by Michael Strickland, ‘Redaction Criticism on Trial: The Cases of A. B. Bruce and Robert Gundry’, *EQ* 86 (2014).

15 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 26; cf. 623–40. For details of the events, see the *Christianity Today* article of February 3, 1984 (posted online).

Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach.¹⁶ In a book of nearly 650 pages of text, a vocal few objected to Licona's interpretation of the admittedly strange events of Matt. 27:52–53. Licona, citing work by such scholars as Raymond Brown and a variety of ancient authors, concluded after some deliberation that the events were probably poetically conveyed in a way consistent with other ancient authors talking about special events, such as the deaths of figures like a Caesar. Licona's discussion of this passage took six pages within his book, less than 1% of its total content, but it was enough to incite widespread debate over whether one could affirm inerrancy while maintaining that there were poetic or metaphorical passages within the Gospels, even if other ancient authors appeared to have just such similar passages. The result of the dispute was that Licona resigned his position as apologetics coordinator for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. The matter here appears to have been a dispute over a single issue: literary genre. In other words, what constitutes a genre, or can one have a figurative genre within or alongside a historical genre? The interpretive answers are clearly diverse and have not been solved by simply an appeal to more interpretation. Instead, they were made into a matter of inerrancy. Again, a matter of interpretation became a matter of hermeneutics.

Neither of these disputes – which appear to have been essentially the same dispute separated by nearly thirty years – was confined primarily to matters of interpretation. If the matter had been interpretation alone, we could have hoped for some kind of interpretive outcome that would have resolved the issues. Instead, the major issues here, while they involved interpretation, were primarily matters of hermeneutics. What at first was a question of particular interpretations became questions of larger matters of understanding. That more than simply interpretation was involved is made clear by the fruitless appeal that took place in both disputes to the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Despite its preface, which states that the statement should not be given 'creedal weight', it appears that this is exactly what it has been given in some circles. However, what is more important to note here is that the statement is designed and purports to be a statement on biblical interpretation, not on biblical hermeneutics – as evidenced by the fact that a different statement on biblical hermeneutics was formulated by the same committee four years later.¹⁷ It is not my place to enter into the two previous disputes in order to arbitrate their outcomes. I will only say at this point that, from what I can tell, both Gundry and Licona were well within the bounds of even the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, and their opponents were applying a different standard than is called

16 Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 548–53. Some details in this account are taken from Licona's Wikipedia entry.

17 The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics is a highly problematic statement that involves a mix of hermeneutical tenets, principles of interpretation (e.g. on narrative and historicity), and even specific interpretations (e.g. on Gen. 1–11).

for by the statement itself, one that prejudges all issues of criticism, genre, and the like. In other words, they were applying a hermeneutical standard to a matter of interpretation.

The fact that the disputes of Gundry and Licona never got much beyond disputes over interpretation should not surprise us, in light of my comments above. From the above brief treatment of representative works on biblical interpretation (even if called hermeneutics), we can see that interpretation may be a part of hermeneutics, but the two cannot be equated and they must be distinguished from each other, especially as interpretation usually focuses upon techniques for interpretation (such as the nature of redaction criticism, or what constitutes a genre). Hermeneutics, however, is concerned, as Pokorny has rightly indicated, with the much broader and, I would say, much more fundamental question of human understanding.

As Jason Robinson and I have defined it, hermeneutics ‘refers to the many ways in which we may theorize about the nature of human interpretation, whether that means understanding books, works of art, architecture, verbal communication, or even nonverbal bodily gestures.’¹⁸ There is a dynamic relationship that takes place between the object of our understanding and ourselves, such that we as interpreters must always bring ourselves, our pre-understandings, and even our prejudices to interpretation. There is an ineradicable subjectivity to interpretation, and to think otherwise is to attempt to create what can only be an artificial pseudo-objectivity. The very process of attempting to isolate the object of interpretation and to claim to analyze it without an interpreter begs a multitude of questions: what object of interpretation, which factors are being excluded and which are being retained, by which interpreter, and for what purpose? The hermeneutical dynamic irrevocably and intimately involves the human subject as interpreter, the object of enquiry (which itself is often only difficultly defined), and the contexts of each in whose relationship understanding occurs.

Hermeneutics is successful only to the degree that it is able to include as much of what makes us human as possible, e.g., our social, historical, linguistic, theological, and biological influences. Broadly speaking then, to think hermeneutically means to ask what we mean by human understanding universally, i.e., what we all do naturally, regardless of our specific cultures, languages, or traditions. However, most hermeneutical descriptions also pay close attention to how our cultures, languages, and traditions influence the ways in which we understand.¹⁹

Hermeneutics is much broader in scope than interpretation. Hermeneutics involves not just elements of interpretation, but what it means to be an interpreter: what are the assumptions, preconditions, felicitous conditions, activities, prior commitments, and human components, among other things, that enter

18 Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1.

19 Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 2.

into, and even govern, any act of human understanding, whether its object be language, culture, the physical world, even texts, and much else? In that sense, hermeneutics recognizes human conditionality, the fact that we are never neutral, and that there is no place of unaffected neutrality, no Archimedean place to stand, but that understanding is always conditional and provisional, and often negotiated and debated among competing understandings. Hermeneutical understanding, therefore, also recognizes that there is no means by which one can separate human understanding from contemporary significance and application.

Interpretation, however, is much more specific. Interpretation includes the processes and techniques involved in interpretive acts, especially, but not exclusively, of texts. As a result, we can see that biblical interpretation is not to be equated with biblical hermeneutics, nor is it simply a subcategory of hermeneutics, because hermeneutics itself need not involve interpretive method or practice. Instead, hermeneutics and interpretation are intersecting and overlapping but not synonymous or even inclusive terms. Biblical interpretation no doubt is predicated upon – whether knowingly or unknowingly – hermeneutics. Biblical interpretation includes the theories, methods, and results of how the Bible is interpreted, whether this involves ancient or modern allegorizing, literalism, harmonization, grammatical-historical exegesis, textual or lower criticism, various so-called higher criticisms such as form-, source-, and redaction-criticism, and so-called modern or contemporary methods such as literary readings, canonical readings, ideological criticisms, linguistic criticism, and the like, which result in readings of texts more or less influenced by these and other methods. There is no doubt that biblical interpretation is hermeneutically motivated – even if many interpreters are not cognizant of this and believe they are simply ‘reading the text’. However, there is much involved in hermeneutics that is outside the scope of interpretation, just as there are elements of interpretation – including the mechanics or techniques of interpretation, and even its methods – that are outside the purview of hermeneutics proper, except that such interpretive acts inevitably reflect prior and continuing hermeneutical commitments.²⁰

This complex of hermeneutical issues raises a set of questions regarding the authority of the Bible that is not easily resolved – and certainly will not be resolved by me here. They include all of the fundamental questions related to hermeneutics and understanding. They include at least the following: what is the basis of understanding in a biblical hermeneutics? Is biblical hermeneutics foundationalist (even objectivist), grounded only in the author of Scripture (whether human or divine); anti-foundationalist, with no objectivist basis; or

20 Much of this paragraph and the following three come from Stanley E. Porter, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics and Theological Responsibility’, in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 16–35/29–50, and recent work (chapter 2) to appear in a forthcoming volume on hermeneutics by Porter and Jason Robinson.

post-foundationalist, recognizing the infinite complexity of human situatedness and the attempt to make meaning of our surroundings? What role do such things as prior commitments, presuppositions, tradition, authority, the Bible, and theology play in a view of biblical authority? What is the role of the self in understanding, and what is the role of the community, both in relation to biblical authority? How do we differentiate among author, text, and reader, and such things as authorial and textual intention? What are the relations between the individual elements of a text and the whole of a text? What role does textual and interpretive situatedness play? What role does the history of interpretation play? What are the differences among such terms as meaning, interpretation, significance, and criticism, among others?

All attempts at hermeneutics must come to terms with these variable factors in some way or another – whether the emphasis is upon authorial intention, the meaning of the text, or the role of the reader, to identify the three main foci – and have direct implications for formulating a view of the authority of the Bible that is much larger than simply the question of the genre of a Gospel. I continue to confront these elements and believe that an inerrantist view of the authority of the Bible is the most coherent and consistent means of coming to terms with God, the Bible, and the human situation – but it is a position that others will not necessarily accept, and requires continuing debate and discussion, even if consensus is never reached.

The complexity of these issues is often made more difficult by the failure to appreciate two important further questions: what did the text mean when it was composed by its author for its original audience, and what does the text mean for me? Whereas most interpretation focuses upon techniques for interpretation – whether these are matters of language, genre, or the like – such interpretation is virtually always, by definition, focused upon the past, that is, what something meant then, whereas hermeneutics is concerned with both what something may have meant but also with what something means, which entails what it means to me as a human subject. Much biblical interpretation has concentrated on a narrow definition of meaning focused upon what a text meant at the time of inscription – though often failing to recognize the complexity of such an interpretive task in and of itself – and failed to appreciate that meaning is a far more complex notion. Much of this confusion seems to have grown out of a fear that what a text means may overpower what it meant.

There have been many different approaches to this issue, with scholars emphasizing one or the other question and tending to emphasize either ancient meaning or modern understanding. The classic distinction of E. D. Hirsch between meaning and significance differentiates meaning as what was intended by the author and significance what this meaning becomes in other contexts.²¹

21 E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 8. See also P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Wendell Harris sees interpretation as the probable meaning for the assumed authorial audience, while significance is

Many have rejected such a formulation, as failing to realize that, once separated from the author, the text transcends its original context and speaks in new and meaningful (not just significant) ways to new audiences. Hans Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, and Paul de Man, among others – an intriguing group to be sure – all recognize in some way that the author has a fundamental role in the hermeneutical equation and hence in meaning and understanding, even if this authorial position is superseded in the context of larger questions of understanding.²² Gadamer differentiates between reproductive (authorial) and productive (interpreter) meaning, Barthes speaks of giving the text autonomy free from the author (implicating the existence of an authorial meaning), Derrida admits that ‘doubling commentary’ or reproducing the original meaning of a text has a place in critical understanding, Ricoeur recognizes authorial intention but speaks of the text not coinciding with it once autonomous but needing to be ‘recontextualized’, Foucault acknowledges the embeddedness of the author in the text, and de Man recognizes the place of grammar and its meaning even if he wishes to offset it with rhetoric.

In other words, the question for hermeneutics is not what the text meant – which apparently hermeneuts and interpreters on all sides of the question can agree that it did at one time in relation to its author, even if this is difficultly conceived (thus avoiding the charge of complete subjectivity and relativism) – but what does the text mean, in my situatedness as understanding subject. In that sense, much of Hirsch’s and others’ agonizing over the differentiation between meaning and significance has been grossly misguided. The issue is not whether one can determine the meaning then. We must acknowledge that the task of interpretation of an ancient text is very difficult and requires a range of interpretive tools and techniques for it to be accomplished – but it is not impossible. The major problem with Hirsch’s formulation is to dismiss the notion of any other meaning and demote it to the level of mere significance. Meaning only becomes meaning for an understanding subject when I recognize what it means

related to non-authorial contexts. See Wendell V. Harris, *Interpretive Acts in Search of Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), ix.

22 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989 2nd ed.), 296–97; Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in his *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 49–55; Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158; Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, translated by John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 91, 108, 139, 203; Michel Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’ in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon 1984), 101–20 (111–12); and Paul De Man, ‘Semiology and Rhetoric’, in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, edited by David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford, 1998 2nd ed.), 906–16 (908–909). I am thankful for the essay by Merold Westphal, ‘The Philosophical/Theological View’, in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, 70–88 (76–81), for some of the references here, although he would probably disagree with my use of them.

for me as one engaged in an act of understanding. Determining the meaning then of the author in the original context is only part of the hermeneutical task – a half turn of the hermeneutical circle or spiral. We must turn the circle or spiral a full rotation so as to bring the horizon of text and author together, to fuse the two horizons into a single horizon of understanding. Meaning is only fully achieved and understanding only gained when we recognize that understanding only occurs by means of an interpreter. When we ask the question of what Gen. 1:1 means, we are asking more than simply what the Hebrew text meant when it was penned, what that particular configuration of Hebrew characters signified. We are asking that to be sure – with all of its linguistic, contextual, and even canonical issues necessary to determine that meaning – but we must also ask what that means for me as a twenty-first-century interpreter, with over three thousand or more years of interpretive history and understanding between the original writing and my reading, including the rise of modern science. When we ask the question of what 1 Tim. 2:12 means, we are asking more than simply what these particular Greek words signify – again with all of the linguistic, contextual, and even canonical issues attending – but also what they mean for me as a contemporary twenty-first-century reader, with nearly two thousand years of interpretive history and understanding between the original writing and my reading, much of this interpretation at least questionable, I believe, due to inadequate pre-understandings and prejudices. This encapsulates the problem of the authority of the Bible.

There are certainly a number of speculative reasons that hermeneutics and interpretation have been confused – some of them I have already suggested. One of the reasons for confusion over the authority of Scripture as a hermeneutical issue is that the common metaphors that we use to discuss interpretation and hermeneutics have not been clearly articulated or understood. There are three such metaphors worth mentioning briefly: the hermeneutical circle, the hermeneutical spiral, and the hermeneutical triad. We have already seen how the hermeneutical spiral has been (mis)appropriated, but let me attempt to move beyond this. There is a growing literature of commentary upon and critique of the hermeneutical circle.²³ I mention this, not because I will be engaging with it, but because it is worth noting that these hermeneutical metaphors are exactly that – metaphors designed to aid in understanding, not formulated to substitute for it.

The hermeneutical circle has been discussed or invoked since the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey at the beginning of the hermeneutical era.²⁴ The circle is used in two primary ways, both of them, I believe, in potentially unhelpful ways when it comes to thinking about the authority of the Bible. The first is to describe an interpretive scenario in which the larger whole informs the understanding of its parts, and the individual parts inform the understanding of the whole. There is a long tradition of conceiving of the

23 See, e.g., Mohammad Motahari, 'The Hermeneutical Circle or the Hermeneutical Spiral?', *International Journal of the Humanities* 15.2 (2008): 99–111.

24 See Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 24–42.

hermeneutical circle in this way. However, despite this, I do not believe that this is a hermeneutical circle, but an interpretive one, as the circle never necessarily moves outside of the world of the original text. A better conception is to see the hermeneutical circle involving a reciprocal relationship between distinct horizons of understanding. The notion is that the circle in some way brings into dialogue the horizon of the object of interpretation – in our case a written text – and the horizon of the interpreter, so that they form a mutually informing and reciprocal understanding, informing and critiquing each other in what has been called a fusion of horizons. Understood in this way, the hermeneutical circle has been a largely productive metaphor, because it has captured several essential features of hermeneutics. One is that the interpreter has a horizon of understanding; another is that this horizon of understanding should not be confused with the horizon of the object of interpretation; and a third is that these two horizons can be mutually informing, bringing about understanding through their dialectic. This, however, is the place where the hermeneutical circle experiences the limits of its metaphorical power. The circle remains a circle, which implies that one still perpetually moves back and forth from horizon to horizon, without effecting transcendent movement.

The hermeneutical spiral is sometimes introduced as a supposed improvement upon the hermeneutical circle, because the spiral implies movement in understanding as one alternates from horizon to horizon, from object to interpreter in the quest for understanding. However, a spiral is a problematic geometric shape. Spirals come in all sorts of forms. Some spiral away from the center, others remain equi-distant from the center, and others have a conical shape. The last is what is meant by Osborne in his use of the hermeneutical spiral – although I would contend that rather than cone, one should use vortex to describe the kind of movement that he anticipates, a vortex that moves closer and closer to a definitive meaning. The difficulty with using the hermeneutical spiral, however, is well illustrated in Osborne's definition of it: 'A spiral is a better metaphor because it is not a closed circle but rather an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader'. So far, so good, and capturing the hermeneutical situation. However, he continues: 'I am not going round and round a closed circle that can never detect the true meaning but am spiraling nearer and nearer to the text's intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for my situation today.'²⁵ This is not a hermeneutical spiral, but the orbit of a planet around the sun. Osborne is attempting to retain the metaphor of the hermeneutical spiral while endorsing the bifurcation between meaning and significance, with meaning being equated with authorial intention. The result is not a horizon of meaning for the interpreter, but the simple transference of original meaning to the interpreter's contemporary situation. One can see that the metaphor of the hermeneutical

25 Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 22.

spiral cannot solve the problem of the authority of the Bible as a hermeneutical issue if one has a view of hermeneutics simply as interpretation, or as (in Osborne's case) applied interpretation.

Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson recently claim to have introduced a third metaphor, the hermeneutical triad.²⁶ The triad consists of three triangulated areas: history, literature, and theology. However, despite making the (unfortunately mistaken) claim of their introducing the term 'hermeneutical triad', they do admit that previous scholars have examined the same three areas. It is true that they are not the first to introduce the three areas of history, literature, and theology. The problems with the hermeneutical triad, however, are more serious than simply redundancy. Köstenberger and Patterson give the impression that they are the first to organize the three areas in a hermeneutical and triangular way. They are wrong in this regard. Gottlob Frege conceived of meaning in a triangulation of sign (*Zeichen*), sense/meaning (*Sinn*), and reference (*Bedeutung*); Charles Peirce apparently conceived of meaning in terms of representamen, interpretant, and object; C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards thought of meaning similarly as symbol, thought or reference, and referent (and used the triangle as a figure); and Karl Bühler as expression, appeal, and representation.²⁷ More important to note, however, is that this is not a hermeneutical triad at all, but an interpretive triad. Köstenberger and Patterson are concerned with the literature of the Bible, the history of the Bible, and biblical theology. They are not concerned with a hermeneutical vortex of coalescing horizons past and present, as is evidenced in the fact that the horizon of the interpreter is confined to a single chapter on application at the end of the book (in fact, the chapter on biblical theology is a short one just before this one).

We have seen that one of the major problems for biblical scholars in formulating an appropriate view of the authority of the Bible is that they are confused on a number of prior points. They are confused about the difference between hermeneutics and interpretation, to the point that they fail to grasp that what

26 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 24. However, despite their claims, they are not even the first to introduce the language of the hermeneutical triad. I note that the term hermeneutical triad is used in Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 135, consisting of the same three 'concerns': 'historical, literary, and philosophical or theological methodologies'.

27 See Gottlob Frege, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 56–78; Charles Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 98–119, esp. 99–100 (both Frege and Peirce are conceptualized triangularly by Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976], 59–60); C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), esp. 11; and Karl Bühler, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, translated by Donald Fraser Goodwin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990 [1934]), esp. 35.

they think is simply a matter of interpretation of an ancient text is in fact a much broader and complicated hermeneutical endeavor. They are further confused by the fact that the kinds of metaphors that they use for discussing their conception of hermeneutics do not lead them beyond interpretation. Their circles, spirals, and triads are interpretive, not hermeneutical. As a result, with such confusion, it is no surprise that what is sometimes called original or intended meaning is equated with contemporary meaning (though often mislabeled as significance).

There are two major definable factors that are overlooked in this process, both of them vital to a hermeneutical understanding. One is the horizon of the interpreter. The horizon of the interpreter has effectively been excised from much evangelical interpretation (under the guise of hermeneutics). This seems to have been in part the problem with the disputes involving Gundry and Licona, as well as in other formulations of the hermeneutical/interpretive dilemma. One of the major insights of hermeneutics is that understanding requires both an object of interpretation and an interpreter, an involved subject. The subject is recognizably situated within his or her contemporary horizon of understanding, with all of the presuppositions, pre-understandings, and contextual features that this implies. The interpreting subject is an essential and ineradicable part of the hermeneutical equation, and takes an active part in any act of understanding – despite attempts to bracket out such a subject. The second factor overlooked in this process is recognition that, as contemporary interpreters of ancient objects, we must bridge a span of thousands of interpretive years. These years are not empty spaces wherein no one lived, thought, or acted, but these years are occupied by a varied complex of cumulative interpretive thought, some of it helpful and some of it not. We are the inheritors of a compounded weight of interpretive history, brought to bear in ways that we are often not fully cognizant of. This cumulative interpretive weight cannot be easily moved aside and certainly cannot be neglected, because we are the products of these previous acts of understanding, and they inform our pre-understandings. History shows how difficult it is to recognize, to say nothing of move beyond, such previous understandings. We only need to note how Christians were a part of supporting, endorsing, and justifying the slave trade on the basis of what they perceived to be the ‘clear’ meaning of the Bible and the accumulated weight of tradition. I fear that the same is true of some views of women in ministry, in which positions based upon questionable or even unsustainable interpretations have led to gross further misinterpretation throughout the Christian centuries, until we have convinced ourselves of interpretive integrity of views that are well wide of hermeneutical soundness.

How does this relate to my stated view that the issue of the authority of the Bible is a hermeneutical issue? It relates in several ways. First, we know from previous unfortunate experiences that the inerrancy of the Bible is not phenomenologically demonstrable, even within the evangelical camp, simply on the basis of acts of interpretation, that is, on the basis of a naïve realistic position. This is well illustrated by the two major examples I cited above, and can be replicated from the experiences that most of us have had. One sees the limitations of this approach by its formulation that relies upon the (no longer extant autograph) text

to verify itself. We recognize that there are problems, but if we confine ourselves simply to interpretation, we cannot move beyond the limitations of interpretation. We must appeal to something else to gain perspective on the issue.

Second, we see that the interpretive approach does not answer the fundamental questions even of interpretation. There are many – including apparently those who write books on biblical interpretation (sometimes called hermeneutics) – who seem to believe that answering the question of what the text meant is sufficient for answering the question of what it means, that is, in answering the larger question of how we understand the text. This simply is not the case, because while such an approach may claim to give due attention to one of the horizons of understanding (this itself is a questionable assumption), it does not give attention to both of the necessary horizons, including that of the engaged subject. In fact, I believe that it is right to question whether interpretation alone can arrive at anything resembling a satisfactory estimation of meaning as we are using it here, because it confines itself simply to the configuration of a text at a given time in the past, but without asking the larger question of what that text may have meant then to those who read and understood it, what it has meant as it has been understood over the course of time, and what it means to those who understand it today. What I mean by this is that, as I have attempted to show and as I think that most of us would want to recognize, the meaning of a text is not confined simply to some original or pristine construal of its linguistic symbols, but involves what the text means within a given context, of text, situation, culture, and beyond. We may be able to construe the language of a passage in Hebrew or Greek in such a way as to have some sense of the words in their given syntax (even this is more difficult than it appears) but miss entirely what the passage meant to the original readers, that is, what they understood the text to signify for them in their given context – and this has no necessary relationship to what we think a text means today.

In light of this, I believe that the issue of the authority of the Bible cannot be formulated in terms of or shown to be simply a matter of interpretation. Interpretation is of course a necessity, and it may in many if not most instances reaffirm our view of the authority of the Bible, but it is not sufficient to establish the authority of the Bible, especially as inerrant. The authority of the Bible as a meaningful and useful concept can only come about when we fully embrace both horizons of understanding – the horizon of the original text within its context of understanding and the horizon of the contemporary subject with his or her context of understanding. This hermeneutical vortex – always attempting to get at a more reasoned, articulable, and perhaps even consensual understanding of the meaning of the text for the reader in the contemporary context – is a requirement of a robust view of the authority of the Bible in order to avoid the Bible becoming either an artifact confined to the past, with interpretations but no meaning, or simply an autobiographical reflection of the present without necessary grounding in the past.

III. Ways forward concerning scriptural authority?

This just-stated solution will, no doubt, be perplexing to some, because it indicates that a view of the authority of the Bible, including one that holds to inerrancy, cannot be secured simply on the basis of examining the Bible itself. For some this perspective may even be preferred, because it attempts to eliminate the horizon of the interpreter.

There are two major interpretive methods that have recently been advocated as means of addressing the issue of the authority of Scripture: the canonical approach and theological interpretation of Scripture. The first is a reaction against historical criticism and attempts to preserve the Bible's authority through invocation of the notion of canon; the second is a reaction against supposedly sterile contemporary interpretation and attempts to preserve the Bible's authority through invocation of early interpretation. Each merits brief discussion, before I draw the discussion to a close with my final suggestions.

Based upon the work primarily of Brevard Childs, canonical approaches to Scripture attempt to combine insights from historical criticism (in other words, interpretation) and the ecclesial affirmation of the church's canon of Scripture. Childs advocates the use of historical criticism within the context of affirming the Bible as canon. There are questions about his approach from the start – apart from the major issue of Childs not being able to define exactly which canon he is talking about or why. Some of the problems are evident in his *New Testament as Canon*.²⁸ These include the tension between traditional or critical interpretation and a canonical interpretation. This problem was made obvious in my exchange a number of years ago with Rob Wall, probably the single most productive Childsian canonical New Testament critic. In our discussion over the pastoral epistles, it appeared that historical issues simply were not relevant to Wall even though he accepted the conclusions of historical criticism, leading to what I considered a bifurcated approach to interpretation.²⁹ A second problem is that a canonical approach has never been fully defined. For some, it appears to be a type of biblical interpretation. In other words, when a canonical approach is invoked, the approach alone apparently governs the interpretive decisions. At this point, some accuse canonical critics of being literary critics or of avoiding critical issues or problems. For others, a canonical approach appears to be a type of hermeneutic, in which the fact of the canon, and possibly even its compositional structure, govern the presuppositions of the approach. However, I have

28 See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994 [1984]) and *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), for major works on the New Testament.

29 For this exchange, see Stanley E. Porter, 'Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon', *BBR* 5 (1995), 105–23; Robert W. Wall, 'Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: A Response to S. E. Porter', *BBR* 5 (1995), 125–28; and Porter, 'Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: A Response to R. W. Wall's Response', *BBR* 6 (1996), 133–38.

serious questions about this positioning of a canonical approach, as it does not answer the question of how the horizon of the original text is to be taken into account – apart from simply neglecting it or treating it as occupying a parallel and non-intersecting plane – and neither does it address the question of the horizon of the interpreting subject. Instead, such a canonical approach reflects a hermeneutic of the canon, in which the second horizon of interpretation is that of the canon itself. This means that the fundamental question of what the text means, in the sense of its meaning for a contemporary interpreter, remains unsolved – or perhaps unrecognized and unacknowledged.

The hermeneutical and interpretive problems with a canonical approach are seen in the fairly recent volume edited by Craig Bartholomew and others in the Scripture and Hermeneutics Series. The volume, appearing in a series that uses the word hermeneutics, is entitled *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*.³⁰ Within the volume itself, there are obviously different conceptions of what a canonical approach entails. Anthony Thiselton, as one might expect, takes the most expressly hermeneutical stance towards a canonical approach, while Christopher Seitz equates it with theological interpretation (a topic I will address in a moment). There are, of course, many chapters that simply offer what are labeled canonical readings of individual books – as well as some chapters where one might legitimately wonder how exactly they fit within the volume. In other words, a canonical approach does not answer the fundamental hermeneutical questions regarding the authority of Scripture, but it leaves them still unresolved and awaiting another horizon of engagement.

Theological interpretation of Scripture is sometimes posited as another possible way forward in the hermeneutical and interpretive conundrum, especially as a number of advocates of theological interpretation explicitly position it in relationship to general or even special hermeneutics. There appear to be two major positions regarding theological interpretation. Some theological interpreters, such as Todd Billings and Daniel Treier, wish to draw elements of general and special hermeneutics into their theological interpretation of Scripture, because the Bible is a written text like others, and its interpretation requires that readers avail themselves of elements of general hermeneutics.³¹ Nevertheless, they also believe that the Bible is not simply a book like any other (a hermeneutical presupposition of significance). As a result, in order fully to comprehend and appropriate it, one needs to approach the Bible as a unique theological text, and thus special hermeneutics is necessary.

Other theological interpreters, such as Stephen Fowl, strongly object to such a position.³² Fowl believes that use of hermeneutics of any sort, whether general

30 *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig G. Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

31 J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); and Treier, *Theological Interpretation*.

32 Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009); cf.

or special, makes interpretation of Scripture subservient to another means of interpretation, so that understanding is determined through other means than the interpretation of Scripture. In particular, Fowl disputes conventional discussions of meaning as misguided and rejects the use of speech-act theory as a means of determining authorial intentions. To my mind, there appear to be serious misunderstandings of what we mean by hermeneutics. Fowl appears to confuse hermeneutics with interpretation as technique. Insofar as he is concerned with particular interpretive techniques, I agree with him that there are serious problems with the ways in which theological interpreters have utilized certain approaches, in particular speech-act theory. However, as we have seen above, hermeneutics is not to be equated with interpretation as technique, but is the acknowledgment of fundamental ways in which humans understand the world around them, including texts. Fowl's position is therefore self-contradictory. He says that he wishes to reject any type of hermeneutics, but he cannot avoid adopting some type of hermeneutical stance to interpret Scripture, even if he wishes to call it something else, such as theological interpretation of Scripture. The question is not whether he will have a hermeneutics but which hermeneutics he will have. He clearly wishes to have one that is not consonant with that of other theological interpreters, as he understands them. He instead emphasizes other elements, such as giving attention to pre-modern interpretation, valuing figural reading, maintaining ecclesial practices, engaging in truth-telling, recognizing the urgency of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and needing patience. This is as much a hermeneutical agenda as any developed elsewhere, as it gives an idea of Fowl's pre-understandings that he wishes to bring to interpretation. However, insofar as these give guidance for interpreting texts, once we examine his call for figural readings in light of his endorsement of pre-modern interpretation, we realize that the problem has not been solved. In fact, the two approaches appear to be at odds with each other, when he endorses readings of the Old Testament that probably were never found in any pre-modern interpreter.

This is not to say that Billings and Treier have found the hermeneutical solution. Treier argues for the imitation of pre-critical interpretation, reading according to the rule of faith, and reading within community. Billings more robustly recognizes the nature of hermeneutics, and embraces the notion of pre-understanding, especially in relation to inspiration, canon, and the like. He also argues that, as a result, we must go further and adopt a Trinitarian hermeneutic, interpret in light of the Spirit's guidance (not our experience), and value pre-modern biblical interpretation including various levels of reading.

I cannot believe that either a canonical approach or theological interpretation of Scripture is a way forward concerning the authority of the Bible as a hermeneutical issue, especially as both of these approaches are at best ambivalent and at worst antagonistic to hermeneutics itself.

IV. Hermeneutics and the authority of the Bible

I conclude with some final thoughts regarding the authority of the Bible and hermeneutics. The most obvious one is that I have not intended to solve the issues concerning the authority of the Bible, and in particular the issue of inerrancy, in relationship to either biblical interpretation or hermeneutics. At the most, what I have attempted to do is to clarify their relationship and their bearing on the issues. This may seem like a shirking of my duty, as I have not articulated a resolution to the difficulties noted above. I might seem to some to have tacitly endorsed, or at least supported, an accommodationist view of authority, in which the errors of the Bible are seen as God accommodating to human frailty. For others, I might seem to have implicitly argued for an errantist position, by adopting a hermeneutical position that leaves purported errors unresolved. Still others might see me as needing to re-define “error” to establish a lower standard of proof. Rather than engage these issues, as I stated at the outset, I believe that I have shown that the disputes are to a large extent misdirected, and that by re-defining the ground of discussion we can enter into a more appropriate, even if murkier and cloudier, realm of discourse. I believe that the issue of the authority of the Bible has continued to be as problematic as it is because of continuing confusion over the major terminological issues. Having said that, however, I now wish to clarify some of the hermeneutical matters that I believe are important for thinking about the authority of the Bible, especially an inerrant one. These do not provide a formula for doing hermeneutics or resolving particular passages or issues regarding the authority of the Bible or inerrancy. They do, however, require that the interpreting subject take full responsibility for his or her own understanding.

The first major consideration is that an inerrantist position is undemonstrable simply by interpretation, certainly from outside the evangelical community and, according to recent disputants, even within it. In other words, inerrancy is apparently unprovable – at least convincingly so – by means of simply examining the biblical text as we have it. This does not mean that we could not some day discover the autographs and find that there are no problems or errors – but that is so highly improbable as to make it a virtual impossibility, and would still not mitigate the issues of both interpretation and understanding. More likely is that with continued scholarship there will be other plausible explanations offered of apparently errant passages. However, in light of our previous experience it is again highly doubtful that these explanations will satisfy everyone, or even a significant portion of those who are concerned. This matter of supposed proof and of convincing others indicates that, rather than the authority of the Bible being a matter of interpretation – such that correct interpretation forces out incorrect interpretation, and everyone is able to observe this – there are larger issues involved. These are hermeneutical ones. These have to do with major issues such as ontology (who is God?), epistemology (how do we know him?), revelation (how does God speak?), questions of proof, consensus and community, presuppositions and prior understanding, and the like. We may have a clear sense of

our own level of conviction regarding these matters, but that does not mean that others are equally convinced.

Second, the authority of the Bible must be treated hermeneutically because we are concerned not simply with what the Bible meant at the time it was written, but with what it means to be an interpreter of a text and what that text means to me both as an interpreter and as one who is concerned with larger questions of understanding. What the text meant as it was inscribed by the author is important, and I would even say recoverable to a very high degree with a lot of work – but that is not the extent of meaning or understanding, and perhaps not even of interpretation. Meaning and understanding involve both the horizon of the text as an intentionally inscribed artifact and our horizon as understanding beings, with all of our pre-understandings, experiences, social location, and, most of all, desire to understand what the text has to ‘say’ to us today, now, in our contemporary situation.

Third, I am not saying that taking a hermeneutical approach to the authority of the Bible solves all or even any of the major issues regarding scriptural authority. To be sure, these issues, as I have indicated above, will not be solved by the interpretation approach either – at least they have not been solved so far but seem to continue to engender serious opposition, even among those who claim to hold to similar positions. The issues of interpretation will continue to be with us, as these are fundamental to the horizon of the text, captured in the well-known paradigm of author-text-reader. The matters surrounding what it means to understand will continue as well, with perhaps the added recognition that by problematizing them as I have we can address them more clearly and straightforwardly – not as the panacea of problems of inerrancy but as the realities of what it means to be a self-conscious hermeneutical being.

Fourth, I believe that it is incumbent upon all of us as part of the hermeneutical process to develop a robust, rigorous, and, most importantly, clearly articulated hermeneutical approach to the matter of the authority of the Bible. Many are not so self-aware. That is, we must know ourselves as understanding subjects insofar as this is possible, if we expect to be able to understand something as important as the Bible. This involves conscious awareness of our theological, textual, and human preconceptions, our view of God, reality, and our fellow humans, the communal and negotiated nature of meaning, and our own sense of what constitutes a convincing argument. This is not easy, because there is no explicit formula to be able to do this – and less of one to convince others of our perspective on understanding.

Abstract

This paper examines the issue of authority of the Bible not as an interpretive issue but as a hermeneutical issue. Many of the difficulties concerning this important topic have been made more complex and perhaps even insoluble because the issue of hermeneutics has not entered into the discussion as it should. I first address the major problems with the traditional realistic view of the authority of

the Bible, I then discuss the issue of hermeneutics and interpretation more fully, and, finally, I discuss some recent developments in biblical studies in light of the distinctions that I am making, to see if they are adequate interpretive models consistent with the hermeneutical view of scriptural authority that I am advocating.