A Theological Critique of Modern Exegetical Practice

David HOEHNER, *Washington, USA*

David Hoehner in 1991 completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Texas where he specialized in Government and Economics. In 1998, he received a Master of Theology dergee from Dallas Theological Seminary. David served as Academic Dean of Donestsk Christian University from 2002 to 2006. He recently completed a Master's of Arts in International Relations and Economics at Johns Hopkins University and is currently working as an economist for The Louis Berger Group.

With the arrival of modernity, the practice of Christian interpretation, as with the rest of human knowing, made a turn toward the subject. The whole phenomenon of revelation began to be questioned, and the interpreting subject was thrust to the forefront. Consequently, modern hermeneutical theory shows a clear preoccupation with anthropological descriptions of understanding, and Christian interpretation is taken as merely a subset of broader hermeneutical theory.[1]

More recently, responding to postmodern critiques of the ideal of the autonomous knowing subject, new interpretive theories have been posited that seek to reflect new developments in linguistics (Wittgenstein, Searle, Austin), ethics (MacIntyre), philosophy of science (Kuhn, Polanyi, Lakatos), and the sociology of knowledge (Berger). These stress the social nature of all human knowing and as a result recent accounts of Christian interpretation attempt to account for the sociality of our knowledge. Perhaps, most significant in this regard has been George Lindbeck's ecclesial-centered understanding of doctrinal formation.[2]

Both more strictly anthropological accounts as well as wider social descriptions of interpretation have their place in understanding what it means to know and in particular how this bears on theological knowledge, but they in and of themselves are entirely inadequate as Christian accounts of knowing if they are not placed in the wider context of the Christian doctrine of God

[1] For a good description of this, see J. Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 309-17.

[2] G.A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

and the understanding of revelation that derives from this.[3]

For the Christian, knowledge of God, in whatever form it comes, is based on the premise of God's gracious self-revelation of Himself to us, without which God-knowledge is entirely impossible. This means that any account of Scriptural interpretation will be completely deformed if not placed in the context of this economy of grace. To start with the human as knowing subject is in fact to miss the point. It is the goal of this paper to submit current exegetical approaches to a theological re-appraisal and to offer a brief description of what a more theological description of exegesis might involve.[4]

It is here that we need to turn to a more classic understanding of God's Trinitarian revelatory activity that will serve as the framework for our description of Christian interpretation of Scripture.[5] We start with the Father's gracious move towards humanity, His desire to enter into relationship with us, to be known by us. The Father is thus the subject of all revelatory activity.

The object of revelation is God as well, but this time in the person of Christ, the Son. Christ as both mediator of creation and redemption is known both through general revelation (created order, history, culture) as well as through special revelation (pre-eminently the Incarnation mediated through Scripture). The Christo-centric nature of God's revelatory activity is pivotal to a correct understanding of the nature and tasks of exegesis, as we will later explore.

Finally, if the Father is the subject of revelation and the Son is the object, the Spirit is that which effects the revelatory process, that which makes the objective revelation subjectively complete in the recipient, be it the church as a whole or the individual member.

In all this, it is important to keep in mind that the goal of revelation is not merely transmission of information about God. While there is an indisputable cognitive dimension, the goal of revelation is relationship with the living God experienced as salvation. The personal nature of such knowledge means that revelation is not a mere matter of new or changing cognition but involves the whole person and demands an ethical response. To know God is to become increasingly like Him (1Jn. 3:2).

Also important here is to posit an understanding of revelation that is sufficiently dynamic to account for Scripture's own

[3] While it would appear self-evident that Christian approaches to Scripture cannot be developed apart from the doctrine of God, sadly this, in fact, has not been the case in recent history. For critiques of this tendency, see Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections," 307-41; F. Watson, *Text, Church, and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); K. Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," *First Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 127-158. For a critique of this tendency among Catholic scholars, see D. Farkasfalvy, "A Heritage in Search of Heirs: The Future of Ancient Christian Exegesis," *Communio* 25 (1998), 505-19. Farkasfalvy calls for a re-examination of patristic and medieval exegesis with a view to reconstructing a "theology of scripture" that can inform our exegetical undertakings.

[4] For a collection of essays that addresses the divide that has emerged between the disciplines of theology and exegesis, see J.B. Green and M. Turner (Eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). For a description of the origins of this division from an institutional standpoint, see E. Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

[5] For an interesting attempt to provide a Trinitarian account of Scripture using speech act theory's categories of locution, illocution, and perlocution, see Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech Acts," 153-54.

self-understanding.[6] Discussions about revelation often misguidedly seek to pinpoint the actual location of revelation in the propositions of Scripture (Warfield, Henry and most evangelicals and conservative Catholics), experience (Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Hick), the historical events recorded in Scripture (Wright, Cullman, Pannenberg), or the dialectical presence of Christ (Barth, Brunner, Bultmann).[7]

A much healthier approach is to posit the continuing nature of God's self-revelation. Useful here is the theological category suggested by John Webster of "sanctification" which he defines as "the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation."[8] This approach has several advantages. First, it qualifies what we mean by Scripture being called revelation by stressing its instrumental role. This prevents a divinization of the text. Second, this approach preserves a dynamic view of revelation, not locating it in one particular moment, but asserting God's ongoing self-revelation, first and foremost through Scripture. Third, it accounts for both the divine and creaturely elements involved in God's revelation of Himself, whether this is found in the historical event, tradition, or text. As we will see when we come to the act of interpretation, keeping these two in balance is critical to an understanding of what this act involves. Finally, it grants these creaturely realities a certain divinely-invested teleology: revelation of God to effect salvation.

The Christian tradition has always assigned a unique status to Scripture as revelation. Scripture as canonical is the norming norm among other theological sources. It is God's primary instrumentality through which He reveals Himself to His people. As such it is incumbent upon the church to never fail to return to Scripture to again listen to God's Word, to try to attend to His will for our lives in new circumstances.

As with any sanctified gift, the possibility of human profanation is ever present. We may either attend to God's gracious self-revelation and seek to order our lives in light of this revelation or we may seek to manipulate the gift and exploit it to our advantage. If Scripture is indeed the place we hear God's voice, then the first dimension of interpretation that needs to be mentioned has nothing to do with method. Our primary goal in reading Scripture is not to understand the text; it is to encounter the Triune God. Thus, critical to the task are virtues that will allow the interpreter to be open to the claims of God through the text. Webster describes this well:

> We do not read well; and we do not read well, not only because of technical incompetence, cultural distance from the substance of the text or lack of readerly sophistication, but also and most of all because in reading Scripture we are addressed by that which runs clean counter to our will.[9]

[6] For a similar argument for the dynamic nature of revelation but in a Jewish hermeneutical framework, see G.L. Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. R. Alter and F. Kermode (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1987), 633.

[7] For a good survey of the various views of revelation, see A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992).

[8] J. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17-18.

[9] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 87.

Consequently, Webster speaks of the need for a "hermeneutical conversion" whereby we submit ourselves to the text or, more properly, to God's Triune work through the text. Reading Scripture is understood then as part of the process of mortification and vivification.[10]

First among the virtues is faith.[11] We come to the text with a trust that God indeed desires to be known, so we come expectant to hear Him. Given the clutter of our lives, this requires a certain discipline of concentration as we seek to quiet our minds and attend to what the Lord might say. Spiritual writers through the centuries have spoken of the practice of silence whereby we learn to collect ourselves and prepare ourselves for the difficult task of meditation.[12]

The second virtue, tied to the first, is hope. Hope attaches our faith to the world in which we live. In the reading of Scripture, we seek not an easy escape from the world in which we find ourselves. We go to Scripture not to find out how God revealed Himself then to another people. Rather, we listen to God through His Word in order to sense His will for us here and now. We seek to discover the ways in which God's redemptive work is unfolding now in anticipation of the consummation of this work at Christ's return.

The final virtue, not surprisingly, is love. We read the text not as a dead object to be mastered. Rather we read the text so that we can be brought to God in His complete otherness. Our sinful inclinations make this a task filled with danger as our idolatrous tendencies seek to persuade us to make God in our own image. But the movement of love forces us to come to terms with God as "Other" and submit ourselves to His revelation of Himself. Love always requires on our part a measure of humility, a willingness to let God through the text hurt us.[13]

Part of what helps us to be virtuous readers of the text is our reading of the text in the context of community. Our sinful inclination to read the text in order to vindicate ourselves is challenged when we read in the company of other God-seekers. The fullness of community allows us to press forward to the fullness of God knowledge. To the context of the local community might be added the wider Christian tradition both historically and geographically. Exposure to the faith and practices of communities other than our own often helps surface culturally-influenced ways of reading Scripture that have allowed us to rationalize sinful beliefs and behaviors.[14]

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[10] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 87-89.

[11] These "interpretation virtues" (the so-called theological virtues) suggested here are in no way original but, in fact, are suggested first by Augustine in his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.26-40. Augustine sees these virtues as both necessary prerequisites for as well as the effective fruit of a good reading of Scripture.

[12] See for example, 17th century French mystic Madame Guyon in her *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Gardiner, Maine: Christian Books, 1975). To this might be added various spiritual disciplines such as fasting and solitude that help reform our appetites so that our affections can be more properly ordered. Webster (*Holy Scripture*, 88-89) downplays the role of such practices in his effort to stress the work of God, but this seems to unnecessarily downplay the human dimension to the process of sanctification. Without question, it is the Spirit working through us that is determinative for our spiritual growth, but this also assumes human openness to this work.

[13] Calvin argues that knowledge of God leads to a radical self-appraisal (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.i).

[14] Webster (*Holy Scripture*, 48-50) expresses apprehension about according too much authority to the community in his desire to protect the "externality" of Scripture to the church. While the Scripture's special status needs to be maintained so that the church and tradition can remain open to its scrutiny, this need not lead to the rejection of the

Thus, in distinction to modern approaches to interpretation it is vital to understand the greatest possibility for misunderstanding of the text comes not from wrong or wrongly applied methods, but rather from the poorly formed character of the interpreter. That said, this does not free us from the task of interpretation. Attention to the literal meaning of a text reflects an understanding of the text as given to us in human form, a Word incarnate. To bypass the human dimension of Scripture is to risk Docetism. Scripture is God's communicative act whereby He encounters us using human forms. As a human communicative act, Scripture employs language, genres, social forms, cultural presuppositions, all of which must be understood in order for successful communication to take place.

To affirm Scripture as communicative act is also to affirm the objectivity of God's revelation. We have the opportunity, even obligation, to return to the text as God's primary instrumentality of revelation. In Scripture, we open the idolatrous dimensions of our beliefs to judgment and reformation. Careful exegesis reflects our desire once again to carefully listen to what God has to say.

Informing the entire process of interpretation must be the Christian affirmation of Scripture as God's instrumentality of self-revelation, a revelation that finds its culmination in Christ. While it will be argued later that this premise opens the text up to broader theological interpretations that exceed the meaning of the original human author, the process of interpretation must begin with attention to the literal meaning.

The question still emerges as to what exactly it is that we are seeking when we are searching for the literal meaning. That such a meaning exists or, if existing, is even possible or desirable to access has been the subject of much hermeneutical ink this past century. Recent hermeneutical theory has removed the search for meaning from the author and located it either in a now autonomous text (e.g., Gadamer, Ricouer) or in the reader (Barthes, Fish).

While these approaches have yielded valuable insights into the nature of meaning, the move from the author they propose fails to take into account that the text, any text, is a communicative act and as a communicative act for it to be successful it assumes a certain apprehension of the intention of the communicative subject. While further meaning (or perhaps better "significance" as we shall later argue) may be developed from this meaning, authorial meaning must be the anchor of these.

That said, the search for authorial intention has not been without its problems theoretically or practically. Theoretically, this problem has been complicated by Schleiermacher's influential location of meaning in the subjective consciousness of the author. Schleiermacher assigns the reader the task of intuiting this consciousness so that he formulates the task of interpretation as follows: "To understand the text at first as well as or better than its author."[15] Thus, interpretation includes both a grammatical and a psychological task.[16]

community's important role in interpretation. To assert this is to assert the Spirit's continual work of making God's self-revelation effective.

[15] F.D.E. Schleiermacher, "Hermeneutics and Criticism," in *The Hermeneutics Reader,* ed. K. Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1985), Introduction, IX, §18.

[16] Schleiermacher, Introduction, III, §7-10; Part 2:

Here, helpful is Vanhoozer's proposal that we locate authorial intention not in the elusive mind of the author but in the very communicative act that we have access to in the form of the text. In this act, the author has codified his meaning in conventional signs, so it is by trying to unpack this encoding that we come to understanding. Thus, we ascertain meaning not through intuition, as with Schleiermacher, but through reference.[17]

When we try to understand the intention, what we are trying to do is to look to what the text is "attending," to its "directedness." In Vanhoozer's words, "To intend, then, is a matter of directing one's mind towards a certain object or idea.... In speech acts the speaker's attention is directed towards an object (e.g., the propositional content) in a particular manner (e.g., assertive, commissive, directive, etc.)."[18] Thus, Vanhoozer argues interpreting is a matter of following directions.

As such, exegesis requires adequate knowledge of the symbol system through which the author has codified his or her intention. This involves disciplines such as historical-cultural studies, literary criticism, genre analysis, and linguistics. While skills in applying these disciplines will allow us to deal with the objectivity of the text, to qualify as interpretation these must be placed in the service of understanding the intention of the author through the text and not for the pursuit of other goals such as the historical situation behind the text, the traditions which form the text, or other dimensions that modern exegetical schools have posited.

When we understand intention as referring to the "directedness" of the text, we attest that in the broadest sense Scripture attends to God's self-revelation in Christ, that is, in Scripture we meet God Himself. Keeping this in mind protects the reader from granting an undue autonomy to the text, a temptation that both liberals and evangelicals succumb to in their own ways.[19] Liberals have done this in modern hermeneutical theory by making the text independent of the author (human or divine) and making the goal of interpretation the understanding of the autonomous text. Scripture becomes just one of a wider class of texts.

Evangelicals in their striving for an indubitable theological foundation have looked to Scripture, instead of God, to provide this. This becomes evident in how the doctrine of Scripture gets pushed forward in theological works to the front as the epistemological warrant for all other beliefs.[20] Traditionally, Scripture was treated as a subset of the doctrine of God that provides the ground for the possibility of revelation in general and Scripture in particular. More prosaically, this shift is reflected in evangelical spirituality that so stresses knowledge of the Bible. Such an emphasis has the danger of confusing the

Technical Interpretation, §6.

[17] K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 222.

[18] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 225-26.

[19] For a similar assessment, see Vanhoozer, "First Theology: Meditations in a Postmodern Toolshed," *First Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 17-31. Vanhoozer employs a distinction C.S. Lewis makes between looking *at* something and looking *along* it. He argues that much of modern Biblical criticism has been focused on looking *at* Scripture, rather than "*along* Scripture, thereby seeing God, the world and ourselves as biblical texts do" (37).

[20] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 12-13. Compare such modern approaches with the approach of Calvin whose treatment of Scripture in the *Institutes* comes in the midst of his broader explication of the Trinity.

instrumentality of revelation with revelation itself. It can amount to a virtual hypostatization of Scripture. Rather, the ultimate end of our reading Scripture is not to know Scripture or to know the history revealed in Scripture, but to know God, Scripture serving only as the means.

Perhaps helpful here is to consider and adapt Gadamer's metaphor of interpretation as conversation. For Gadamer, interpretation involves a conversation between the text and the interpreter. What binds the two together is the subject matter, or what we have called the object of its "directedness." Gadamer asserts: "Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them."[21] Understanding comes as the two horizons are fused. Given the fixity of the text, it is the interpreter's own horizon which becomes exposed to risk in the conversation.

While Gadamer's divorce of meaning from intentionality is problematic, the metaphor of conversation is in fact quite appropriate to Scripture with one significant adaptation: our conversation is not with the text but with God Himself who continues to speak to us through Scripture. Gadamer is correct in arguing that understanding comes when the two subjects of the conversation attend to the same subject. What he fails to see is that conversation involves a dialogue between two subjects and not between a subject and the other subject's communicative act.

In reading Scripture we enter into dialogue with God Himself. Because of the nature of our dialogue partner, the dialogue itself is an asymmetrical one. Entering this dialogue is risky because we are subjecting ourselves to the scrutiny of God. Reading Scripture becomes a means by which our "world" is shattered so that we can enter more fully into the divine economy given to us in the text. This understanding of interpretation recasts it from being a merely intellectual exercise to the inter-subjective communication that it is.

As with every inter-subjective communication, the nature of the knowledge is not primarily informational but rather personal in nature. Such personal knowledge invariably involves an ethical response. Knowledge of the "other" to be true requires transformation once acquired. Failure to respond to the revelation of the "other" involves objectifying the subject with whom we are conversing, using the subject for our own ends. The "I-You" becomes perverted into the "I-It."

It is this affirmation that Scripture always ultimately attends to Christ which opens the way for meanings that exceed the literal meaning, or, more accurately, the literal meaning of the human author. The human author in attending to the work of God is always also attending to God's revelation of Christ, if at times with only a dim understanding of what is to come (1Peter 1:10-12).

Again for clarity, we return to Vanhoozer's discussion which is helpful. First, he reclaims the meaning-significance distinction that E.D. Hirsch originally proposed.[22] Under this approach, meaning refers to the "determinate something 'in' the text–intended meaning–that remains

[21] H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 387.

[22] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 8-10, 62-66, 139-143; E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 74-92.

fixed and unchanging throughout the history of interpretation."[23] Significance, on the other hand, deals with the "meaning" of the text for me in my present situation. As such, significance can and must change, since it deals with the relationship between the determinate meaning and the context in which it is received. This distinction helps to maintain the determinateness of authorial intention while addressing the real concerns of hermeneutics, both ancient and modern, to contemporize texts for new contexts.[24]

Earlier support for such an approach can be found in Aquinas who writes, "The author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves."[25] That is, what we encounter in Scripture are words that possess meaning as they describe and interpret God's revelatory action in history. These events, though, themselves are in fact revelatory and invite continual appropriation for new contexts. A good example of this within Scripture is, of course, the Exodus event, the key salvific event of the Old Testament. For later generations in crisis, it is the Exodus event through which they read their situation. Thus, we see the theme of new exodus heavily developed in Is. 40-55 as Israel finds itself in the Babylonian captivity (cf. also Josh. 4:22-23; 1Sam. 4:1-7:1). These later contemporizations are in fact extrapolations of the significance of God's intervention in history for later audiences.

An important qualification for the meaning-significance distinction is that under the Christian teaching of inspiration we accept not only human authorship but divine authorship as well. The notion that God may have intended meaning beyond that of the human author is called *sensus plenior*.[26] That this is indeed the case is again grounded in the idea that God's gradual unveiling of Himself reaches its climax with the coming of Christ. As such, all salvation history is seen as pointing toward this final revelation.

If we continue with the Exodus illustration, we see that in the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed by Matthew as a new Moses or new Israel (cf. Mt. 1:21; 2:13-15; 3:13-17; 4:1-11). Paul, too, in 1Cor. 10:1-5 re-interprets the Exodus narrative through Christ. In these examples, the Exodus event as mediated through Scripture is re-appropriated for new contexts and given new meanings (or more precisely new significances).

If Christ is the key to interpretation and to discovering the fuller meaning of

[23] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 259.
[24] As Vanhoozer (*Is There Meaning in This Text?* 261) mentions, one added nuance to this distinction, however, is that there are certain "significances" which are intended by the author, what Hirsch calls "transhistorical intentions." A good example of this would be a lament psalm that deals with a particular crisis that the writer is facing and his struggle with God in the midst of this. By his very composition of this psalm and offering it for public use, the psalm writer is in fact intending that the particularity of his struggle be appropriated by others in their own distinct struggles. That is, such appropriation coincides with the intended meaning, although the nature of the appropriation is unknown to the original author. Such a qualification helps illustrate how while the meaning-significance distinction is valuable, it cannot be made an unbreachable divide.
[25] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I, 1, 10.
[26] For a brief treatment of *sensus plenior*, see R.E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2 vols. in one. Ed. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer and R.E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NT: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:605-23. Also see D.J. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*. Ed. by D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1986), 179-211.

the divine author, on what basis can we find this meaning and how does this relate to human authorial intention. Vanhoozer proposes that the canon be viewed as a divine communicative act in which "the divine intention [is] enacted and embodied."[27] That is, the individual works of Scripture receive a new level of intentionality in their placement in the canon which serves as the new "intentional context" for understanding their meaning. This approach correctly reflects a distinctly Christian understanding of Scripture, the whole of Scripture, as God's primary instrumentality of revelation.

What is important to stress then is that while the meaning-significance distinction is in fact a helpful one, it must not be used to dismiss "significances" to a status of lesser importance, something not worthy of the attention of exegetes. Indeed, it might be argued that in many cases, it is the significances of a text that hold far more importance for a Christian understanding. It is the "significance" of texts which we will argue have been the pursuit of much earlier Christian exegesis and has been variously called the "allegorical" or "spiritual" meaning. It is the preference of this writer to identify this as the "theological" meaning of a text.

It is quite refreshing to observe that after a couple of centuries of being under attack, the important function of spiritual or theological interpretation is again being positively appreciated. Perhaps one of the most important impetuses for this has been Henri de Lubac's seminal work, *Medieval Exegesis*. In the last thirty years, there have been numerous articles and books published both subjecting historical criticism to re-appraisal and re-examining earlier approaches to interpretation.[28]

This theological conviction of the possibility of meaning beyond that of the original human author is borne out in the very practice of apostolic interpretation.[29] A couple of examples will suffice. First, in Mt. 1:22-23 after Joseph is told by the angel of the birth of Jesus who will save he people from their sins, Matthew tells us: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'" Thus, Matthew is positing the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise in Is. 7:14.

But a close reading of Is. 7:14 in its original context makes such an identification seem unlikely. In the original context, we see Judah is at a point of national crisis with the threat of invasion from Aram and Israel. Yahweh announces through Isaiah that Ahaz need not fear (vv. 8-9) and asks Ahaz to request a sign (vv. 10-11). Ahaz refuses (v. 12). In response to Ahaz' lack of faith, Yahweh

[27] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 264

[28] Webster, *Holy Scripture*; F. Watson, *Text, Church, and World*; S.E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); S.E. Fowl and L.G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); R.L. Wilken, "*In Dominico Eloquio:* Learning the Lord's Style of Language," *Communio* 24 (Winter 1997), 846-66; D. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of the Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980), 27-38

[29] For an account that locates "allegorical" interpretation further back in the Jewish practice of *midrash*, see G.L. Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation." A fuller account of Jewish interpretive method can be found in R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

gives a sign anyway: a woman (*'almah*), perhaps Ahaz' wife, would give birth to a son as a sign of God's protection and he would be called Immanuel which means "God with us."

On what grounds then can Matthew employ this text in such a way? The clear answer is that Matthew reads the text not as a historical artifact, confining the meaning to the particularity of Isaiah's time. The saving God revealed in Isaiah's time is still living and still cares for His people. It is the coincidence in situations that compels Matthew to appropriate this text.

When Matthew is writing, Israel is in a time of political crisis again, this time subject to Roman imperial rule. Interestingly, Matthew uses the LXX translation that refers to a virgin, *parthenos*, instead of the Hebrew *'almah* that is a broader word for "young woman" and does not necessarily mean virgin. This heightens the nature of the promise leading to an expectation of a heightened fulfillment. In the first case, a mere birth would signify God's caring presence: God *with us*. In the second case, a miraculous birth signifies God's presence in a new unprecedented way: *God* with us.

Strictly speaking, the historical fulfillment happened in the 8th century. But the truest fulfillment comes in Christ. It is this fulfillment that serves as our point of confidence that God is still with us (Mt. 28:20) and is still revealing Himself to us today. In fact, as we already mentioned this Christological focus is heavily developed throughout the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is portrayed both as the new Israel and the new Torah. The entire history of Israel and all of the Old Testament is seen as revealing Christ.

Another striking example of theological exegesis is in Paul's application of the seed promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 17:7; 24:7) solely to Christ in Gal. 3:15-18. Paul underlines his argument by pointing to the fact that "seed" is singular (Gal. 3:16). The contexts of the Genesis passages, however, make clear that "seed", while singular grammatically, is intended in a collective sense (see especially Gen. 13:16 which speaks of the "seed" being as numerous as dust). Thus, Paul's argument is not all that persuasive on purely exegetical grounds.

On theological grounds, however, it is brilliant appropriation. It allows Paul to argue that the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled not through the Law but through Christ, the unique seed from Abraham, who will indeed be the instrument of blessing for Israel and the nations. While Paul stresses the singular nature of the seed in vv. 15-18, the corporate dimension of the seed is re-visited in vv. 23-29. Once the Law is removed as the mediator of God's blessing, faith becomes the means to access it, opening the blessing up to everyone. Thus through faith we are baptized into Christ, the seed (vv. 27-28) and whoever is in Christ is Abraham's "seed" (v. 29). Again, it is a Christocentric understanding of God's self-revelation that provides the warrant for Paul's interpretation here.

While these are only two examples, they are in fact illustrative of the apostolic appropriation of OT texts as a whole. The apostles rarely confined themselves to the original historical meaning. They did this not because of some embarrassment at the OT narrative but because the arrival of Christ has transformed the meaning of all of history, not least of which the revelation of God in the Old Testament. It is the understanding of Christ as the climax of revelation that warrants, and

even demands, an exegesis that moves beyond the human literal intention.

To those who would hold strictly to historical meaning as the object of exegesis, it might be fitting to be reminded of the attitude of the religious leaders toward Jesus. It is not their ignorance of Scripture that is the problem. Rather, it is the fact that, seeing Jesus, they fail to understand Him as the fulfillment of the entire OT (Jn. 5:39-47). What this in fact means is that if we keep the meaning–significance distinction, it is often the significance that possesses greater importance for the Christian interpreter. To say this is to place the efforts of historical-critical exegesis in their proper place: necessary, but subordinate to the task of listening to God.

While we have argued for the need for spiritual interpretation, many will point to the danger of falling into endless subjectivity, assigning texts arbitrary meanings of our own choosing. Again, it is necessary to return to the premise of Scripture as communicative act. To take this seriously is to take seriously the objectivity of its meaning which has been codified. Traditional exegesis seeks to undertake the some times difficult work of discovering the meaning of the original author.

We have asserted, however, that it is the author's attention to God that justifies finding "significances" beyond the original meaning. To this we added the dimension of divine authorship that possibly opens up new meanings, perhaps partially or not at all understood by the human author, what we earlier called *sensus plenior*. Finally, we asserted that the entire canon is directed towards Christ as the climax of revelation. It is this Christo-centric approach that grants unity to our reading of the diverse works which make up the canon, protecting us from arbitrary readings.[30]

It is important to note that despite some of the excesses in earlier Christian interpretation in allegorizing the text, the importance of the literal meaning was always affirmed. Origen, for example, holds to a three-fold meaning, identifying the historical meaning as the "body." This level of meaning is accessible to those less mature in their faith.[31] Aquinas holds to a four-fold meaning of Scripture. The first level of signification he calls the literal sense, the sense which serves as the basis for all other meanings: "That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it."[32]

What keeps interpretations from becoming arbitrary then is by tying them to the original historical meaning. This avoids the Platonic tendencies of some early interpreters who, when embarrassed by the literal meaning, fled to "spiritual" meanings.[33] The Christian understanding of creation and the Incarnation itself forbids us from following such a path. Anchoring other possible significances to the original historical meaning affirms the

[30] See R.L. Wilken, "*In Dominico Eloquio:* Learning the Lord's Style of Language," 862. He points to the more arbitrary approach of such groups as the Gnostics who, lacking this Christocentrism, selectively employ Scriptures that support their own purposes.

[31] Origen, *On first things*, IV.11.

[32] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 10.

[33] Origen, in fact, seems prone to this error. He argues that Scripture can be lead to misapprehension if only the literal meaning is accepted. While he grounds this on the fact of divine inspiration, his tendency to see Scripture as full of mysteries open to those who are spiritual (*On first things,* Preface, §8; IV.9) often seems to stem from a certain shame of the actual historical meaning with all of its messiness.

historical nature of God's revelation of Himself to us. We search in Scripture for God and patterns of how He reveals Himself that help us to understand our own world. Such an approach is traditionally called typological and this is the term to be preferred to allegorical which often carries with it many other connotations.[34]

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper has been to call us back to a more thoroughly theological understanding and practice of the task of exegesis. It has argued that Christian exegesis must be placed in the broader context of God's gracious self-revelation to us. It requires interpreters who have sufficiently godly character to allow them to take God's sanctified instrument of Scripture and to use it well. As "sanctified," Scripture has creaturely and divine elements. Its creaturely aspect compels us to take seriously the human side of Scripture–the language and forms through which God reveals Himself. This has been the preoccupation of modern exegesis.

But a completely Christian approach to Scripture requires us also to attend to the divine dimension of Scripture, God's sanctified instrument of revelation not just for a past period in time but for now as well. This compels us to attend to the way Christ is revealed in Scripture to us for our present situation. This has been the traditional pursuit of Christian exegesis. To undertake this task is to simultaneously manifest a confidence in God's continued revelatory activity, a faith that Christ is indeed with us "to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

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[34] G. Florovsky. "Revelation, Theology, and Philosophy." *Collected Works of George Florovsky, Vol. III: Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), 24-25. J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 20-23.

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