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|---------------------------|---|
| 1 Editorial | <i>Changes and Choices</i> |
| 3 Stephanie Black | <i>Key Hermeneutical Questions for African Evangelicals Today</i> |
| 35 Stefan Höschele | <i>To Baptize or Not to Baptize? Adventists and Polygamous Converts</i> |
| 51 Rodney Reed | <i>Giving to Caesar What is Caesar's: The Ethics of Paying Taxes from a Christian Perspective, Part Two: Tradition, Reason and Experience</i> |
| 69 Gregg Okesson | <i>God and Development: Doxology in African Christianity</i> |
| 84 Book Review | |

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Key Hermeneutical Questions for African Evangelicals Today

by Stephanie L. Black

Abstract

Responding to a perceived gap between 'academic' and 'spiritual' study of the Bible, this article explores assumptions behind hermeneutical approaches taught in evangelical African theological colleges. Using an author-text-reader model of communication, four foundational and programmatic questions for evangelical African hermeneutics are discussed: (1) Where is biblical meaning created? (2) What is the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation? (3) Can a passage of Scripture have more than one meaning? (4) If we allow the possibility of multiple meanings, how do we choose among differing interpretations? The article discusses differences between 'inspiration-illumination' and 'two-point inspiration' hermeneutical paradigms and concludes that historical author meaning serves as a constraint on, but allows for a variety of, contemporary reader meanings within God's 'communicative intention.' A set of criteria for evaluating and validating differing interpretations of Scripture is suggested.

Introduction

I suspect I'm not the first biblical studies instructor in an African theological college to notice the vast gap between what we discuss in class and what our students experience when they return to their home churches. After we spend hours talking about how to understand and use the Bible, honing skills in grammatical-historical exegesis, seeking to produce a careful, reasoned understanding of the meaning a biblical author intended to communicate to his original audience, my students too often find that their churches have little interest in this sort of biblical interpretation. The students' academic contributions sometimes receive a cool welcome when what their congregations long for is a fresh word from God through the Bible, speaking directly to their situation today. In fact, our students sometimes find that they are labeled as 'unspiritual' because their reading of the Bible lacks spontaneity and immediacy.

After observing this for some time, I began to ask myself, 'Is it them? Or is it us?' Where does the problem lie? Does it lie with the churches for being unwilling to welcome the fruit of academic study? Or is the problem with our theological curriculum, which provides answers to questions no one is asking? A desire to understand and help close the gap between 'academic' and 'spiritual' study of the Bible, between the theological college and the church, led me to ponder the assumptions behind the hermeneutical approaches we evangelicals teach in African theological colleges. I asked myself where these hermeneutical approaches came from, what presuppositions underlie them,

and whether these approaches are simply imported from western tradition or truly 'fit' African evangelicalism today.¹

One noticeable characteristic of contemporary African Christianity is that as a whole it is increasingly charismatic or Pentecostal.² This has significant implications for the way that African believers understand and make use of the Bible. In his book *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins writes, "For Southern [hemisphere] Christians, and not only for Pentecostals, the apostolic world as described in the New Testament is not just a historical account of the ancient [Middle East], but an ever-present reality open to any modern believer, and that includes the whole culture of signs and wonders. Passages that seem mildly embarrassing for a Western audience read completely differently, and relevantly, in the new churches of Africa or Latin America."³ Emmanuel Obeng observes that in Ghana, for example, Charismatic students have failed university examinations because they did not prepare for them, expecting direct aid from the Holy Spirit instead. He adds, "It is commonplace to hear statements that there is no need to prepare for sermons, the Holy Spirit will give utterance to the anointed people of God at the time of delivery."⁴

By contrast, many (perhaps most) evangelical theological colleges in Africa were originally established with the help of western missionaries who had little experience with charismatic or Pentecostal Christianity. In fact, some of these missionaries were decidedly anti-charismatic in their experience and

¹ I am using the term 'evangelical' to refer to those who view the Bible in its entirety as God's uniquely authoritative self-revelation. As Nthamburi and Waruta observe, "We have to contend with the fact that the Bible is an inspired book and as such it has its own authority" (Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta, "Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches," in *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, eds. Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo (Nairobi: Acton, 1997), 42). In Noll's words, "[W]hat it means to be an evangelical ... still has more to do with beliefs about the Bible than with the practice of scholarship. Evangelical self-definition, that is, hinges on a specific conception of Scripture more than upon a specific approach to research... The most important conviction of evangelical scholars is that the Bible is true..." (Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible*, 2nd edn (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 142-43). For my purposes here, this understanding of 'evangelical' embraces both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal expressions of commitment to scriptural authority.

² For an informative brief overview of the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa and a survey of its present characteristics, see J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Born of Water and the Spirit': Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Pretoria: Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005).

³ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161.

⁴ Emmanuel A. Obeng, "Emerging Concerns for Biblical Scholarship in Ghana," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 38-39.

attitude. Mission-founded theological colleges may continue to reflect the theological convictions of these founding fathers even years after the nationalization of leadership and of much of the teaching staff. There are benefits from this, in that such colleges tend to retain a commitment to core evangelical doctrines such as the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. But in many colleges the specific approaches to Scripture inherited from non-charismatic 20th century missionary teachers continue to be passed on to succeeding generations of 21st century African students. When confronted with the reality that today's African Christianity is decidedly Pentecostal in style, and that even mainline Protestant or conservative evangelical churches can be strongly influenced by members' Pentecostal beliefs and practices, one can begin to appreciate the gap between the hermeneutics taught in class and the expectations of people in local churches. Little is taught at the theological college about 'good' Spirit-centered hermeneutics, so students are left to fend for themselves in responding to whatever 'bad' examples of Pentecostal-style biblical interpretation they may encounter when they return home. Too often students emerge from our theological colleges poorly equipped to help their congregations discern between valid and invalid 'Spirit-led' interpretations of the Bible, or to explain how the Holy Spirit does speak through the Bible in fresh ways today,⁵ when such questions are the heart cry of contemporary African believers.

As a western missionary myself, it is clear that I'm not in a position to provide definitive answers to these questions for African evangelicals, nor would I want to do so. An Ethiopian friend reading an earlier draft of this article politely commented, "the African voice is very thin in your paper." I think this is inevitably true. The purpose of this article is to stimulate a discussion of its topic by African voices, particularly among evangelical biblical scholars and theological students. However, my own church background has left me in a position to help frame the questions under discussion in what I hope are useful ways. I grew up in a charismatic Presbyterian church - a combination that some western evangelicals may be surprised to find exists. I like to tell people that we spoke in tongues, but only for fifteen minutes before the sermon, 'decently and in order'! The combination of Pentecostal worship style and a Reformed theological framework produced a spiritual vitality for which I continue to thank God. That is not to say that my church was perfect or that we didn't go through periods of spiritual excess and questionable practices. We certainly had our share of each. But both the positive and negative

⁵ This can be a challenge elsewhere than Africa, as well. Speaking of the situation in western Pentecostalism, Ellington states his concern that "Pentecostal scholars have in many cases been trained in conservative Evangelical institutions, working within a methodology that is, in some ways, fundamentally at odds with a Pentecostal worldview and understanding of Scripture", Scott A. Ellington, "History, Story, and Testimony: Locating Truth in a Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *PNEUMA* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 249.

experiences have left me interested in offering a sympathetic insider's critique when it comes to evaluating approaches to biblical interpretation that focus on the role of the Holy Spirit.

In this article I will outline what I consider to be four key hermeneutical questions for African evangelicals today, as we seek to address the questions our Christian brothers and sisters are asking about biblical interpretation. These questions are:

1. Where is biblical meaning created - in the author, the text or the reader?
2. What is the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation?
3. Can a passage of Scripture have more than one meaning?
4. How do we choose among different interpretations?

I don't pretend to have fully formed answers to these questions. I strongly believe that it's the role of the rising generation of African theologians and biblical scholars to seek out answers to these questions that fit the contexts of their own churches in various parts of the continent. And in fact, with the growing influence of African Christianity in the global church, I suspect that the answers they craft will then reverberate northward and westward to aid the churches of Europe and North America as they confront similar issues.

Question #1: Where is Biblical Meaning Created: Author, Text or Reader?

A widely used model of communication states that in every act of communication there is a sender, a message, and a receiver. In terms of the Bible, one can speak of the biblical author (the sender), the biblical text itself (the message), and each of us as we read the Bible (the receiver):



This raises the question, where is biblical meaning created? By that I mean, how does God communicate through Scripture? Where do we encounter God and his truth in the Bible?

A first step is to explain what I mean here by 'meaning.' In recent years Western evangelical scholars have begun talking in terms of 'divine discourse' or 'communication' rather than 'revelation' as a paradigm for Scripture.⁶ This emphasizes that God's purpose in the Bible is not just to reveal facts (propositions, or truth statements), but to engage his people in a relationship with himself and to call for a response of faith and obedience. N.T. Wright, for example, observes, "Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us - which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information."⁷ Vanhoozer speaks of Scripture in terms of a 'missional' model of

⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), which has had a significant influence on evangelical scholars.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 30.

communication, and points out that as his own thinking on biblical interpretation has developed, in his more recent writings “perhaps most surprisingly, there is an almost complete absence of the term *meaning*!”⁸ Vanhoozer prefers to speak of biblical communication in terms of divine ‘speech acts’, which he feels has the value of helping us understand Scripture as more than merely facts or propositional content. In applying communication theories to biblical hermeneutics, evangelicals have depended heavily on speech-act theory, which describes how people ‘do things’ with words beyond simply making truth statements. Vanhoozer affirms this “opens up possibilities for transformative reading that the modern obsession with information has eclipsed.”⁹ Jeannine Brown states her central focus as the affirmation that “Scripture’s meaning can be understood as the communicative act of the author that has been inscribed in the text and addressed to the intended audience for purposes of engagement.”¹⁰ She summarizes, “Meaning can be helpfully understood as communicative intention.”¹¹ Discussion of biblical meaning as ‘discourse’ or ‘communication’ has largely supplanted previous attempts among evangelical scholars to distinguish between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ or between ‘meaning’ and ‘application’ in interpreting the Bible, since in such distinctions the term ‘meaning’ was almost entirely equated with historical author meaning and/or propositional content. This reframing of the hermeneutical enterprise in terms of what God is ‘doing’ in biblical language, his communicative intentions toward us today, offers good news for African believers who are actively seeking God’s Word to them in the daily challenges they face. It reaffirms that the focus of our reading and interpretation of the Bible is to hear what God is saying to us in the ongoing relationship he establishes with us, and to respond obediently.

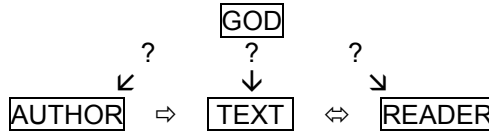
⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 163n.

⁹ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 163-64. See John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). For an example of a speech-act approach to biblical discourse, see Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*; also Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 162-88. Porter critiques the imprecision with which the theory has sometimes been applied in biblical studies and delineates reasons researchers in linguistics have largely abandoned speech-act theory in favor of other approaches, Stanley E. Porter, “Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation, and Theology: Hunch, Holy Spirit, or Hard Work?” in *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 112-18. However, in my view the foundational insight into language functions that biblical scholars glean from speech-act theory is productive in spite of the theory’s inherent limitations for research in linguistic pragmatics.

¹⁰ Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 14.

¹¹ Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 80. Brown notes that the term ‘communicative intention’ in her work is taken from Mark Brett, “Motives and Intentions in Genesis 1,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1991): 1-16.

But if we say that it is God himself who creates meaning in the Bible in his intent to communicate with his people to call forth a response, it then pushes the question back one step further: 'Where does God create meaning?' At what points in, or in what dimensions of, the process of biblical revelation does God speak to us today? Using the model below, we can ask whether the 'locus' (the main source or location) of biblical meaning is found primarily in the author, the text or the reader:



Is meaning found 'behind' the biblical text? That is, are we looking for the historical author's intended meaning which the text represents, to be *recovered* by the reader? Is God's message to the original audience the whole of God's message to us? Or, a second possibility, is meaning found 'in' the biblical text? That is, does the biblical text have a life of its own once the historic author finishes writing? Is there sometimes a deeper, hidden 'spiritual' meaning in a passage of Scripture that the human author may not have been aware of, to be *discovered* by the reader? Does God have more to say to us today than the original author might have realized? Or finally, is meaning found 'in front of' the biblical text? That is, is meaning *created* by or in the reader, as we as readers interact with the biblical text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our own contexts today? Does God speak to us directly as we read the Bible? And if so, what if anything does the meaning the historical author understood have to do with what God is saying to us now?

Of course, most of us are unaware of distinct components of author, text and reader when we interpret the Bible. We encounter the Bible as a living book, in which we (rightly) expect to hear from God himself through his written word. As we read a passage of Scripture, we assume that what we understand it to mean is exactly what God both intended and intends to say. "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" is our rallying cry. Yet very few of us are aware of our own role as readers. What we bring to each reading of the biblical text - our personal experiences, theological assumptions and cultural worldview - act as unseen filters affecting what we notice when we read and how we perceive it. Fee and Stuart point out that "whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that *our understanding* is the same thing as the Holy Spirit's or human author's *intent*." But as Fee and Stuart warn, "we invariably bring to the text all that we are... Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray..."¹² Since as

¹² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 18.

readers we are inevitably interpreters, we can benefit by becoming more aware of how we read the Bible. That awareness - the ability to recognize our own reading practices and how they influence our interpretation of Scripture - and then using that awareness in the decisions we make about how we *will* read the Bible, is what hermeneutics is all about.

And in reality, the three parts of the communicative process described above are not completely distinct. For one thing, we don't have direct access to the historical author. (He's dead.) The only tangible 'artifact' we have is the text produced by the author. At the other end of the process, as I've just explained, all readers bring to the biblical text their own perspectives, which strongly color how they read, so there is a constant interaction between reader and text even if we assume that our focus is on the historical author's own meaning. But the three-part model of author, text and reader can help us understanding varying approaches to biblical hermeneutics.

It is important for us to be aware of how our own historical and theological context has influenced the way we search for meaning in Scripture. Through most of the 19th and 20th Centuries, western evangelicals studying the Bible in academic settings found those settings dominated by historical criticism. Historical criticism is an approach to the Bible which aims to get 'behind' the biblical text to discover the historical world of the author and the author's community, and/or the experiences and feelings of the author, whether or not the modern-day person undertaking this study is committed to faith in the God of which the biblical author speaks. At the time, this historical approach satisfied the modernist drive for a 'scientific' approach to the study of the Bible that didn't make assumptions about the text based on Christian beliefs. Confronted with historical criticism and the skepticism about God's role in producing biblical texts that often accompanied it, evangelical biblical scholars began to use what has been called the grammatical-historical method in interpreting the Bible. Grammatical-historical exegesis is a more text-centered subset of historical criticism, which makes room for the belief that the human authors who wrote the biblical texts were divinely inspired. Such evangelical biblical scholars use tools similar to the tools historical critics use to study the text, but their aim is to discover the inspired meaning the historic author intended to communicate in the text. This primarily historical approach had the benefit of allowing evangelical scholars to operate successfully in the late 19th and 20th century western academic environment.¹³ But the dominance of

¹³ For discussion of evangelicals' use of grammatical-historical exegesis in relation to the historical paradigm dominating academic biblical studies see, for example, Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 354-56; Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 16. However it is important to note, as Noll observes, that the situation of evangelicals in academic biblical studies in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not as polarized as tended to be the case in the United States. This was largely due to the prominence of Anglicans among British evangelicals. In the nineteenth century, Noll explains, "As members of the

historical criticism in that environment seems to have had the effect of focusing the attention of evangelical biblical scholars on the author-text side of the hermeneutical equation, rather than the text-reader side. Even today, evangelical hermeneutics tends to have a great deal to say about recovering author meaning in the biblical text, but much less to say about the relationship between the text and contemporary readers.

At the risk of greatly oversimplifying the process, we can say that the rise of historical criticism in the West and evangelicals' response to and engagement in historical studies, strongly shaped evangelical hermeneutics in the 20th century. Although African Christians tended not to be directly involved in these events, they have inherited many of these concerns and outcomes through the influence of western missionaries and the educational systems they established. In addition, African biblical scholars who received their theological training in the West may have explicitly or implicitly adopted the historical approaches they learned there. Peter Nyende observes that the affinities between academic interpretations of the Bible in Africa and those in the US and Europe, "should not come as a surprise, in view of the fact that education systems which Africa inherited were from the North Atlantic," and that "as a result... the Bible in theological institutions in Africa is interpreted by means of historical criticism." Nyende notes, however, that in African academic settings there tends to be more concern for the contemporary "relevance, applicability or usefulness" of biblical texts in African contexts.¹⁴ Ukpong affirms that current biblical scholarship in Africa is "to some extent a child of these modern [historical-critical] methods of western biblical scholarship." He adds, "In spite of this, however, biblical scholars in Africa have been able to develop a parallel method of their own. The particular characteristic of this method is the concern to create an encounter between the biblical text and the African context." Ukpong further explains, "To be sure, there are two currents of academic readings of the Bible in Africa: one follows

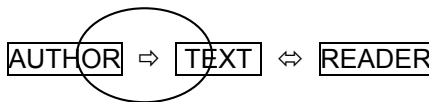
establishment as well as often of the lesser aristocracy, these Anglicans enjoyed access to Oxford and Cambridge, and they occasionally received preferment in the state church. In sum, their participation in the establishment encouraged both a traditional conservatism and a pragmatic tolerance for others." In the early twentieth century, Noll continues, Britain did not experience the Fundamentalist-modernist controversy on a scale similar to that in America, with its focus on disputes over Scripture. British Christians were more concerned about the destruction caused by World War I, controversy surrounding the revision of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, and a general weakening of the influence of Christianity in Britain. Noll summarizes, "The most significant conservative Bible scholarship in Great Britain was being done by Christians working in the university world; their convictions, while not strictly evangelical, were reasonably traditional. From this setting a more distinctly evangelical scholarship emerged more easily than was the case in the United States" (Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 63-64, 78, 85).

¹⁴ Peter Nyende, "Institutional and Popular Interpretations of the Bible in Africa: Towards an Integration," *Expository Times* 119, no. 2 (2007): 60-61.

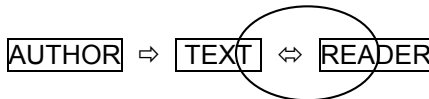
the western pattern, while the other follows the African pattern of linking the text with the African context. Many African authors publish in both patterns.”¹⁵

In more than a hundred years of academic study, western evangelicals have gotten fairly good at historical approaches to Scripture. But most people in African churches (and contemporary western churches as well), especially those with a Spirit-centered sense of immediacy about the way God communicates with his people, are more interested in what they themselves as readers encounter in and feel about the text. Regrettably, given this legitimate desire for a contemporary personal encounter with God in the Bible, grammatical-historical exegesis as it is usually practiced focuses almost entirely on discovering the historical meaning of the human author. Too often it has little to say about the dual authorship of the Bible - divine and human - and offers little in terms of discovering what fuller aspects of meaning God may intend to communicate through Scripture. Grammatical-historical exegesis lacks a specific theological method of connecting the ‘then and there’ of the biblical revelation with the ‘here and now’, although various interpreters have come up with their own systems. As we will see below, the grammatical-historical method is an essential element in the task of biblical hermeneutics, because God has chosen to inculturate his authoritative word through human authors in specific historical contexts. But an exclusive use of grammatical-historical exegesis as it is often taught in biblical studies courses in evangelical theological colleges too often results in giving answers to the questions that church people today aren’t asking. Too often the focus and results of such study remain in the past, without adequately exploring the ways God continues to speak through the Bible today.

In other words, evangelical theological colleges have become quite adept at exploring this part of the hermeneutical equation:



when what most church people are interested in today (whether they can articulate it or not) is this part of the equation:



As evangelical biblical scholars we often insist that our side of the equation is the most important aspect (‘author meaning is determinative!’), but it may be that part of the reason we’re motivated to make this claim is that it’s the aspect we theologically trained scholars are particularly good at. In practice, however,

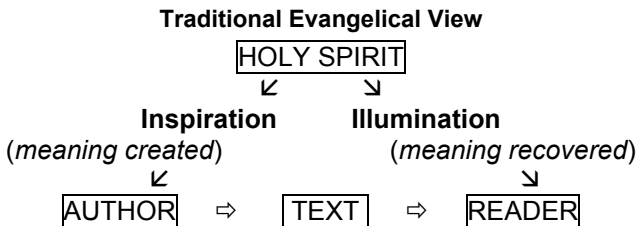
¹⁵ Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000): 4.

and in our own devotional lives, most of us would acknowledge that both aspects (author-text and text-reader) as well as a sensitivity to both ‘authors’ (divine and human), are essential in bringing scriptural truth to light in our lives. This exploration of the text-reader relationship and the dual authorship of Scripture, especially the role of the Holy Spirit as we read and seek to understand the Bible, is too often lacking in our theological curriculum.

Our current challenge as evangelicals is to develop an approach to biblical interpretation which takes seriously the Holy Spirit vibrantly speaking God’s message to believers through the Bible today, but which does not ignore the inspired understanding of the original author, or the canonical text that is the result of God speaking through his Spirit in many times and places. The complementary roles of author, text and reader must each play their part in our hermeneutics. To my knowledge, little has been published thus far addressing specifically evangelical African hermeneutics beyond an author-centered historical-grammatical approach.¹⁶ Particularly in Africa, where people long to find in Scripture answers to the great needs of their lives for identity, security, health, prosperity, and defense against demonic spiritual forces, the relationship between the biblical text and the reader needs to be more thoroughly explored in a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of the way God speaks to us through Scripture.

Question #2: What Is the Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation?

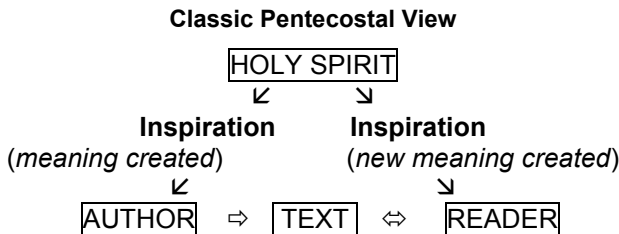
A traditional evangelical view of the Holy Spirit’s role in biblical interpretation says the Spirit plays two different but complementary roles. First, the Holy Spirit *inspires* the biblical author to record faithfully the message God wants to communicate. Then, the Holy Spirit *illuminates* the mind of the reader in order to understand that message. This view can be understood as follows:



¹⁶ See, for example, Samuel Ngewa, “The Validity of Meaning and African Christian Theology,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, eds. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tienou, (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 49-55. The one-volume *African Bible Commentary* is a valuable attempt to show more clearly the relevance of biblical texts for African readers, but is not (as far as I observe) an attempt to develop unique evangelical approaches to biblical hermeneutics for Africa; see Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *African Bible Commentary* Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006). The innovative and sometimes controversial work of the late Kwame Bediako perhaps went furthest in this area, although his interests lay primarily in the area of African Theology rather than biblical hermeneutics.

In this understanding, the process of illumination involves the Holy Spirit's work in regenerating the unbelieving person so that he or she has the spiritual capacity to hear and receive God's truth. The classical Protestant evangelical view of illumination is often limited to this role. In practice most evangelicals would say that in some way the Holy Spirit also helps the reader understand what God wants to say through the biblical author in a specific passage. However, for most traditional evangelicals the Holy Spirit does not reveal new content to the reader; instead, the Spirit enables and helps the reader to recover the content preserved in the biblical text.

By contrast, in a classic Pentecostal understanding of biblical revelation, there are two points of inspiration. First the Holy Spirit *inspires* the biblical author to record faithfully the message God communicates to him or her. Then the Holy Spirit *inspires* the reader to hear God's voice afresh through reading the Bible. This Pentecostal understanding can be understood as follows:



In this approach the second aspect of inspiration tends to take the place of or supersede the traditional evangelical understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in illumination, and can (for many Pentecostals) involve new content communicated by the Holy Spirit at that point. One contemporary Pentecostal scholar observes that the "sharp distinction between 'inspiration' and 'illumination' is increasingly being glossed over by Pentecostals."¹⁷

It is important for evangelicals working in a context where people come from both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal experiences to recognize this significant difference in assumptions about the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation. Kenneth Archer explains that from the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement, "the Holiness tradition and Pentecostals located the inspirational work of the Holy Spirit in both the past written document (Scripture) and in their present experience with Scripture. Inspiration was not limited to the Scripture in the sense that it was a past document containing no errors, but it also included the present ability of the Scripture to speak to the community." As Archer points out, "Fundamentalists, on the other hand, located the inspirational work of the Spirit in the past written document

¹⁷ Timothy B Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age," *PNEUMA* 15 (1993): 176.

(Scripture) only.”¹⁸ The ‘Fundamentalists’ to whom he refers would include many among the 20th century missionaries who helped bring the Gospel to Africa. But those from a broader stream of evangelicalism also tend to share this approach. The spiritual inheritance passed down from such missionaries and institutionalized in the curricula of theological colleges may incorporate beliefs about inspiration and illumination that are at odds with the two-point understanding of inspiration that implicitly informs much of contemporary African Christian experience.

In fact, evangelical biblical scholars have offered very little in terms of explaining their doctrine of illumination, leaving a conceptual vacuum for ordinary Christians to fill from their own experience. Clark Pinnock observes, “I challenge you to open the standard books on biblical interpretation and see whether you can find a serious discussion of the illuminating work of the Spirit in them. They all mention it in passing but seldom offer a proper discussion of it.”¹⁹ Pinnock asserts that as a result of the influence of rationalism in Western culture, “the only thing we leave for the Spirit to do in interpretation is to rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes.”²⁰ But Pinnock claims, that “earlier Christian theologians, not caught up in our polemical situation and less nervous about the status of original inspiration, did not feel the need to differentiate the two kinds of inspiration so sharply. John Wesley could write in his notes on 2 Tim. 3.16, ‘The spirit of God not only once *inspired* those who wrote the Bible but continually *inspires* those who read it with earnest prayer.’”²¹ However Wesley meant to use the term ‘inspire’ in this context, Pinnock’s point, that the ‘polemical situation’ in which contemporary evangelicals often find themselves tends to make them uncomfortable with issues of illumination versus inspiration, is well taken.

The conviction of a present, active role of the Holy Spirit in reading and understanding the Bible remains a central tenet of contemporary Pentecostalism, even if Pentecostal scholars themselves have not come to a consensus as to how to describe it. French Arrington writes, “The real issue in Pentecostalism has become hermeneutics, that is, the distinctive nature and function of Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit, the Christian community, grammatical-historical research, and personal experience in the interpretive process.”²² Note that as a Pentecostal scholar himself, Arrington includes in this statement grammatical-historical research (i.e., historical author meaning), but sets it alongside other factors such as the roles of the Holy Spirit, the

¹⁸ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 40.

¹⁹ Clark Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993): 7.

²⁰ Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” 8.

²¹ Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” 4.

²² French Arrington, “The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals,” *PNEUMA* 16, no.1 (1994): 107.

Christian community and personal experience. In terms of a Pentecostal theory of hermeneutics, Archer affirms, "The important role of the Holy Spirit and the impact of personal experience upon hermeneutics are the most frequently discussed dimensions."²³

This discussion of hermeneutics among Pentecostal biblical scholars has become quite lively in recent years.²⁴ In stark contrast to earlier generations of Pentecostals who distanced themselves from institutions of high learning, there is now a generation of Pentecostal scholars actively engaged in academic biblical studies and in conversation with others across the theological spectrum.²⁵ Discussion about Pentecostal hermeneutics in (predominantly western) academic journals includes questions concerning the extent to which Pentecostals practice a biblical hermeneutics distinct from that of evangelicals, and whether they ought to; what the relative roles of Pentecostal experience and historical author meaning should be in Pentecostal hermeneutics (i.e., should Pentecostal experience validate an understanding of author meaning, or should such experience precede and determine the understanding of author meaning); the extent to which biblical narrative (specifically Luke-Acts) should be treated as normative in constructing Pentecostal theology; and potential affinities between Pentecostalism and postmodernism, and whether or not this is beneficial.²⁶

²³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century*, 142.

²⁴ Recent discussion of this topic among Pentecostal scholars, with responses from noted evangelical scholars, is summarized in Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, eds., *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012).

²⁵ Kenneth Archer, cited above, a Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) bishop who completed his PhD studies under the supervision of Richard Bauckham at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, would be only one such example in the West. Journals such as *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* and the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* disseminate much of this discussion.

²⁶ See Brubaker's summary of various positions Pentecostal scholars have taken on the nature of Pentecostal hermeneutics vis-à-vis evangelicalism: Malcolm R. Brubaker, "Postmodernism and Pentecostals: A Case Study of Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Evangelical Journal* 15 (Spring 1997): 39-44. See also Bradley Truman Noel, "Gordon Fee and the Challenge to Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Thirty Years Later," *PNEUMA* 26, no. 1 (2004): 60-80. Although evangelicals tend to look to Fee as emblematic of Pentecostal biblical scholarship, for the most part Pentecostal scholars see Fee and his work as more 'evangelical' than 'Pentecostal,' largely because of Fee's denial of a baptism of the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion and of the necessity of speaking in tongues as initial evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit, in addition to Fee's emphasis on the priority of historical author meaning in biblical interpretation. Arrington, "The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals," 105-106, addresses the concern for the 'subjectivity' of experience among Pentecostals and their critics. See also Archer's summary of Pentecostal scholarly interaction concerning the role of experience in biblical interpretation: Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (1996): 76-77. For a defense of the

African Pentecostals also share the growing interest in theological studies. As Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu observes, "A number of African Pentecostals ... are now pursuing higher degrees in theology, subjecting their own movements to critical academic study as insiders." Asamoah-Gyadu asserts, "Such an approach, if it is maintained in the future will help bridge the gap between the academy and experiential faith that exposed the deficiencies in the training of historic mission pastors in the face of African religio-cultural realities."²⁷

Among the diversity within Pentecostal approaches to biblical studies there is a consistent affirmation that the Pentecostal community's experience of the Holy Spirit does and should shape their reading of Scripture. And there is a corresponding assumption among Pentecostals that any Spirit-filled believer can understand the Bible's spiritual meaning. A.O. Nkwoka affirms, "The Nigeria Pentecostal stance is that any literate Christian who has been regenerated and filled or baptised by the Holy Spirit has the capacity to read and interpret the Bible having been enlightened by the Holy Spirit."²⁸ Yet, as Archer laments at one point, "Many Pentecostals would argue for a prominent role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretive process but I have found only one in my research thus far who has articulated *how* the interpreter would rely upon the Holy Spirit."²⁹ In preparing graduates to serve effectively in Pentecostal or Pentecostal-influenced ministry contexts, evangelical theological colleges have much to gain by listening to the ways these issues are being addressed and by taking into consideration the thoughtful insights of Pentecostal scholars as they seek to explain the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. Biblical scholars in Africa - Pentecostals and others - have much to add to the international discussion from their own experiences and reflection, given that they tend to participate in churches and communities where the authority of the Bible is affirmed and daily experience of the Holy Spirit is also assumed.

The question evangelicals will want to raise is, to what extent can a contemporary reader trust his or her own experience of the Holy Spirit as a reliable guide to interpreting the Bible? The Reformation watchword of *sol*

Pentecostal use of biblical narrative see Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Story: The Hermeneutical Filter for the Making of Meaning," *PNEUMA* 26, no. 1 (2004): 36-59. With respect to Pentecostal hermeneutics vis-à-vis postmodernism, Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalism-Modernist Controversy," has been influential, engendering both positive and negative responses from other Pentecostal scholars. In this article Cargal strongly affirms the value of postmodernist insights for Pentecostal hermeneutics. Robert Menzies, "Jumping Off the Postmodern Bandwagon," *PNEUMA* 16 (1994): 115-20, offers a critique of Cargal's position.

²⁷ Asamoah-Gyadu, "Born of Water and the Spirit," 405.

²⁸ A. O. Nkwoka, "The Challenge of Nigerian Pentecostal Theology and the Perspicuity of Scripture", in *Study of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honour of G. C. Oosthuizen*, eds. Johannes A. Smit and Pratap Kumar (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 118-19.

²⁹ Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," 77 (my emphasis). He is referring to Arrington, "The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals."

scriptura defended the authority of the Bible against the authority of church tradition. But both the Reformers and their modern day descendants then found that different interpreters can promote differing interpretations of Scripture, all appealing to Scripture itself as the source of authority. Attempts to replace *sola scriptura* with *sola spiritus* break down at the same point. Different believers may point to their own experience of the Holy Spirit as validating their differing interpretations of a biblical passage. How do we know which if any of them are reliable? As Wright warns,

“the ‘experience’ of Christians, and of everyone else for that matter, always and inevitably comes up with several simultaneous and incompatible stories. ‘Experience’ is far too slippery for the concept to stand any chance of providing a stable basis sufficient to serve as an ‘authority,’ unless what is meant is that, as the book of Judges wryly puts it, everyone should simply do that which is right in their own eyes. And that, of course, means that there is no authority at all... But there is a more profound problem to be addressed, indeed a logical problem. The ‘experience’ of Christians, and of churches, is itself *that over which and in the context of which the reading of scripture exercises its authority*... If ‘experience’ is itself a source of authority we can no longer be *addressed* by a word which comes from beyond ourselves.”³⁰

If we accept that the Holy Spirit speaks to the Christian believer through the Bible today, we must also accept that, given the limits of our sin-darkened minds in perceiving divine truth, we may sometimes get that message wrong. Our ability to hear the Holy Spirit speaking God’s truth in Scripture may be flawed by our own creaturely fallenness. For this reason, a Spirit-centered hermeneutic should allow a role for validation by other criteria in the hermeneutical process.³¹ We will return to this issue in Question #4 below.

Question #3: Can a Passage of Scripture Have More than One Meaning?

Students tell me that in their local churches the Bible is sometimes understood to be like an onion - there is always another layer that can be peeled away to reveal new layers of meaning. The role of the preacher is then understood to be just that: peeling away the layers in a passage to reveal a fresh meaning (revealed by the Holy Spirit) that the listeners have never heard before. In fact, a truly inspiring and ‘inspired’ preacher is thought to be one who can discover and expound in an exciting way some new, spiritually revealed, layer of meaning in a biblical passage. In this sense the idea that a single passage of Scripture can have multiple meanings is simply assumed by the congregation.

³⁰ Wright, *The Last Word*, 102-103 (his emphasis).

³¹ This is not unrecognized by Pentecostal biblical scholars. Arrington, for example, warns that “to guard against personal experience displacing Scripture as the norm or against excesses in interpretation, active participation is vital in the Pentecostal community of faith... The Jerusalem Council exemplifies community and provides a biblical model for interpretation that includes Scripture, experience, tradition and reason (Acts 15)” (Arrington, “The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals,” 106).

In contrast, traditional evangelical hermeneutics tends to place a strong emphasis on a biblical passage having just one meaning, specifically the historical author's meaning. Sam Oleka reflects this classical evangelical view when he states, "After the intended meaning of the original author has been determined and the interpretation done, the interpreter is left with the contemporary application. It behooves the African contemporary interpreter to know that there is only one interpretation to every given Scripture text, but that there could be several applications to it."³² Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard affirm, "The meaning of a text is *that which the words and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of its author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers*. It is the meaning those words would have conveyed to the readers at the time they were written by the author or editor."³³ Thus, traditional evangelical hermeneutics is focused on the author-text end of the hermeneutical paradigm. The text is treated as a window through which the author's intention can (at least to some extent) be viewed.

However, it is interesting to observe that more recent evangelical thinking has begun to question this focus on singular author meaning. For example, Vanhoozer states: "I have spent a disproportionate amount of time elsewhere trying to establish and protect the rights of authors. While I am not yet ready to recant..., I now see the need to supplement my normative account with a more descriptive treatment of what actually happens in understanding."³⁴ In another essay, Vanhoozer writes:

How has my mind changed since writing *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Let me count the ways!... I have come to see that biblical discourse is caught up in the very subject matter that it is about: the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, for that matter, is the attempt to interpret it... What remains constant ... between earlier and later Vanhoozer is the emphasis on the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. However, I now recognize the equal importance of dealing with the other dimensions of biblical discourse ('to someone *about* something'). I also recognize how important it is ... to sort out the relative standing (status) of authors, text, reading, and subject matter... I now want to insist that the

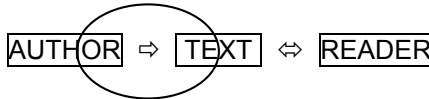
³² Sam Oleka, "Interpreting and Applying the Bible in an African Context," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, eds. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 108.

³³ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd edn (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 186 (their emphasis). See, similarly, Duvall and Hays: "In biblical interpretation, the reader does not control the meaning; the author controls the meaning. This conclusion leads us to one of the most basic principles of our interpretive approach: *We do not create the meaning. Rather, we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author*" (J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 195; their emphasis).

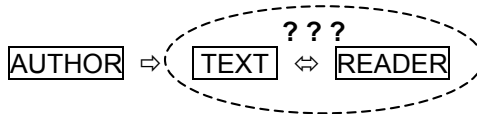
³⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

theological interpretation of Scripture involves both reading the Bible like any other book - in doing justice to the authorial discourse - *and* reading the Bible *unlike* any other book...³⁵

Although in the past the focus of evangelical hermeneutics has been primarily on the author-text relationship:



evangelical scholars such as Vanhoozer and others are beginning to explore more fully the relationship between text and reader and the role of the Holy Spirit in that relationship, even if they are not yet sure how they want to incorporate the reader's role into their hermeneutical theory:



Why is this change taking place? It is happening at least in part because evangelical scholars are taking account of postmodernism's critique of modernism and applying postmodern insights to their understanding of how God communicates biblical truth. At the risk of oversimplification, some basic contrasts between modernist and postmodern worldviews can be illustrated as follows:

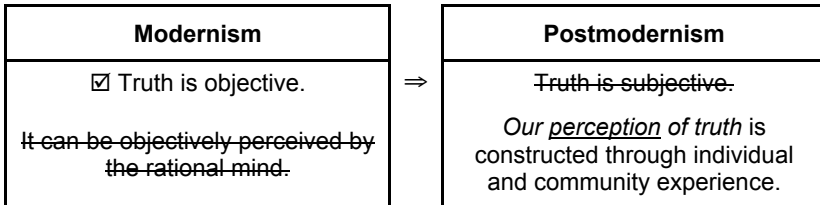
Modernism	⇒	Postmodernism
Truth is objective. It can be objectively perceived by the rational mind.		Truth is subjective. It is constructed through individual and community experience.

In the modernist worldview, truth is objective. It is 'out there' to be discovered by rational inquiry. This belief in the external stability of truth and in human ability to perceive it had the benefit of fueling scientific and technological revolutions that transformed societies. However, the idea that human minds are completely objective is misleading. In fact, as postmodern critics point out, our minds and our ways of understanding are strongly colored by our own subjective experience, our philosophical worldview, our cultural background

³⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 73-75.

and a host of other factors. This is the ‘myth of objectivity’ for which modernism is justly criticized. Postmodernism asserts that truth (especially in the spiritual, moral and ethical realms) does not exist ‘out there’, but is a product of the individuals and communities who construct it through their own experiences and perceptions. A corollary of this is the assumption that the experiences of many different people produce many different truths.

Evangelicals, committed to the objective reality and authority of God, don’t accept the postmodernist belief that truth is merely subjective and relative. But evangelical scholars increasingly recognize the validity of post-modernism’s critique of modernism’s claim to objectivity in *perceiving* God’s truth:



As Christianity becomes more globalized and Christians from many cultures and backgrounds read the Bible with differing eyes, it becomes apparent how much our own background and experience - what some scholars have termed our ‘pre-understandings’ - affect what we understand God to be saying in Scripture. This recognition is especially important in Africa, where evangelical biblical interpretation has been strongly colored by western cultural pre-understandings. The postmodern critique reminds us that it is essential that African readers add their voices to the discussion of God’s authoritative revelation in Scripture, so that the understanding of all may be deepened.

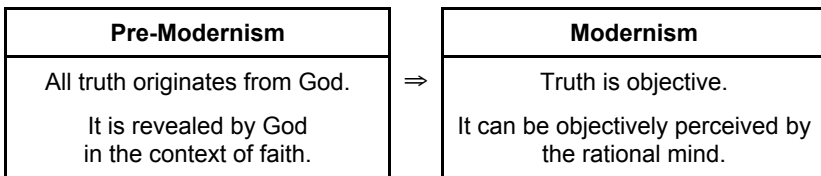
The recognition of the reader’s role in the attempt to recover historical author meaning also fosters new thinking about the role of the reader in constructing meaning as the Holy Spirit speaks to each individual and community through Scripture in their own contemporary context. As Klein, Hubbard and Blomberg summarize, “Clearly postmodernism offers evangelicals a mixed bag of bane and blessing. We should welcome the rejection of modernism’s dependence on human autonomy, reason, and science and technology as the be-all and end-all of life.” Speaking of the value of postmodern perspectives concerning the ways truth is conveyed, they continue, “Christians in general (and the Bible in particular) have historically valued narrative, symbolism, the aesthetic, a value-laden interpretation, and the importance of community. Christians once too enamored with modernism are increasingly recapturing many of these dimensions thanks to postmodernism. On the other hand,” they affirm, “we must dispute the postmodernists’ denial of absolute truth...”³⁶ The willingness to accept

³⁶ Klein, Hubbard, Blomberg, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 72.

postmodernist insights about human dimensions of interpretation, without buying into postmodernism's rejection of absolute truth, allows scholars such as A.K.M. Adam, Stephen Fowl, Francis Watson and Vanhoozer to speak of "the possibility of a theological criticism informed, but not governed, by postmodern arguments."³⁷

In short, evangelical scholars are beginning to acknowledge that multiple readers reading from differing perspectives may recognize multiple meanings that God intends to communicate through a biblical passage. God may have more than one 'communicative intention' in a passage of Scripture. And once the possibility of something more than a singular historical author meaning has been acknowledged, such scholars have also begun to think about how God himself, as the divine author of Scripture, may have placed, or 'encoded', multiple meanings in the biblical text itself. In considering this, scholars interested in hermeneutics recognize that they are revisiting issues of the multidimensional approaches to biblical interpretation that characterized 'pre-modern' or 'pre-critical' interpreters of the Bible (before approximately 1700 AD). Scholars are beginning to look again at the hermeneutical thought of such writers as Augustine (4th century) and Thomas Aquinas (13th century), among others, to explore possibilities for hermeneutics today.³⁸

Pre-modern approaches invite the interpreter to consider the Bible specifically in terms of its character as God's authoritative divine revelation. A comparison between pre-modern and modern worldviews may be roughly summarized in this way:

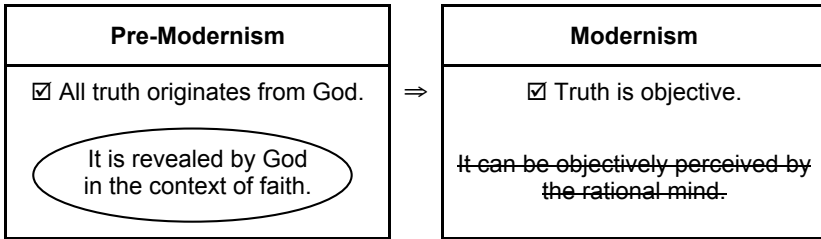


As evangelicals, we can affirm that God's truth is objective, that is, that truth originates from God (as in the pre-modern view), but has a real and objective existence (as in the modern view) given that God himself is the creator of a world which itself has objective existence. But if we cannot always perceive

³⁷ Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 10.

³⁸ See, for example, David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26-38; Stephen E. Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 35-50. For Augustine's approach to Scripture, see my "Augustine's Hermeneutics: Back to the Future for 'Spiritual' Bible Interpretation?," *AJET* 27, no. 1 (2008): 3-33.

that truth rationally, and can never perceive it completely objectively, perhaps (such scholars might ask) we should reaffirm the nature of Scripture as divine revelation, showing us truth in God's own way:



Evangelical scholars appreciate the emphasis on Scripture as divinely revealed communication, rather than simply as historical texts, that they find in pre-modern approaches to interpreting the Bible. This renewed interest in biblical interpretation as an explicitly theological rather than historical task, found not just among evangelicals but across the theological spectrum, is encapsulated in the emphasis on 'theological hermeneutics' which dominates the current academic discussion.³⁹

For African evangelicals, who on the whole did not pass through the modernist paradigm at a popular level (and for whom the language of 'pre-' and 'post-' modernity may be an irrelevant western construct), a renewed appreciation of pre-modern interpretative approaches could offer a significant point of contact between academic and popular approaches to the Bible. One practical example is that while western evangelical scholars are often uncomfortable with allegory as the dominant model of pre-modern hermeneutics (given that allegory depends on multiple 'spiritual' senses of Scripture purportedly hidden in the text, usually unrelated to the historical author's meaning), it is clear that allegorizing plays a prominent role in biblical interpretation and preaching in Africa. As R. S. Sugirtharajah observes with respect to trends in Christianity throughout the global South, "People's

³⁹ See, for example, Adam *et al.*, *Reading Scripture with the Church*; Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman, eds., *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, and Daniel Treier, eds., *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

exegesis could be described as pre-critical, and perceived to be taking as their point of departure the Pauline dictum - 'the letter kills but the spirit makes alive'. People as exegetes unconsciously nurture pre-critical reading practices such as those which are literal, typological and allegorical... The purpose of the interpretation is not to seek historical information about the biblical record but to deal with the issues that face them."⁴⁰ The strengths and weaknesses of allegory as a hermeneutical method merit further study by African biblical scholars, and a fuller awareness of its use by pre-modern biblical interpreters may be of use in this process.

However, at the same time that interest in the theological or 'spiritual' dimensions of biblical interpretation is growing, both African and western evangelicals remain concerned that a focus on reader-centered and multidimensional meaning ('what the Spirit is saying to me') undisciplined by a grammatical-historical focus on author meaning can result in unlimited subjectivity in biblical interpretation. Evangelical scholars worry that if historical author meaning is no longer the only criterion for interpreting a biblical passage it will lead to interpretational anarchy and potentially to actual heresy. As Vanhoozer observes, "All of us want to say that a *little* plurality [of meaning] need not be a dangerous thing, yet we diverge in our attempts to explain how such plurality can be delimited and principled rather than merely infinite and arbitrary."⁴¹

We return to the question introduced above in discussing the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation: If different believers equally committed to biblical authority claim different interpretations for a Scripture passage, how do we know which interpretation (or *interpretations*) should be accepted as valid?

Question #4: How Do We Choose Among Different Interpretations?

This question regarding the evaluation of multiple *interpretations* of a biblical passage is a slightly different one from the question above regarding multiple *meanings*. Whether or not we believe there is only one possible meaning of a passage of Scripture, we inevitably find ourselves confronted with competing claims about what that meaning - or legitimate range of meanings - might be.

In evaluating differing interpretations, discerning the historical author meaning through grammatical-historical exegesis is a significant component in understanding God's communicative intent. But in contrast to traditional evangelical hermeneutical assumptions, let us consider that it forms only one component (although still, I would claim, the foundational component) of the hermeneutical enterprise. A number of criteria can be proposed for evaluating

⁴⁰ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221.

⁴¹ Vanhoozer, "Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation," 132.

readings of Scripture, of which historical study (for evangelicals, grammatical-historical exegesis) is only one. The matrix of possible criteria includes:

- a. Grammatical-historical exegesis (author meaning)
- b. The context of the whole Bible (also called canonical context or biblical theology)
- c. Church tradition (history of interpretation)
- d. Confirmation by faith community (church)
- e. Intellectual reason
- f. The 'inner witness' of the Holy Spirit
- g. Personal and/or community experience

Although none of these criteria may lay claim to be an independent or absolute confirmation of 'the' correct understanding of biblical truth, our confidence that an interpreter has indeed heard the Holy Spirit speaking through God's word is increased by the extent to which a cluster of these criteria coalesce as mutually reinforcing affirmations. If some combination of understanding the historical author's meaning through grammatical-historical exegesis and/or seeing how the passage fits into the whole context of biblical teaching, and/or the support of fellow believers and/or church tradition, and/or a sense of the Holy Spirit's guidance, and/or my personal experience with God, and/or my own God-given good sense, line up in my understanding of what God is trying to say through a particular passage of Scripture, I will have more confidence that I am hearing the Spirit correctly.⁴² This process also assumes, of course, that I participate in a faith community - i.e., a church - and that my private reading of the Bible is constantly shaped by reading the Bible with brothers and sisters in Christ. The more of the viewpoints listed above that fit together in a matrix of perceptions of biblical truth, the more confident we will feel that we are hearing God's message together. In this way one can speak of a level of 'interpretational probability' even if we may not (as the postmodern critique reminds us) have complete certainty that our sin-darkened and culturally influenced minds perceive God's message perfectly.⁴³

Each of these criteria could be explored in much more depth, and should be, as African evangelicals seek to develop appropriate hermeneutical models. But I want to offer just a few brief comments about how two of them, grammatical-historical exegesis and church tradition, might be understood to work alongside the others. I feel that an exploration of the roles of these two

⁴² On the role of intellectual reason in validating biblical interpretation, Wright notes, "Reason provides a check on unrestrained imaginative readings of texts... It will include the need to make sense. Of course, the question of what counts as 'making sense,' and the question of 'whose rationality?' will remain contested, but not so as to render all discussion futile" (Wright, *Last Word*, 119)

⁴³ Vanhoozer speaks of the need for a 'hermeneutics of humility and conviction'—humility as "the virtue that constantly reminds interpreters that we can get it *wrong*," and conviction as the assurance that "while absolute knowledge is not a present possession, adequate knowledge is" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 463-465).

parameters in our interpretation of the Bible may be of particular significance in the ministry contexts in which evangelical African theological graduates are likely to find themselves.

1. The role of author meaning

If the Holy Spirit continues to speak to us directly through the Bible today - especially in light of the possibility of new inspiration (as in the Pentecostal view) - why should we be concerned about the original author or audience?⁴⁴ What difference does that past event make to us today? I suggest that specifically in its focus on historical author meaning, grammatical-historical investigation is essential. I say this from two theological convictions. First, for his own purposes, throughout history God has chosen an incarnational model in the way he relates to his human creatures. As in Jesus Christ divine and human natures are combined (but not co-mingled), so similarly in his written Word, God chose to speak to and through human agents. By ignoring the historic author in the process of revelation, in favor of a purely 'spiritual' means of direct revelation by the Holy Spirit, we ignore God's own choice to work incarnationally. Most importantly, we underestimate the significance of God's intervention in human history, and his act of salvation and redemption in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historical event. Christianity is an irreducibly historical religion, focused on God's engagement with his human creatures in time and space.⁴⁵

Thus, in speaking to us God chooses to work through people, including the human authors of Scripture. Nicholas Wolterstorff describes Scripture as 'divinely appropriated human discourse', that is, words spoken and/or written by human beings, which God inspires and then uses to carry out his own

⁴⁴ When confronted with the challenge to author meaning presented by 'radical' reader-centered interpretations of the Bible, evangelicals have tended to argue for the right of the human author to be heard. This is, for example, essentially the premise of Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (a position that Vanhoozer himself modified slightly in later writings, as noted above). However, to someone operating with a Pentecostal two-point understanding of the Holy Spirit's inspiration, such an argument is unlikely to be persuasive. If the message of the divine author - conveyed to the reader by the Holy Spirit - is ultimately the most important dynamic in biblical revelation, then why should historic author meaning be given priority? Rather than argue for 'rights' of human authors, it may be more expedient to demonstrate the 'theological value' of authors. That is what I attempt to develop in this section.

⁴⁵ A number of Pentecostal scholars also affirm the essential historicity of Christian faith, and the need to respect historical author meaning. Autry, for example, writes, "Christianity is ... based on events, divine acts in time, and revelations concerning meaning of those events in time ... Biblically informed faith and hermeneutics cannot be ahistorical. To say that the historical-critical method is by itself inadequate is not to say that it is inappropriate or unnecessary. Faith and hermeneutics demand a vital concern for history - the history to which the text refers and out of which the text arises." (Arden C. Autry, "Dimensions of Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Focus," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 3, 1993, 33).

'speech acts' such as asserting, promising, prohibiting or commanding.⁴⁶ Augustine points out that throughout the Bible there is evidence of God's habit of combining human and divine agents in revelation. Paul had a vision of Christ on the Damascus road, but received baptism and teaching from Ananias (Acts 9:3-8); an angel speaking to Cornelius told him to ask Peter for further help (Acts 10:3-6); similarly, it was an angel who sent Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, rather than the angel himself interpreting Isaiah's prophecy (Acts 8:26-35); Moses spoke with God face to face, but accepted spiritual advice from his father-in-law (Exodus 18).⁴⁷ In Augustine's opinion, God does this to strengthen the bonds of love human beings have with one another: "Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans."⁴⁸

Just as significantly, if we overlook the historic dimensions of biblical revelation we may also ignore the continuity of God's character and purpose throughout time and eternity - a second important theological conviction. God does not change, and the Holy Spirit will not contradict today what God spoke yesterday. The more we understand what God said and did in the past, the more profoundly we are likely to understand who he is, what he is saying to us today, and what his ultimate objective is in communicating with us. God's story continues, with God's character and purpose unchanging, and we must discover our place in it. Under divine inspiration the human authors of Scripture faithfully recorded for us the words and actions of God in history. The result of ignoring them is our own poverty in knowing God.

For these reasons (among others which are beyond the scope of this discussion), author meaning in its historical context should serve as the primary parameter or constraint for any other meaning(s) we understand a passage to have. Whatever the Holy Spirit communicates to the reader through a biblical text today, it will be consistent with and confirmed by what God spoke through the historical author to the original audience:

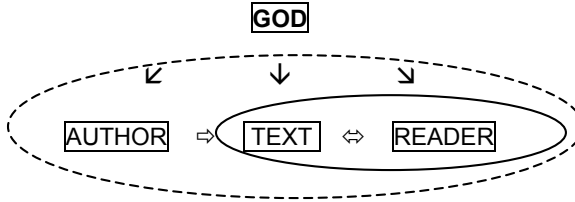
⁴⁶ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 53ff.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, preface (6-7) [12-15]. Augustine makes a point of noting that Moses' father-in-law was from a different ethnic group. This and the following quotation are from Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R. H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The initial paragraph numbering, i.e. preface (6-7), is that traditionally used. The additional paragraph numbers [12-15] are those of a different historical system adopted by Green in this edition.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, preface (6) [13].

Grammatical-Historical Exegesis

(Historic author meaning as parameter or constraint)

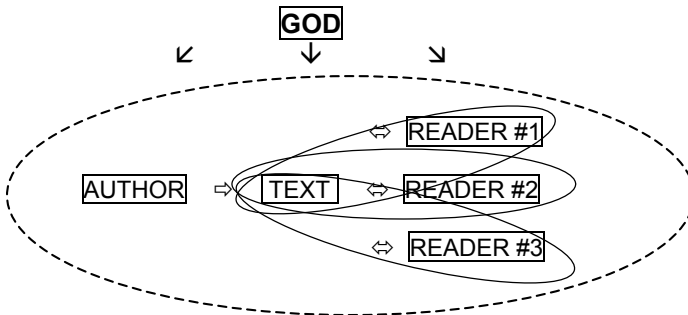


Fee and Stuart write, "A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. *This is the starting point*" (my emphasis).⁴⁹ While I affirm Fee and Stuart's statement that "a text cannot mean what it never meant," I would prefer to restate their position by saying that the true meaning of the biblical text for us is *consistent with* what the human author originally understood it to mean when it was first spoken. This allows for canonical (text-centered) dimensions that the biblical author might not have anticipated, as well as additional insights which the Holy Spirit might show a reader that are relevant to his or her contemporary situation.

Building on Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard's affirmation that historical author meaning "provides a fixed core of meaning"⁵⁰ - although admittedly understanding the notion of 'core' more flexibly than they are likely to have intended - we can also say that commitment to author meaning as the primary parameter or constraint for interpretation does not rule out the possibility of a text having more than one legitimate meaning (more than one divine communicative intent) for more than one reader. It simply means that each of these readings can be validated by their consistency with author meaning:

Grammatical-Historical Exegesis

(Historic author meaning as parameter or constraint)



⁴⁹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 30.

⁵⁰ Klein, Hubbard, Blomberg, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 189.

As biblical scholars who have had opportunities to study the historical and cultural contexts in which the biblical revelation was given, it is our joyful privilege to introduce contemporary readers to the biblical authors to whom God first spoke. And as we and our fellow readers search for meaning in a biblical passage and what God might be communicating to us today, it is also important for us to know how other believers, other readers throughout the history of the church, have understood God to be speaking to and through these biblical authors. This is the role of church tradition in biblical interpretation.

2. The Role of Church Tradition

Contemporary evangelicals tend to be ahistorical in their approach to Scripture, and to Christian faith in general. One reason for this may be a suspicion of Catholic or Orthodox practices that combine the Bible with church tradition (that is, with traditional interpretations of Scripture explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by the church) as a two-part authority. In their attempt to be faithful to the Protestant commitment to *sola scriptura*, evangelicals tend to reject ecclesial claims to interpretive authority and to ignore the specific biblical interpretations that those claims promote. But as Wright suggests,

Paying attention to tradition means listening carefully (humbly but not uncritically) to how the church has read and lived scripture in the past. We must be constantly aware of our responsibility in the Communion of Saints, without giving our honored predecessors the final say or making them an 'alternative source,' independent of scripture itself. When they speak with one voice, we should listen very carefully. They may be wrong. They sometimes are. But we ignore them at our peril.⁵¹

We are not the first to grapple with a difficult passage of the Bible, nor the first to search out the relevance of Scripture in our own context, what God is saying to us in the 'here and now'. For African evangelicals especially, a re-engagement with ancient readings of Scripture offers a way back and around the western modernist paradigm of interpretation inherited with the missionary movement, to discover other readings that may resonate with their own sense of how the Spirit speaks through the Bible. African Christians interested in Spirit-centered readings of the Bible can find examples of biblical interpretation not shaped by western Enlightenment rationalism, but which rely on a more intuitive, subjective understanding of the way the Holy Spirit communicates God's truth through Scripture. In early readings of Scripture African evangelicals may also find examples of biblical interpretation directed to communities much like those that still exist in many parts of Africa today: rural or in the process of urbanizing, communitarian rather than individualistic, non-industrial, threatened by political and economic oppression from expansive empires, potentially facing persecution, dealing with poverty and plague, and permeated by an awareness of the God of the Bible even in contexts of competing religious systems. In more recent stages of church history, African

⁵¹ Wright, *Last Word*, 117.

evangelicals can compare their understandings of biblical passages with those of other evangelical interpreters in Latin America and Asia, which along with Africa form Christianity's emerging global center of gravity.

Are the interpretations of Scripture found in historic and global manifestations of the Church more authoritative than what any African evangelical believer reading the Bible today might produce? No. Are they instructive and spiritually helpful, as a way of placing ourselves in God's story as it continues to unfold through human history? Certainly. And in many cases those interpretations have the advantage of having been examined, tested and used by centuries of brothers and sisters in Christ in various cultural contexts. If we believe that our God is the God of all humankind, and that his Church consists of his faithful people in all times and in all places, with whom we will one day worship him in heaven, then we can be enriched and constructively guided by paying attention to what believers in a variety of times and places have understood the Spirit to be saying to them through Scripture.

Conclusion

How should African evangelicals prepare their theological college graduates to interpret and use the Bible in contemporary African churches? How do we respond to the genuine questions and concerns from the people among whom our graduates will minister, communities of believers who are increasingly Pentecostal or influenced by Pentecostalism? How do we forge a biblical hermeneutics that affirms Scripture as God's authoritative self-revelation and also recognizes the ongoing reality of the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture to African Christians today?

There are few resources available for the classroom that offer context-appropriate biblical hermeneutics from an African and evangelical perspective. In my experience many of the published resources come from South Africa where, as Maluleke acknowledges, the misuse of the Bible to justify apartheid has led to a situation in which "the Bible is regarded as a problematic document to be handled with care and to be read from the point of view of the struggles of poor Black people."⁵² The resulting suspicion of the biblical text is not the starting point from which most evangelicals in the rest of the continent prefer to begin reading the Bible.⁵³ Nyende laments the scarcity of useful information concerning the way the Bible is popularly interpreted and used

⁵² Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The Bible and African Theologies," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 174.

⁵³ West contrasts "the liberation hermeneutical perspective of South Africa (where the predominant hermeneutic disposition is one of suspicion toward the Bible)" with "the inculturation hermeneutical perspective of West, East, North, and Central Africa (where the predominant hermeneutic disposition is one of trust towards the Bible)", Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Getui, Maluleke, and Ukpong, 95.

throughout Africa “by men and women in the churches, in open spaces (i.e. in streets, markets, fields, etc.) and homes,” and urges that more study of this sort be undertaken by African biblical scholars so that biblical interpretation in theological institutions and in the church can be brought closer together.⁵⁴ The challenge now before evangelical authors in Africa is to produce materials that can be used in theological colleges to train the next generation of African church leaders and biblical scholars.

In this article I have outlined four questions that I believe are foundational and programmatic for the further development of evangelical African hermeneutics. These questions are:

1. Where is biblical meaning created - in the author, the text or the reader?
2. What is the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation?
3. Can a passage of Scripture have more than one meaning?
4. How do we choose among different interpretations?

Regarding the locus of meaning in Scripture - meaning which I've defined in terms of God's ongoing 'communicative intention' - I have outlined the relative roles of author, text and reader, and described how historical concerns regarding author and text came to the fore in 20th century evangelical biblical scholarship. In response, I've indicated the value of a hermeneutical approach in which historical author meaning serves as a constraint on, but allows for a variety of, contemporary reader meanings. With respect to the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation, I've pointed out the difference between the 'inspiration-illumination' and 'two-point inspiration' paradigms of evangelicals and Pentecostals respectively, and shown that Pentecostal scholars themselves are actively discussing and critiquing various approaches to Pentecostal hermeneutics. Regarding the potential for multiple meanings in a biblical passage, I've indicated that this is an issue evangelical theological scholars are currently revisiting, as they take on board the postmodern critique of modernist hermeneutical assumptions and rediscover the unapologetically spiritual and theological focus of pre-modern biblical interpretation. And in terms of evaluating and validating differing interpretations of Scripture, I have suggested a set of criteria that African evangelicals may explore further in the attempt to affirm a disciplined multiplicity in biblical interpretation.

As evangelical biblical scholars in Africa consider these key hermeneutical questions and develop various responses and models, the vast gap between the theological curriculum commonly offered in evangelical institutions and the realities those institutions' students and graduates encounter when they return to their home churches may begin to be addressed. In the face of the potential irrelevance of academic theological studies, given the heart cry of African believers for a spiritual encounter with the Bible, we can begin to answer the question, “How does God speak to us through the Bible today?”

⁵⁴ Nyende, “Institutional and Popular Interpretations of the Bible in Africa,” 59.

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