

RELEVANCE AS A MEDIATING CATEGORY IN THE READING OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: VENTURING BEYOND THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE¹

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The most efficient way to introduce the problem which this article addresses is by means of a brief autobiographical reflection. In vocational terms I can be described as a teacher of biblical studies. In that capacity I am a reader of the biblical text. I ply my trade in two (occasionally uncomfortably) distinct contexts. I am an ordained Anglican, and I am employed at an interdenominational evangelical Bible college. When it comes to reading the biblical text, those two contexts typify the hermeneutical tension in which I live, the attempted resolution of which moulds a significant part of my working life. In one context, that of the evangelical Bible college, I often read with those concerned with such things as authority, objectivity, and authorial intent. The Bible is God's word, and the job of the Christian is simply to do what it says. The adjective that best describes my other context, the Anglican one, is pluralist. In that context I often read with those who are more focused on such things as subjectivity, interest, relationship, and ideology. What is most important is the Bible reader's experience of life, and any engagement with the Bible is subject to that experience and the reader's cultural context. This is, of course, a caricature of both contexts, and the diversity inherent in each of them. The fact is that the two are not mutually exclusive, and at an intuitive level I find a considerable amount of interplay. My desire is to understand that interplay better at a hermeneutical level, at the level of how I read, interpret, and use texts.

That I have described my activity in each of those contexts as "reading" is a response to the fact that questions about the position of the reader with respect to the text dominate the contemporary hermeneutical landscape. Literary theory, according to Anthony Thiselton, "constitutes one of the three most significant developments for biblical hermeneutics over the last quarter of a century." The second development Thiselton cites is the impact of post-Gadamerian hermeneutics," by which I assume he means Gadamer's rebellion against method and structure, and a turning towards language

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and context and particularity when it comes to understanding. Thiselton's third chosen development is "the emergence of socio-critical theory and related liberation movements."² A consequence of this has been the privileging of the reader in the creation of meaning and the corresponding development of various ideological positions whose interests dictate how the text is to be read. The question of "reading," and the position of the reader with respect to the text, is raised by each of those hermeneutical developments. It is in "reading" that I struggle to come to terms with the conflicting imperatives of my contexts.

In each of the two distinct contexts that I have described there is irony at work in the activity of reading, and there are potential problems when that irony is missed. One of the ironies of the Bible college context is that it combines a commitment to the objective nature of the text and the importance of authorial intent as the locus of meaning, with an intensely subjective reading after the fashion of the pietist tradition. The biblical text is read in terms of "what the text *means to me*," and yet the assumption about the nature of the text is that it contains intentional, self-evident, and non-negotiable communication from God. A subjective experience is combined with a thoroughly objective theory of what is being experienced. There is little awareness of how much of him or herself the reader brings to the text, as a result of which the reading experience can be given an unwarranted privilege. As Thiselton has expressed it,

Very often in religious groups an individual is encouraged to "frame" the biblical text with reference to the narrative history of personal testimony, and to "read" the text as "what the text *means to me*." If this is undertaken within a frame of corporate evaluation and testing, the life-experience in question may enhance pre-understanding and weave meaning and textual force with emotional warmth and practices in life. But without any principle of *suspicion*, in Gadamer's terminology a *premature* fusion of horizons will take place *before* readers have listened in openness with respect for the tension between the horizons of the text and the horizons of the reader.³

The potential for abuse inherent in such a position is obvious.

In my other context, the Anglican one, which I have characterized as pluralist, there occasionally arises an opposite irony to that of the Bible college context. There is much greater interest in what we might loosely term the more objective text-historical, what another age may have called scientific, approaches to reading the text, alongside a more untrammelled freedom granted to the reader in the creation of meaning. This time the encounter with the text is as the study of an artefact which one stands outside of rather than as a conversation partner with which one engages. The percep-

² A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 471. I acknowledge a significant debt to Thiselton's magisterial treatment in much of the thinking in this article. Another influential treatment is that of K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos: 1998). My debt is not so much to the positions each adopts as to their judicious and encyclopedic awareness and careful appreciation of the strengths even of positions which they themselves are unable to adopt.

³ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 531 (emphasis original).

tion of meaning that emerges as a result of such study will be much more compatible with a community of interpretation, and much more aware of the “foreignness” of the text and the care with which conclusions arising from its reading must be treated. But there may be no corresponding commitment to personal appropriation of the text. Rather the text is then “critiqued” and “used” in the service of a predetermined ideological position.⁴ To call on Thiselton again, he asks of such approaches:

Do the systems function as *socio-critical* ones in the sense that they embody some *trans-contextual, metacritical, or transcendental principle of critique*, or do they collapse into *socio-pragmatic* hermeneutics which, on the basis only of narrative-experience *within a given context, exclude all interpretative options in advance which would give any other signals than positive ones for the journey already undertaken?*⁵

Ironically, two quite different stances with respect to the text each when taken to their extreme can end in a kind of fundamentalism, use the word in the sense of recent popular usage: stances characterized by a militant selective defiance of all contexts other than one’s own, whether that be the context of the text in question or that of those who would like to read it differently.⁶

Again, I want to emphasize that the two types of outcome from reading the Bible that I am describing are extremes, although neither is as rare as we might hope it to be. These two approaches to the text of Scripture need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, as a matter of reading ethics they positively must not be mutually exclusive. The challenge to somebody straddling the sort of reading contexts that I have described is to discover a hermeneutic that makes sense of the polarities and holds them together in some way.

There are any number of angles from which these polarities can be examined. One particular one that provides good value for effort, in that it keeps the process of reading firmly in view, is the tension between the intent of the biblical text or its author and the response of the reader to the text. I will refer to this variously as the intention/response or the author/reader polarity. Its exploration in this article enables me to test the conviction that my two contexts are not mutually exclusive. The route of the exploration will traverse the traditional categories expressed in the metaphor of the hermeneutical circle, placing a question mark over the diagnostic capabilities of that metaphor. I then critique one response to the hermeneutical circle, the spiral model, as an inadequate treatment of the tension between intention and response. Its inadequacy lies at least partly in its perception of “intention.” The latter part of the article notes one particular

⁴ Note the distinction between interpretation and use of texts tentatively made by U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 62. See also D. J. A. Clines, “Varieties of Indeterminacy,” *Semeia* 71 (1995) 24, on the distinction between critique and interpretation, although his suggestion that interpretation entails “thinking the authors’ thoughts after them” is too reductive of the task of interpretation.

⁵ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 439–40 (emphasis original).

⁶ P. Gifford, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (ed. A. Hastings, A. Mason and H. Pyper; Oxford: University Press, 2000) 257.

approach to the question of intention, and commends a consideration of the intention/response or author/reader polarity through the category of relevance, as it is currently being worked out within the discipline of pragmatic linguistics. The concluding contention of this article is that relevance theory is a valuable conversation partner in the quest for a hermeneutic that I have described above, one that appreciates the role of the reader in interpretation without surrendering respect both for the text and for the possibility of agency and intentionality that comes with an emphasis on the author. In that respect it is a venture beyond the hermeneutical circle.

I. THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

The metaphor of the hermeneutical circle is used to describe the relationship between several polarities in interpretation. The term originates with Friedrich Schleiermacher's encounter with a particular paradox which he described in a couple of key ways.⁷ For Schleiermacher, "complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle, that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice-versa. . . ."⁸ It is not possible to understand the whole of a text without a detailed appreciation of the parts that go to make up that whole, and it is equally not possible fully to appreciate the parts of a text without understanding the whole to which the parts belong, or their context, as we might describe it today. Schleiermacher specified this further with his distinction between grammatical and psychological interpretation. Grammatical interpretation is that careful technical attention to the detail of a text that determines how each of the parts work and what they are able to say and what they are not able to say. Psychological interpretation is the attempt to appreciate not so much how the text works as the effect on the text of the person reading it and the impact on interpretation of the experience and context that that reader brings with him or her to the reading. The hermeneutical circle is the perpetual conversation between those two interdependent aspects of interpretation.

Schleiermacher's analysis opened the way to describing a range of conversations or tensions in the process of interpretation. Thiselton reminds us that his formulation was not a "simplified model":

It is more than a straightforward relation between the parts and the whole of texts. These processes of understanding involve distinctions between a divinatory intuitive perception of wholeness and comparative judgement and critical assessments about linguistic elements, categories, and genre; distinctions between language-possibilities and language-users; distinctions between human individuality and patterns of structure or generality.⁹

⁷ On Schleiermacher, see Thiselton, *New Horizons*, esp. section VI, and J. Verheyden, "The Basic Features of Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics," in *Papers of the Schleiermacher Group and Schleiermacher Society* (ed. D. E. Klemm and T. N. Tice; San Francisco: AAR, 1997).

⁸ F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (ed. H. Kimmerle; trans. J. Duke and J. Forstman; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 113, cited in Thiselton, *New Horizons* 221.

⁹ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 232–33.

Particularly for our purposes, one further manifestation of the hermeneutical circle suggests that whenever a text is read a conversation emerges between two parties, the author and the reader of that text. There are times when the author is quite inaccessible to the reader, and the intention to communicate can only be deduced from the text itself.¹⁰ For all practical purposes the text itself then becomes a partner in the conversation, but even in such an instance, I suggest, the reader assumes as she approaches the text that she is encountering an intention on the part of another to communicate, even when that other may be known only in the text itself. To put it in less personal terms, the intention of the text comes into contact with the response that the text calls forth. The circle metaphor expresses the view that in the search for meaning intention cannot be fully apprehended other than through a response to the text, and yet response needs to be moderated by an appreciation of intention. Neither may dominate and neither may be dispensed with.

In that case, the hermeneutical circle is employed as a response to the phenomenon that anyone who encounters a text tends to decide, whether consciously or not, to privilege one or other of the conversation partners, the reader or the author/text. To put it another way, one of two vantage points is chosen from which to view the text that is being interpreted. The text may be viewed from the vantage point of the author. Meaning is sought in the search for the author's original intention in writing or compiling the text; intention is a privileged category in the interpretive process; the proper attitude of the reader is thought to be as one who seeks to understand what the author originally meant rather than to critique what the text is saying or to admit as meaningful ambiguities that the author may not have intended; and there are supposed limits to the uses to which a text may be put. The other vantage point from which the text may be viewed is that of the reader. From that perspective the meaning of a text is that which the reader perceives it to be; the response of the reader is privileged in the creation of meaning as against those who privilege authorial intent; texts may be critiqued and not merely interpreted; and the legitimacy or otherwise of the use to which a text may be put is for the reader to determine. The adoption of the metaphor of the hermeneutical circle ensures that neither vantage point is able to operate at the exclusion of the other. Both are necessary, but a circle has to be entered somewhere, or, to continue with the mixed metaphor, a reader cannot begin to read without beginning to look at the text from one particular angle.

As far as it goes, then, the metaphor of the hermeneutical circle has proven to be a useful diagnostic instrument, in that it has provided a way of describing the problem and the challenge of interpretation, and of accommodating the various guises in which the problem and challenge can occur.

¹⁰ R. W. Gibbs, *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 206, advances the "idea that the multifaceted nature of authorship complicates any simple view of intentionalism. Yet these complications don't eliminate the cognitive unconscious drive toward inferring something about both real and hypothetical authors'/artists' communicative intentions."

However, a diagnosis ought to lead to a prescription, and when it comes to prescribing a way of understanding the process of encountering texts, the hermeneutical circle becomes too blunt an instrument, capable only of describing a conversation between partners often at odds with each other. It ought not to be surprising that the metaphor of a circle results in a rather circular series of “yes, but . . .” items in a conversation that struggles to hold together the varying poles of interpretation. It is easy to identify with J. I. H. McDonald’s assessment that “[a]t first sight, to be invited to go round in circles is not an attractive proposition.”¹¹ This is the case the more so in that the conversation between purveyors of the primacy of authorial intent in the search for meaning, and those of the primacy of reader response is too often not conducted in a particularly creative manner. Note, for instance, the contrast between Stephen Fowl, who advocates the abandonment of any talk of meaning in order to focus solely on “interpretative interest,” and John Poirier’s vigorous argument that “meaning-as-intention is definitionally inherent in the idea of a text.”¹²

II. INTERPRETING SACRED TEXTS

At this point we might pose the question, does it matter what we do with the text? So what if we are simply “using” it? I think there is an ethical response to that question that would apply to our reading of any text. If the quality of intentionality is granted to a text, it follows that there must be external limits on the uses to which a reader may put a text. But the ethical question is acute when the text being read is held to be sacred.¹³ Detweiler highlights the manner in which the ethical question is writ large: “. . . the readers or the community of interpreters who believe in the sacredness of the text they address will treat it differently than a non-sacred text. They will feel more constrained in their interpretation of the sacred text because it has, after all, a divine authority that commands reverence and restricts a free play of response.”¹⁴

Detweiler’s comments are primarily descriptive, and more needs to be said about the manner in which a text may be said to be sacred. My explo-

¹¹ J. I. H. McDonald, “Hermeneutical Circle,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1990) 281.

¹² Fowl, “The Ethics of Interpretation or What’s Left Over after the Elimination of Meaning,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (ed. D. J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl and S. E. Porter; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 384; J. C. Poirier, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory,” *CBQ* 62 (2000) 253.

¹³ K. J. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts, The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant,” in *After Pentecost, Language and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. Bartholomew, C. Greene, and K. Möller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 45, expresses it powerfully: “Do not bear false witness.’ To me, this is the categorical imperative of hermeneutics. To bear false witness—to say that the author is doing something in a text that he or she did not do—is to subject an author to a form of violence.”

¹⁴ R. Detweiler, “What is a Sacred Text?,” *Semeia* 31 (1985) 214. He then continues perhaps more in the vein of caricature, contra the argument of this paper: “A sacred text ought really to mean only one thing: that which its divine author wishes it to mean. This, in turn, leads to the phenomenon of privileged interpreters. . . .”

ration of the interaction of intention and response in interpreting biblical texts accepts that the texts in question are sacred to the extent that “God speaks” by means of the texts. That claim is argued by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who employs speech-act theory, particularly what he calls the “illocutionary stance of biblical narrative,” to help him differentiate between divine authorship and divine discourse.¹⁵ Wolterstorff arrives at the view concerning the significance of Scripture that “the discourse of biblical writers is an instrument of divine discourse.”¹⁶ He argues that God may not inappropriately be described as the author of Scripture by thinking of the nature of inspiration. For him, “inspiration does not determine the agent of the discourse generated.”¹⁷ Human discourse has become the vehicle of divine discourse as the human authors have discerned what God is saying either through interpretation of available events or through an entitlement to perceive what would otherwise be unknowable. Wolterstorff is convinced of the entitlement of human authors to know such things. The question, “Are we entitled?” is crucial to his argument. In particular, “Are we entitled to believe that God speaks?”¹⁸ If we accept Wolterstorff’s argument for entitlement, the way is open for us to respect the divine intentionality of the biblical texts, while also appreciating the importance of the reader and acknowledging the potential for indeterminacy in the communicative act.¹⁹ The conduct of biblical interpretation is then potentially an engagement with “divine discourse,” the conduct of which engagement is critically dependent on an appreciation of the relationship of intention and response to one another. In the terms of this paper, a desire to understand that engagement better fuels a desire to venture beyond the hermeneutical circle.

III. THE HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL AND QUESTIONS OF MEANING

Before I commence my own attempt to do so, I want to describe briefly one particular influential effort that ultimately fails to satisfy. I refer to the adaptation of the circle metaphor to that of a spiral. McDonald follows the sentence quoted above with this observation: “Since, however, the circle tends to operate at several different levels, it is not inappropriate to think of it as a spiral,” by which I take him to mean something that is making

¹⁵ N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse, Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), chap. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* chap. 5.

¹⁹ It also enables Wolterstorff to appreciate the gains of Meir Sternberg’s approach while escaping the limitations of Sternberg’s dependence on the category “implied narrator,” a dependence which finds us back with the problem of imposing modern literary categories on another order of text, and also back in a New Critical playing field (pp. 248–52). See M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), chap. 2, on “Narrative Models.” In parting company with Sternberg and promoting the concept of entitlement, Wolterstorff argues that his position is not the same thing as ascribing omniscience to the author who attributes inner states to God, thus necessitating ultimate authorship of Scripture to be divine.

progress.²⁰ A programmatic presentation of the possibilities of that metaphor is found in Grant Osborne's *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.²¹ He envisages a process of interaction between text and interpreter which locates meaning in what he calls the "text/sender."²² Furthermore, "the intended meaning does have a life of its own as a legitimate hermeneutical goal."²³ Once meaning has been determined by this process there is a spiral outwards to another conversation which realizes the significance of the meaning. In this spiral the two horizons of what Osborne now calls source and receptor are fused. But the fusion occurs because "the text itself sets the agenda" with the intention "to reshape the interpreter's pre-understanding."²⁴

On first acquaintance there is something attractive about the possibilities of Osborne's spiral, and my brief mention of him cannot do justice to the care and length with which Osborne works out the spiral, but there are a couple of problems with it. In the first place it is highly dependent on "intention" in its understanding of meaning and so finally is not able to make a genuine accommodation to context, so important to reader-centered approaches.²⁵

Correspondingly, the spiral paradigm is also forced to differentiate between significance and meaning in a way that for me does not provide a satisfactory account of the nature of meaning.²⁶ The issue relates to the question of the recoverability of intention. We must recognize that a variety of things can happen to a text independent of authorial intent. For example, the social context may change, the response of the reader may change, or the textual context may change, and each can alter meaning.²⁷ Each can be exemplified. *The Taming of the Shrew* is read and interpreted in a way that would not have been possible in Elizabethan England, due to a changing

²⁰ McDonald, "Hermeneutical Circle" 281.

²¹ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991).

²² *Ibid.* 323.

²³ *Ibid.* 324.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ A full-scale discussion on meaning is beyond the scope of this lecture. See the clear summary of theories of meaning in A. C. Thiselton, "Meaning," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1990) 435–38. He identifies five: referential, semantic, ideational, functional, and de facto. Thiselton considers that "[n]o single theory of meaning is valid for every kind of question." I am leaning towards a combination of a semantic and a functional understanding of meaning, and have some sympathy with the well-known dictum in L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) 20: "For a large class of cases—though not all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (emphasis original). A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 74, comments further: "Wittgenstein's appeal to the concept of use is intentionally broad for the reason that uses of expression are as various as the language-games in which they occur, and therefore no single formula can capture their variety."

²⁶ Although Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 394 recognizes the difficulty in "[adjudicating] between meaning and significance."

²⁷ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 38, in a much more comprehensive analysis, identifies six "levels at which readers may consciously or unconsciously bring about a transfer out of texts and their meaning: (i) intertextual; (ii) situational or temporally contingent; (iii) horizontal; (iv) semiotic; (v) hermeneutical; and (vi) relating to theories of texts."

social context. The Education Act of 1877 in New Zealand was passed in a context of growing numbers of denominationally-based schools in dialogue with an influential strand of free thinking in the new colony. The Act decreed that education must be free, compulsory, and secular. It is arguable that the authorial intent of the Act was that “secular” be understood to mean “non-sectarian,” but it has consistently been understood, reader-responded to, in a different way virtually from its inception and so has come to have a different meaning, such that we are now saddled with a long history of state-funded education at all levels being determinedly secular, not non-sectarian.²⁸ An example of a change of textual context is the narrative section (chs. 1–6) of the biblical book of Daniel set in the sixth century BC. On their own they are stories of faithful accommodation to an exilic context and envisage the eventual compliance of Gentile kings with the sovereignty of Yahweh, and they may be read as such to great benefit. In the canonical form of the book of Daniel, though, they belong with a set of visions that are focused on the eventual replacement of all earthly kingdoms. As a result of the juxtaposition of historical and visionary material, in due course the entire book could come to be read less as a call to faithful witness in the diaspora and more as a post-exilic tract of resistance to Hellenization, particularly in its political forms.²⁹

Where is the meaning found in each of these instances? The conservative, or traditional, response is to say that meaning remains with intention, but that the context has brought a variation in the significance of the meaning. A new critical approach, and perhaps also that of canonical criticism, would consider that the changing contexts bring about more than a change in significance.³⁰ The meaning itself is affected. Moving beyond the text itself to reader-response, there are those also who highlight the role of the reader and the response of the reader in the creation of meaning, quite apart from the intent of the author or the usage of the text.³¹ Texts themselves are indeterminate, and what is determined is the context of the individual reader. In that case there can hardly be said to be meaning at all, but only significance.

Without wanting to get into a full-scale discussion of what is meant by meaning, my point is that the hermeneutical spiral with its privileging of intent takes us into an understanding of meaning that is too much at odds with experience, and insufficiently attuned to the vantage point of the

²⁸ On the history of this period see I. Breward, *Godless Schools? A Study of Protestant Reactions to Secular Education in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1967) 1–20. Breward comments of the Legislative Council debates of the time (p. 18) that “[c]areful study of the debates and divisions shows that there was very little doctrinaire secularism amongst members.”

²⁹ See my argument in, “Metaphor, Narrative, Interpreter and Reader in Daniel 2–5,” *Narrative* 8 (2000) 260–62.

³⁰ See M. G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 5, and J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984) 208, on the possible relationship of canonical approaches to the New Criticism.

³¹ See the comment by Clines, “Varieties of Indeterminacy” 24, that “. . . the moment we allow that there are other standpoints apart from that inscribed in the text from which we may read a text we have committed ourselves to indeterminacy of meaning.”

reader. I note also that the spiral is heavily dependent on the physical sender-receptor model, or the code model of communication, a point to which we return below. So if the spiral does not provide a satisfactory model, where can we turn for help?

IV. INTENTION AND MEANING

Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. has written a book called *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning*.³² A feature of this interdisciplinary work, undertaken by a psychologist, is the way in which Gibbs treats the concept of intention. He explores the category "intention" from the perspective of the reader and argues for a proper distinction between authorial intent and the reader's perception of intent.³³ It is readily recognized that it is not always possible to recover authorial intent. However, and here the psychologist is able to help us, Gibbs demonstrates that any conversation or work of art or piece of literature is approached with the assumption of intention. The reader/viewer/listener assumes that there is an intention to communicate by somebody. I suggest that this is supremely so for a reader who is approaching what is reckoned by her to be a "sacred text," or, in the terms I have outlined above, a text in which God speaks. If the author cannot be directly accessed, then a construct of an author is created. In either case, intentionality is a key part of the communication process and cannot be eliminated in the perception of meaning and significance.

This is both a helpful way forward and an uncomfortable reminder of our tension. At times Gibbs's work fronts as an appreciation of the importance of the author. At others, it resembles other text-centered approaches to interpretation in its recognition that the author is often nothing more than a construct in the mind of the reader.³⁴ At that point it sounds very much like the concept of the implied author, although Gibbs does not use that terminology. Although he alerts us to both the importance of intention and the complexities of the concept of authorship, he does not finally point us through them. He does, however, suggest two fields of thought that can help us. The first, speech-act theory, he ultimately rejects, but the second, relevance theory, he finds useful in a number of ways.³⁵ The employment of

³² Gibbs, *Intentions*.

³³ Gibbs, *Intentions* 206, writes, "I will advance the idea that the multifaceted nature of authorship complicates any simple view of intentionalism. Yet these complications don't eliminate the cognitive unconscious drive toward inferring something about both real and hypothetical authors'/artists' communicative intentions."

³⁴ See for instance his employment of Foucault and Booth in support of what he calls his "new view of authorship" in Gibbs, *Intentions* 230-33.

³⁵ See Gibbs, *Intentions* 55-57 on speech act theory and pp. 118-21, 270-72 on relevance theory. He comments (p. 121) that relevance theory "holds much promise and should clearly be the focus of additional empirical research." This is echoed by Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse, a Relevance-Theoretic Study* (Ph.D. diss., University of Otago, 2000), chap. 2, whose view is that relevance theory "has proved to be a robust and seminal theory, as evidenced by the amount and diversity of ongoing work based on it." I am indebted to Pattemore's work, in which he explores the applicability of relevance theory to biblical interpretation, and in particular the interpretation of the Apocalypse.

speech-act in hermeneutics and in narrative studies is well-established, and I do not intend to dwell further on its potential for the resolution of the issue under discussion.³⁶ Rather, I will move straight onto a consideration of relevance theory, which I believe has a great deal to offer in the field of biblical interpretation.

V. RELEVANCE THEORY

This is a theoretical branch of pragmatic linguistics that has had little interaction with the discipline of biblical studies, so I need to take a moment to highlight some aspects of it.³⁷ The chief architects are Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in *Relevance, Communication & Cognition*, the 1995 expanded and modified edition of their original 1986 volume of that title.³⁸ Relevance theory builds on the insights of speech-act theory, but goes some way beyond them.³⁹ Sperber and Wilson suggest that “the principle of relevance makes it possible to derive rich and precise non-demonstrative inferences about the communicator’s informative intent.”⁴⁰ Their enterprise is essentially to build “an improved inferential model” which may be “combined with a code model to provide an explanatory account of verbal communication.”⁴¹ The result is known as relevance theory. It is a theory of communication which provides useful categories for handling a text in which we expect to discover God speaking.

Despite the claim of Sperber and Wilson that the code and inference models of communication complement each other in the production of relevance, the key to understanding their exposition of relevance is the notion of inference. This is a complex linguistic concept, but its essence for our purposes is that a hearer of an utterance uses aspects of his or her context to infer or deduce that certain things are meant by the utterance in question. Inference is necessary because the linguistic form of a statement is inadequate on its own to convey what is meant. One statement can potentially

³⁶ G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (trans. J. E. Lewin; Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), and S. S. Lanser, *The Narrative Act* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). As one example of the employment of speech act theory in a study of biblical narrative see the work of D. M. H. Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTSup 151; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997). It is interesting to note how often Thiselton, *New Horizons*, draws on speech-act concepts as he works his way through to a resolution.

³⁷ Space does not permit a full exposition of the term “pragmatics,” but as far as I can tell pragmatism can describe a particular philosophy of language, associated with scholars such as Richard Rorty, while linguistic pragmatism is the study of utterance interpretation arising from the concept of inference, a model pioneered by H. P. Grice. A linguistic pragmatism may undergird relevance theory, but it is not necessarily the case that a philosophical pragmatism does. And so it need not be the case that the use of linguistic pragmatics in the hermeneutical task requires agreement with a pragmatic philosophy of interpretation.

³⁸ D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance, Communication and Cognition* (2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 243: “Perhaps the single most uncontroversial assumption of modern pragmatics is that any adequate account of utterance comprehension must include some version of speech-act theory.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 254.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 3.

mean different, even contradictory things, but despite that the hearer usually is able to infer from context what the speaker intends. I take inference to be the term that describes what happens when a hearer takes account of her own context, understands the speaker's context, assumes that the speaker is taking account of the hearer's context, and in the light of all that is aware what a speaker means by a particular statement made in a particular setting. To put it in somewhat more technical language, Adrian Pilkington expresses the "inferential phase" of communication thus:

An inferential phase brings non-linguistic contextual information to bear upon the output of decoding to arrive at the fully-fledged thoughts that are communicated. This inferential phase involves fleshing out the semantic representation by resolving ambiguities, assigning reference and enriching the content of concepts that contribute to the imposition expressed.⁴²

By building on both the code and inference models of communication, the proponents of relevance theory work with both the intention of an act of communication and the contextualized response to that communication, the inference that is drawn from it. With respect to intention, according to relevance theory, one of the pre-conditions of relevance is that the speaker expects that his or her utterance is relevant, that there is sufficiently in common with the hearers of the utterance that they will discern it to be something worth making the effort to listen to. With respect to contextual effect, Neil Smith and Deirdre Wilson comment that "the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance." In other words, the more the hearer can discern that the utterance has something to do with her own context, the more likely is communication to be successful. At the same time, "the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance."⁴³ Or, the easier it is for a hearer to see where a speaker's utterance impacts on the hearer's own context, the more likely is communication to be successful.

However, in practice the relationship between simplicity of processing effort and relevance is not a directly proportional one. A statement can fail to trigger an inference on the part of the hearer either by being too obscure (requiring too much processing effort) or by being too obvious (requiring too little processing). The point of optimum balance between processing effort and contextual effect is the point of relevance, the point at which successful communication has occurred. To express this optimal point in crude terms, an utterance will be perceived by a hearer as relevant to the extent that it takes enough account of the hearer's own context while also drawing the hearer onto something new. If a statement is too foreign to the hearer, the

⁴² A. Pilkington, "Introduction: Relevance Theory and Literary Style," *Language and Literature* 5 (1996) 157.

⁴³ N. Smith and D. Wilson, "Introduction," *Lingua* 87 (1992) 4-6. See also Nam Sun Song, "Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Relevance Theory, Applications and Implications* (ed. R. Carston and S. Uchida; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998) 91, who expresses it thus: "(a) Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it. (b) Other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who processes it."

absence of a contextual effect means it cannot be processed. If it is too familiar, no processing effort is required and it is likely to be discarded by the hearer as unnecessary.

My description so far has been in terms of speakers and hearers and raises the obvious question: How may this be applied to texts, especially to literary texts? In particular, what about “contextual effect” and “processing effort”? Not all literary works demand quite the same levels of processing effort as does a work like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but all reward processing effort above and beyond the call of normal conversational duty. And there are some biblical texts, texts within which God is said to speak, the first reading of which exhibits little or no contextual effect for a contemporary reader. Although the narrative of Judges 19 is working with values and issues that resonate with our own day, at first sight the repulsive story of the dismembered concubine is so foreign to a contemporary outlook that it hardly seems relevant. Or, as a slightly different type of example, so what if the Israelites were not permitted to eat winged creatures with four legs unless the legs have joints above the foot (Lev 11:20–21)? Any achievement of relevance from reading these texts is the result of a determined processing effort. How will the concept of relevance as developed by Sperber and Wilson cope with this, and also with the notion of indeterminacy?

Some work has been done in answer to these questions, with promising results.⁴⁴ At a basic level, relevance theory’s emphasis on inference is tailor-made for anybody attempting to describe what happens when a reader encounters a literary text. For, as David Trotter has expressed it, “literature tests to the limit not our powers of encoding and decoding, but our powers of inference.”⁴⁵ Beyond the notion of inference, though, is the important relevance theoretic distinction between implication and implicature.⁴⁶ An implication is something drawn from the text when particular contextual assumptions are brought to bear on a text. An implicature is entirely the manufacture of the reader, and as a result there is potentially no limit to the implications that can be drawn from a text. To draw a link with the classical reader-response commitment to indeterminacy, the development of

⁴⁴ The journal volumes *Lingua* 87 (1992) and *Language and Literature* 5 (1996) are devoted to relevance theory and literary style. In *Lingua* 87, see especially N. Smith and D. Wilson, “Introduction” 4–6; D. Trotter, “Analysing Literary Prose: The Relevance of Relevance Theory” 11–27; and A. Pilkington, “Poetic Effects” 29–51. In *Language and Literature* 5 see especially W. Clark, “Stylistics and Relevance Theory” 163–78, and B. MacMahon, “Indirectness, Rhetoric and Interpretative Use: Communicative Strategies in Browning’s *My Last Duchess*” 209–23, who explores the relevance theoretic concept of “echoic utterance” and its use in the analysis of irony. A. Pilkington, “Introduction: Relevance Theory and Literary Style” 157–62, gives a useful overview but slightly overstates the case with his comment that “[r]elevance theory rejects both code models of verbal communication and purely inferential accounts.” See also as a further example of relevance theory and literary text S. Uchida, “Text and Relevance,” in *Relevance Theory* 161–78. See also Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance* 231–43, whose discussion of metaphor and irony provides some clues but is not explicitly directed at the question of relevance and reading texts.

⁴⁵ Trotter, “Analysing Literary Prose” 12.

⁴⁶ See the exposition by W. Clark, “Stylistics and Relevance Theory” 172–76, of the distinctions between implication and implicature, and between strong and weak implicature.

ideological readings determined by the context of the reader may be described in relevance terms as implications. We may, for example, speak of the implications of the text for liberation theology or for a feminist ideology or for an earth-friendly reading of the Bible. Implications may be drawn in each of these examples that have little bearing on the intention of the text.⁴⁷ However, the quest for relevance is concerned, not with implication, but with implication that is, if not intended, at least permitted by the author or speaker. Such implication is denoted with the term “implicature.”

Further, some utterances or texts are capable of generating a range of both strong and weak implicatures, each of which are best thought of as poles of a continuum rather than as discrete categories.⁴⁸ For the relevance theoretician, a strong implicature is that achieved by a minimum of processing effort with a maximum contextual effect. However, this does not deny the existence of further weaker implicatures that are intended, at least to the extent that they are inherent in the text, and that may be picked up by the reader; indeed are meant to be picked up by the reader. They are achieved as a result of further processing effort on the part of the reader during which contextual effects are encountered. One of the features of poetic texts, of which set narrative may be said to be a member, is the intentional creation of a range of weak implicatures, which then become the responsibility of the reader to process.⁴⁹ Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” one example of such a text, is discussed in the *Language and Literature* volume noted above. Much biblical narration is characterized by a “covert” style, which by its very nature requires a significant processing effort on the part of the reader in the discernment of the narrator’s perspective.⁵⁰ As I have already implied in my comments on changing contexts, the text may also permit weak implicatures that go beyond the intention of the author. Wolterstorff puts the case well: “. . . what it is that a speaker wants to say and what it is that a speaker does say, will sometimes be relatively indeterminate. Or may have a richness of content which she herself only dimly apprehends . . . when reflecting on one’s own metaphorical speech one sometimes has the sense of learning what one said—be it with delight or dismay.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Note, for example, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (ed. N. C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000). This is the first of a five-volume project committed to hearing the voice of the earth in the biblical text. It exemplifies an ideology for which intent is something to be opposed if necessary (p. 25): “The Earth crisis challenges us to read the Bible afresh and ask whether the biblical text itself, its interpreters—or both—have contributed to this crisis.”

⁴⁸ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance* 199–200, express it thus: “the fiction that there is a clear-cut distinction between wholly determinate, specifically intended inferences and indeterminate, wholly unintended inferences cannot be maintained.”

⁴⁹ The dynamic nature of this process has been nicely captured in the phrase, “on-line interpretation” in the discussion on the nature of metaphor by Nam Sun Song, “Metaphor and Metonymy” 91.

⁵⁰ See S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (trans. D. Shefer-Vanson; Bible and Literature Series 17; Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 23–45, on the distinction in biblical narrative between “overt” and “covert” narration.

⁵¹ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* 201.

And it is at just the point of accessing weak implicatures that relevance theory proves beneficial to a biblical interpreter who is concerned to express a coherence amongst the intention of the text, the response to the text, and the interaction between the two. If a strong implicature is explicitly the outcome of intention in the creation of a text, such weak implicatures as there may be are discovered as the text is responded to. Whether the weak implicatures are part of the original intent of the author or not, they are inherent in the nature of the text in question. The concept of inference developed by relevance theory is thus able, among other things, to provide us with a snapshot of the interaction of text and reader, intention and response. As Stephen Pattenmore reminds us, “[T]here is no sharp dividing line between strong implications of an utterance which are clearly intended by the speaker and weak implications for which the hearer ‘takes the entire responsibility.’”⁵²

VI. RELEVANCE THEORY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The application of these possibilities explicitly to biblical interpretation is yet in its infancy and is attracting most interest as far as I can tell in Bible translation circles.⁵³ Certainly no methodology can answer all the hermeneutical questions, and there are some that relevance theory does not address. The interaction of truth claims and relevance, for example, remains problematic. Presumably *Mein Kampf* achieved plenty of contextual effect in 1930s Germany. Although Sperber and Wilson address this particular issue in their revised edition of *Relevance*, they are forced to concede the fact that relevance theory is not finally about what is true, but about “cognitive efficiency” in communication.⁵⁴ Apart from the necessary note that communication as a phenomenon is not merely cognitive, it is acknowledged that the process of interpretation is concerned with truth claims as well as how they are communicated and received. Nevertheless, relevance theory is helpful in its recognition of both intention and contextual response in the process of communication. It therefore challenges any hermeneutical approach that either denies the possibility of communicative intent or denies the importance of non-literal implication. I would argue therefore that attention to the concept of relevance and a corresponding focus on the link between intention and response give rise to a notion of hermeneutics that is relational and thus is likely to allow for truth claims in its process.

⁵² Pattenmore, *People of God*, chap. 2. Note that Pattenmore appears here to be using “implication” in the sense of “implicature,” although we have distinguished earlier between the two.

⁵³ E.-A. Gutt, *Relevance Theory: A Guide to Successful Communication in Translation* (Dallas/New York: SIL/UBS, 1992), is a proponent of its possibilities while E. R. Wendland, “On the Relevance of ‘Relevance Theory’ for Bible Translation,” *Bible Translator* 47 (1996) 126–37, is more cautious.

⁵⁴ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance* 263, say that their “notion of relevance has to do with considerations of cognitive efficiency, and the notion of cognitive efficiency cannot be divorced from that of truth. The function of a cognitive system is to deliver knowledge, not false beliefs.”

As a related but slightly different question, I acknowledge also that there remains work to be done on what Walter Moberly has called “the question of God in and through Scripture.”⁵⁵ How may relevance theory help the reader who comes to the text with a faith commitment to understand the enduring relevance of this particular ancient text? The work that has been done so far, including in this paper, has tended simply to assume the relevance of the biblical text rather than to examine it.⁵⁶ It would be productive, for example, to conduct a conversation between the concept of inferred relevance and Wolterstorff’s concept of “divine discourse” as worked out in his book of that title.

Those types of questions need to be answered. Yet, without implying that there are not other ways of achieving the same effect, I suggest that relevance theory permits progress to be made on the question addressed in this article, the question of intention and response in interpretation, and thus enables us to venture beyond the hermeneutical circle in the encounter with the Bible in three particular ways.

First, in a post-modern setting, it helps us to take context seriously alongside the expectation that the text that we are reading exercises a legitimate authority, however we might want to describe it. It does so in that it provides us with categories of thought that enable us to take seriously the very particularity of the biblical story without succumbing to an *a priori* suspicion of metanarrative that is characteristic of some contemporary hermeneutics.

Secondly, and as a related point, the category “relevance” encounters what Thiselton in his conversation with Robert Morgan calls the shift from the historical to the literary, which entails “the shift of focus away from past events and traditions as such to the impact of texts upon present day hearers and readers.”⁵⁷ In the face of this distinction Thiselton urges, not so much a concept of distinct paradigms, as “the welding together of a more comprehensive hermeneutical model.” Relevance theory requires us to take account of those “past events and traditions” for the part they play in the formation of intention in the text or author. With its focus on contextual effect and processing effort in the excavation of weak implicatures, it also supports the assumption that those “past events and traditions” call forth a contemporary response. In that respect the notion of relevance is well placed to assist in the formation of the “more comprehensive hermeneutical model” that Thiselton calls for.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith, A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (CSCD 5; Cambridge: University Press, 2000) 45. Note also his comments on the “enduring significance of the story” (pp. 64–69).

⁵⁶ See the reference above to Detweiler, “What is a Sacred Text?”

⁵⁷ A. C. Thiselton, “On Models and Methods. A Conversation with Robert Morgan,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions, Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (ed. D. J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl and S. E. Porter; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 340–41.

⁵⁸ Thiselton, “On Models and Methods” 341, further describes his model as one “which seeks to draw on the strength of each approach while avoiding its distinctive weaknesses.” See also A. C. Thiselton, “Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological

Thirdly, and related to the two above, it provides one means of encountering the myriad ideological readings of the Bible, most of which rely on a hermeneutic of suspicion of some sort. There are times when suspicion is an appropriate response to the biblical text. It is appropriate in the face of the "gaps" and "ambiguities," as Sternberg characterizes them, in so much of biblical narrative.⁵⁹ This feature asks for a questioning reader. It is also the case that an honest interpreter must be appropriately suspicious of his or her own ideologies. But there are also times when a response of suspicion goes well beyond that envisaged by the intention of the text. The relevance concern for the recognition of weak implicatures as an outcome of sensitivity to both textual intent and personal context provides some clues towards the responsible exercise of suspicion in the interpretive task. There is correspondingly less likelihood of reader responsibility becoming unrestrained privilege.

In short, relevance theory provides one tool for holding together in a creative way both intention and response as partners in the hermeneutical endeavor rather than as rivals restlessly orbiting each other in the hermeneutical circle. As a model of communication it is particularly responsive to a text which, at least for those amenable to the possibility that the Bible is a vehicle of divine discourse, in the nature of the case is explicitly communicative in intent while at the same time calling forth a massive processing effort on the part of its readers. In terms of my opening autobiographical remarks, it also furnishes a hermeneutical category with which to respond to the sometimes competing demands of the contexts in which I read the biblical text.

Hermeneutics," in R. Lundin, C. Walhout and A. C. Thiselton, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 156, and his protest at "the *fundamentally a-historical viewpoint of reader-response theory*, in contrast to the genuine engagement with horizons of expectation located within an on-going historical tradition of textual effects . . ." (emphasis original).

⁵⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, chap. 6 on "Gaps, Ambiguity and the Reading Process," wherein he highlights the "gap-filling" responsibility of the reader.