

THE PRESENCE OF GOD QUALIFYING OUR NOTIONS OF GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION: GENESIS 3:15 AS A TEST CASE

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What is grammatical-historical interpretation? Do we know as well as we think we know? For many scholars, grammatical-historical interpretation means an objective procedure for determining the meaning intended by the human author through an examination of the language of the text and its historical circumstances. But just how objective can we make it? Objectivity, in the eyes of many, implies at least two conditions. First, by rule-based procedures we can weigh the information from language and historical circumstances, and on the basis of that information construct a probable total meaning. Second, the meaning in question belongs to the human author. The divine author can effectively be left out of consideration until after the analysis is complete.

I wish to question this second assumption concerning the elimination of the divine author. And questioning it leads logically to revising our estimation of other assumptions as well.

I. THE CONVENIENCE OF ELIMINATING THE DIVINE

In our present environment the scholarly world would no doubt find it convenient to eliminate the divine author. For if one must debate about the divine author, there is little hope for consensus about meaning. To begin with, not everyone in the scholarly world accepts that God was involved at all as a divine author of Scripture. According to the atheist there is no God to supply the involvement. According to the deist he exists but is uninvolved.

Even if God is somehow involved, the nature of his involvement might vary. Orthodox thinking about the Bible has confessed over the centuries that the Bible is the word of God. But there are modern alternatives. According to one kind of liberal thinking about inspiration, God gives the human authors inspiring thoughts. But they then mix those thoughts with their own and come out with a product that shows God's influence to varying, unpredictable degrees. In neo-orthodoxy the words of Scripture are a witness

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to Christ and to God in Christ. But only indirectly, in the moment of a divine encounter, do they somehow become the word of God.

And what God (or god) are we talking about? The rise of process theology and open theism has made us more aware of the fact that questions about the character of God must be confronted. And if our conceptions of God differ, our assumptions about the meanings that he generates may also differ. Thus any hope for a scholarly consensus about the meaning of a particularly text would appear to vanish.

We need also to be aware of the question of the historical veracity of Scripture. Evangelicals rightly care about maintaining the claim for the reality of the events about which Scripture testifies. It is of the essence of Christianity that certain events, like the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, happened as real events in time and space (1 Cor 15:1–20; in contrast to Bultmann's idea of mythological expression of existential truths, some post-modernists' exclusive attention to "story"). One would then like to keep the discussion of historical veracity open for a wide inspection. The events themselves really happened, rather than being generated merely as religious feelings among people with the right kind of subjective faith. Hence, the Bible as a testimony to the events must be open in some sense to inspection by those who do not yet believe.

II. FAILURE OF THE ARGUMENT FROM HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY

Despite the attractions of these arguments, I do not think they hold water. Consider first the concern for the historical reality of the events. The events are indeed real. But it does not follow that events fraught with stupendous religious significance are equally accessible to all human beings, regardless of the religious condition of those human beings. The Bible itself informs us that ever since the fall of Adam humanity has been in a state of rebellion against God. Only through God overcoming human resistance do people come to him: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

In particular, if an unbeliever does not acknowledge that the Bible is the word of God, he does not give its testimony the proper weight, the weight that it deserves in virtue of the trustworthiness of its Author. Hence, believers and unbelievers will inevitably differ in their reasoning about the historicity of various events.

Yes, an unbeliever could come to admit that parts of the NT are generally reliable. He could then come to admit that the testimony concerning the resurrection of Christ carries serious weight. After considering some of the alternative explanations, he could decide that the resurrection is probable. That in turn might lead to a serious consideration of the religious claims of Jesus and of the NT. In this sense, the evidence is there for anyone who would care to examine it. And the evidence can be instrumental in leading to religious faith.

But unbelievers also have many ways of escaping through assumptions about history and assumptions about the supernatural. If they really want

to do so, they dismiss the Bible out of hand. There is not going to be consensus about how to evaluate the testimony.

Moreover, even those who may be more sympathetic toward an overall historical reliability in the NT are not treating the evidence fairly. General reliability is not the same as the reliability that the Bible deserves. An agreement on historical methodology concerning biblical testimony is possible only if the unbeliever becomes a believer. And this will happen only through the presence of the Spirit, speaking in Scripture. Trying to eliminate the divine author means trying to eliminate the only source through which genuine objectivity and genuine consensus could actually arrive!

III. FAILURE OF THE ARGUMENT SEARCHING FOR SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

The argument that we must eliminate God in order to achieve consensus about meaning also fails. In fact, it fails for two complementary reasons. First, consensus about meaning does not arrive even if we do eliminate God. The Enlightenment hoped that secular Reason would serve as an adjudicator that would bring consensus where religious unity of mind had failed. More than anything else, the Enlightenment triumph of Reason stood behind the progress of the historical-critical tradition and its investigation of Scripture.

So, did the historical-critical tradition bring consensus, at least within its own gates? Far from it. Even within the tradition one heard increasing restlessness, as people began to realize that, apart from a few fleeting cases of "assured results of modern criticism," the critical tradition multiplied hypotheses indefinitely. We now know by sad experience that the goddess of Reason does not lead to an increasing body of assured results about the Bible. We know also, from the disruptive forces of postmodernism, that Reason itself was a false goddess, who was subtly reconstructed by her worshipers in each eddy of critical subtraditions.¹

The second failure in eliminating God is that the argument simply presupposes what it needs to prove. The mere desire to eliminate God cannot eliminate the facts of authorship any more than a human desire to eliminate Paul the apostle could change the authorship of the Letter to the Romans. Thinking does not make it so. The alleged practical convenience of eliminating God does not eliminate his authorship or his presence in the biblical text.

IV. OBJECTIVITY IS A GIFT FROM GOD

Finally, the desire to eliminate God for the sake of objectivity misconstrues both the nature of God and the nature of objectivity. First, consider the nature of objectivity. God is the giver of objectivity. He gives human beings the ability to rise above their prejudices. True objectivity aspires to

¹ See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

know the truth. And truth is from God. Truth that we come to know comes from God.

In addition, those who suppress the presence of God typically misconstrue what that presence would mean. They suppose that God's presence would automatically lead to a situation in which the reader would *only* consider what the text means here and now. God would be speaking immediately to the reader in a kind of existential encounter that ignores anything that the text ever meant in the past.

But that conclusion does not follow. In the first place, the presence of God would mean a growth in humility, which is one of the prerequisites for sound interpretation. And the God who is present now is sovereign over history. As redeemer of human beings he cared for the people long ago. Hence, a proper reckoning with the character of God leads to an affirmation of and interest in what God was saying and doing long ago to people back then and there. It does not short-circuit the process of interpretation and wipe out the sense of history—history which after all God governs to his planned goal.

We may illustrate this point by using Gen 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." What does Gen 3:15 mean? Does it make any difference if we reckon with God's presence in addressing the text to us? If an ordinary layman is informed by the NT, he can easily read the verse as a direct statement about Christ's defeat of Satan, as described in Col 2:15; Heb 2:14; Rev 19:11–21; 20:10; and Luke 11:17–23. He sees in it what the NT teaches. He knows that God had in mind the defeat of Satan by Christ when he originally caused Gen 3:15 to be written. Therefore, that is the "meaning."

Some people are bothered by such a process for several reasons. For one thing, it could potentially lead to arbitrary readings. Whatever meaning someone claims that the Spirit has shown him becomes normative. A modern reader belonging to the Unification Church, the cult of the messianic figure Sun Myung Moon, could read the text as prophesying the coming of Rev. Moon rather than the coming of Jesus Christ. But such aberrant interpretations can be avoided by genuine submission to God, the God of Scripture, whose scriptural instruction in the total canon guides and provides a context for the interpretation of any one verse. The principle of having the clear interpret the unclear also has a role.

People may also be bothered by the fact that a Christological interpretation of Gen 3:15 appears to ignore the original context with Adam and Eve, and the context of the Book of Genesis addressed to the OT Israelites. But again this problem can receive a solution within the context of divine authorship. If one appreciates the greatness of God, one also begins to appreciate that God has a plan for history that encompasses Adam and Eve and the Israelites. So within the total plan of God one then learns to affirm not only that God teaches what one can see when one looks back from the NT, but also that God teaches at a more elementary level what Adam and Eve and the Israelites might grasp before the coming of the NT.

So the affirmation of the presence of God implies not the end of rational reflection, but beginning rational reflection within the context of obedience

and submission to God. It implies not the end of meaningful historical appreciation, but its genuine beginning, because God as the ruler of history is also the source of its meaning.

V. THE PRESENCE OF GOD AS AUTHOR

But we are still left with the question of just how God is present as divine author in a biblical text. We can acknowledge a general principle of “organic inspiration,” in which God through his providence brings it about that the human authors are just the people that God designed them to be, and that God then fully uses all their human faculties in the process of thinking and writing. Within the broad field of organic inspiration there can then still be notable variations. Luke writes like a careful historian. John, the author of Revelation, receives spectacular visions. Abraham Kuyper, observing some of the diversity, classifies inspiration into four “forms”—lyric, chokmatic, prophetic, and apostolic—corresponding roughly to what happens with Psalms, Proverbs, OT prophetic books, and NT epistles.² We could if we wished refine and further subdivide.

VI. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AS MODEL

Without denying this variety let us consider a more fundamental issue. Can we rightly conceive of the Bible and biblical interpretation in the way that puts divine authorship at the center rather than at the periphery? Consider the first record of a canonical deposit, namely the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were first delivered by the audible voice of God from Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–20). Then God wrote them with his own finger on stone (Exod 32:16; 34:1). The people could not bear to hear the audible voice, so God made Moses a mediator of his word (Exod 20:18–21; Deut 5:22–33). God later told Moses to write many other words and these were placed beside the ark (Deut 31:24–46). The Ten Commandments had already been placed inside the ark (Exod 25:16). Thus we have provision for the nucleus of a growing canon.³

Technically speaking, for the Ten Commandments there is no human author. For the oral delivery of the Ten Commandments to Israel we have simply the direct divine voice. With respect to the written form the finger of God produced the writing on stone. So what becomes of the typical formula that we are supposed to focus only on the human author? Clearly it does not work. Focusing on the human author alone violates the essential character of the Ten Commandments.

But, of course, the Ten Commandments as we now have them are written down as part of the larger scrolls of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and these do involve a human hand. Does the presence of the human hand negate the

² Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 520–44.

³ See Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 27–44.

presence of God? Clearly not if we look carefully at the exposition in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Moses is placed as an intermediary, but that does not interfere with the power or authority of God to address the people of Israel and to require complete obedience. The original Ten Commandments, far from being a wild exception, become the original model for understanding what will happen later through Moses. And the instruction in Deuteronomy anticipates that after Moses God will raise up further prophets (Deut 18:15–18). Thus the prophets, and by implication all later scriptural writers, enter into a pattern already established with Moses.

Now all this should be fairly obvious. But what are the implications? Ultimately we know that Moses' mediatorial role is only a type. The final mediator of the divine voice is Christ himself, the final prophet (Acts 3:22–26; Heb 1:1–3), God and man in one Person. Therefore it is legitimate to use the analogy with the person of Christ in order to show how we can think about the relation of divine and human authors. Orthodoxy says that the Second Person of the Trinity became man, not by changing his divine nature, but by assumption of human nature. Remaining what he was he became what he was not. Similarly, God speaks to human beings by remaining God and speaking through human beings whom he summons as instruments.

But modern evangelical scholars in dialogue with the historical-critical tradition, and in dialogue with traditions skeptical of biblical history, are tempted to compromise this picture. In practice, we may instead have the equivalent of an adoptionist view of inspiration. God looks down at what various people are saying. Those words he approves he "adopts" as his own, and they gain the stamp of his approval. But their meaning is merely human meaning. We then do obtain a univocal human meaning, but still such that the human meaning is the meaning of God. But the cost is an adoptionist model at odds with the picture at Mount Sinai.

A second view might be called kenotic. In inspiration God accommodates himself to the human instrument. He does what can be done given the limitations of a human being, but is careful never to go beyond the limits of strictly finite human functioning. Again, the meaning is strictly the human meaning at the cost of a heterodox model of the relation of the divine and the human.⁴

Neither the adoptionist nor the kenotic model harmonizes with Christology. But they also do not harmonize with the detailed texture of OT texts. To begin with, they do not harmonize with the picture of Mount Sinai, where meaning originates in the most emphatic way from God himself. Nor do they fit the OT instances of long-range prophetic prediction, such as predictions of the coming of the Messiah. Such long-range prophetic prediction is impossible to normal unaided human beings. In OT times the hearer or reader of such predictions has only two obvious choices. On the one hand, if the prediction comes merely as a human-generated meaning, then it is only

⁴ See my further discussion of the relation of divine and human meaning in "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241–79.

a speculative possibility, not a real promise to be believed. On the other hand, if the prediction arises preeminently from God's intentionality, it can be believed. To receive such a prediction as it ought to be received tacitly requires reckoning with divine intention as something greater than what is merely human.

The prophetic expression, "Thus says the LORD," should also steer us away from reckoning in terms of a merely human intentionality. The expression directly indicates that what follows is not to be treated as merely a question of the human prophet's own normal ideas—even if those ideas have been providentially controlled by God. It cautions the reader not to think merely in terms of what he already knows about his neighbor Isaiah or Micah.

Genesis 3:15 has a similar flavor. It is introduced as part of God's direct speech to the serpent with no mention of a human intermediary (Gen 3:14). The Book of Genesis as a literary whole does have a human author. But that human author is inviting us in Gen 3:15 not merely to focus on his human interpretation of Gen 3:15 but on the fact that God said it. The human writer of Genesis need not have totally understood what God said. All that is required is that he faithfully recorded it. So we are pushed by the human written product to pay attention to the divine source of meaning.

Finally, consider the broader case where a human being hears the word of God. Once he recognizes that it is indeed the word of God, he can no longer ignore the presence of God. It is not psychologically or religiously normal for him to ignore God in favor of an *exclusive* focus on the human author. Because of the majesty and awesomeness of God, the godly reaction is to have God himself and his speaking in focus. Because God commissions and empowers the human author, the hearer can still, within that God-centered focus, take time to think about how God is intending to use the human spokesman with all his God-ordained capacities and gifts.⁵ A focus on the human spokesman is thus not in itself wrong. But the overall framework is God-centered, not man-centered, because that is instinctively the attitude that a godly person takes toward the holiness of God, as that holiness is manifested in the word that God speaks.

The principle applies to the Book of Genesis. When the reader recognizes that it has divine source, he naturally pays attention *preeminently* to that divine source. He asks, "What does God mean?" "What does he mean not merely by giving the promise to Adam and Eve, but by recording it for me as well? God must be indicating that in some way it is pertinent to me."

VII. THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I would suggest that church history up until the rise of modern skepticism confirms this practice. Within the ancient church, the Antiochenes disputed with the Alexandrians about how best to find the meaning of OT texts,

⁵ See Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture."

whether by allegory or by *theoria*. The Reformers disputed with the Roman Catholics about the use of allegory and the literal sense. But these disputes were carried on within an environment where everyone was concerned with God's intentionality, not just human intentionality. The Reformers and the Antiochenes, the people whom we typically identify as more literal in their approach, found Christ in the OT in types as well as in direct predictions. They saw the OT as a book in which God continues to speak today by addressing us concerning the salvation in Christ and its implications.

And in this conviction they were simply following the apostle Paul: "For whatever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4); "Now these things took place as examples *for us*, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor 10:6); "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down *for our instruction*, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Paul proclaims that the OT is the word of God addressing not just the immediate contemporaries but intended by God for all future ages, including especially and even pre-eminently the NT Christians "on whom the end of the ages has come." The conviction about divine address carries over naturally into a hermeneutical practice in which we seek preeminently what it is that God says to us now, even if it was imperfectly understood by the human author of past ages.

This focus on God's speech is shared not only by the pre-modern Christian church but by pre-modern Judaism as well. One can see it in rabbinic Judaism, in Philo, in the Qumran writings, and in various sects of Judaism. The modern scholarly spirit does not live in this ancient atmosphere. Rather it objects to that atmosphere by pointing out that the door is then opened to aberrations. And indeed many aberrations did arise. One can imagine that one is hearing the voice of God in an idea that is generated by the text when in fact one is still going astray and blind. Someone imagines, for example, that the seed of the woman is Sun Myung Moon rather than Jesus Christ. Similarly, in ancient times, the Sadducees, according to Jesus, did not know either "the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt 22:29). So, proposes the modern scholar, the remedy is to be found in the objective rigor of a grammatical-historical interpretation that focuses solely on the human author.

But that is not what Jesus implies in addressing the Sadducees. The problem with the Sadducees is not that they lacked intellectual acuity or intellectual discipline or hermeneutical rigor or information about the contents of the OT. Their problem was that they did not know the power of God. Or, to put a point on it, they did not know God as they should. And not knowing God the divine author they failed to have a route to understand his mind as expressed in the Scriptures. Their problem was spiritual.

Much the same can be said for the followers of Sun Myung Moon or other heretics. The apostle Paul teaches that the fundamental problem is spiritual darkness due to bondage in the kingdom of Satan: "God may perhaps grant them [opponents] repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do

his will” (2 Tim 2:25–26); “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (1 Tim 4:1–2). “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4).

Only through knowing God does one find humility. And only through knowing God in humility does one find oneself in a situation in which one can listen patiently for what God was doing long ago through human authors, and thereby use the insights that we associate with grammatical-historical interpretation. But grammatical-historical interpretation cannot serve as the fundamental remedy for interpretive confusion about the Bible. Look at the historical-critical tradition. It is determined to use grammatical-historical interpretation. And the result is a multiplication of options. Historical-critical interpretation remains in darkness about the true import of the very Scriptures that it studies so minutely. One can repeat concerning historical-critical tradition what Jesus said of the Sadducees, “You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” The remedy is spiritual, now as always. The remedy is repentance and turning to God, through which one knows God and then begins to hear aright God speaking in Scripture.

The church through the ages, and even Judaism through the ages, has known this. But modern skepticism and the Enlightenment have changed the circumstances. And I now wonder whether evangelical scholarship, for the sake of dialogue with the mainstream of scholarship, has absorbed the influence of the Enlightenment. In practice do we have a model of objectivistic grammatical-historical interpretation of human meaning, a model that is at odds not only with the tradition of the church, not only with the fact of divine authorship, but at odds with God himself, and with his purposes for his inscripturated word? The wheel revolves full circle back to us, and we hear ominously echoing, “You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

Other evangelicals may already have become disillusioned about the influence of the Enlightenment and now seek a remedy in postmodernism. But postmodernism perpetuates the problem of the Enlightenment by rejecting the presence of God. Typically, it tries to confine itself to a horizontal analysis of human readers embedded in human societies and human interpretive traditions. In doing so it denies the possibility of divine revelation and the accessibility of real, solid truth as a gift from God. In this respect it has not really broken with modernity’s systematic blindness to divine presence and divine speech.⁶ So let us take seriously the presence of God both

⁶ Since the Bible is the word of God, it provides a *foundation* for true belief and lived certainty concerning God and his message to us. But this foundation is not *foundationalist*, because the believer does not receive it through autonomous power and self-possessed perfect purity of insight, but through the grace of the Holy Spirit, who in his ministry gives truth to the humble and needy who trust in God through Christ. All the while believers remain finite and contaminated by the remnants of sin. Neither foundationalists nor anti-foundationalists seem to have a clue about the Holy Spirit.

in the giving of Scripture and in its modern reception. How will it affect our hermeneutical approach?

VIII. LIMITS ON UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN AUTHOR

God in his providence does take up the human author. He speaks to people back then and there in the past, and that fact can now be the basis for our receiving light from reflection on the past and its environment. But there are notable limitations. God created each human author in his own image. We cannot expect to understand man in general, nor the human authors in their particularity, without reckoning with the presence of God in human life. "In him we live and move and have our being," Paul reminds us (Acts 17:28).

What were Adam and Eve like when they heard Gen 3:15? What were the Israelites like? What was the writer of Genesis like? Were they merely complex, animated biological machines? Did they live merely on the surface? Then perhaps in Gen 3:15 they saw only an explanation for the age-long human fear of serpents and a promise of continued domination over them. Nothing in the immediate context forces us to see in this verse anything other than an observation about literal serpents and their literal offspring. Estimating the nature of human nature figures into interpretation.

The rise of pluralism and postmodern reflection on pluralism have made more evident what should have been evident all along—that different religions and different worldviews include different conceptions of the very nature of humanity. One's view of God, or one's substitute for God in the form of various mental idols, has its influence on one's view of man. And from there it trickles into judgments about what one can or cannot rightly expect from human authors.

Modern secularism assumes that the human mind operates in normality. But it is in fact corrupted by sin (Eph 4:17–19). Secularism also assumes that the mind is autonomous, insulated from the thoughts of other intelligences except when we encounter those intelligences through the medium of speech or the printed word. But that is simply not true, as the phenomenon of demon possession illustrates. Even apart from actual demon possession the Bible indicates that Satan and his agents exercise a startling influence: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). The entire secular model of autonomous independence in the mind is actually a radically inadequate model.

If such is true we really understand very little of the capabilities of the human mind in an evil direction. But, by symmetry, neither do we understand the capabilities of the human mind in a positive direction. Human beings sometimes think extraordinary, surprising thoughts, and dream extraordinary dreams. The furniture of your own dreams is sufficient to prove that you know very little about what could come into your head or where it comes from. Even within states of consciousness that seem quite ordinary intelligent people can sometimes commit stupid logical fallacies without observing

what they are doing. What accounts for these gaps in our thought? And what accounts for creative thoughts? Many times they seem, as far as conscious observations go, to come out of nowhere.

The human authors of Scripture are in one respect ordinary human beings. But in another respect they are not ordinary. They operate under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is God, he exercises more extraordinary capabilities than do the demons. What are human minds capable of when under the extraordinary influence of the Holy Spirit? We really do not know. And it is this kind of mind that God employs in writing the Scripture. How do we control what is or is not possible? We cannot. Rather, as scholars, we simply pretend that ancient human authors were pedestrian, that they can hardly do a thing that goes beyond what our petty version of rationality could potentially explain. Is the worship of Reason alive and well among evangelical scholars when they attempt to calculate the limits of thought in what they read?

IX. LIMITS ON HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

We also encounter limits in understanding the ancient historical environments from which the writings came. We are indeed better off than previous generations because of the gradual accumulation of texts and artifacts from ancient Near Eastern civilizations. We continue to learn about the Graeco-Roman environment and the Jewish environment of the NT. But there is much that we do not know because of limitations in the surviving evidence. And, given our limitations on understanding the human mind, there are also limitations on understanding other cultures.

But in the area of history we confront extra mysteries. Let us consider what we mean by the *historical* part of grammatical-historical interpretation. We look at the historical environment. But how broad an environment? God sees and plans beyond the chronological limitations of a single human lifetime. In his words and in his deeds within OT times, he was already working on our behalf, as the above quotations from Paul testify. It is therefore a mistake to consider a text of the OT as if it could be isolated like a dead butterfly within a historical time-span of a few years.

Human beings made in the image of God are themselves capable of dreaming of the distant future and the distant past. We can think God's thoughts after him. How much more when human beings are inspired by the Spirit! Did Adam and Eve worry only about the fact that they had been cast out of the Garden of Eden? Did they worry only about the next month's effort to get enough food? Did they worry only about the next hundred years? What about the Israelite readers of Genesis? We do not know how far ahead they may sometimes have looked in their imaginations.

It would be convenient if OT writings were wholly preoccupied with immediate crises, such as how to escape Philistine plundering or how to determine who succeeds David as king. That would help give us as scholars the control that we think we need for objectivity. But in fact the practice of narrow historical focus amounts to a methodological mistake. Such isolated

focus on the immediate is not how human nature works. And is it certainly not how human nature works when it works under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as Paul indicates, has us in mind as well as the original hearers.

But now what becomes of the historical aspect of grammatical-historical interpretation? I claim that it remains radically undefined. One can focus on people back then and there. But one can never isolate that focus from broader questions. And those broader questions ultimately engage the meaning of the entirety of history. To a sensitive Israelite reader, the enmity between the two seeds or two offsprings in Gen 3:15 can suggest a principal conflict that extends ultimately to cosmic dimensions and long historical time periods. Any one piece of history is ultimately intelligible only as part of the plan of God for all of history. One must have the mind of God in order even to begin to reckon with any piece intelligibly.⁷

In principle, Adam and Eve could understand that the promise in Gen 3:15 pointed into the distant future. They could have realized that God had a plan whose depths and details they could not yet see. They could understand that they did not understand. That is, they did not understand “the meaning” of God *in full*. They could grasp that full understanding includes the entire plan of God. Adam and Eve themselves, if transported by a thought experiment into the present time, might be impatient with the fussiness of scholars who insist on long and elaborate discourses on “original meaning” while they virtually ignore God. Adam and Eve might justly point out that the real goal, which God already began to open up to them, is to understand God in full. The scholar who focuses wholly on original meaning fails to grasp that part of the original meaning is the implication that the original meaning proclaims its own mystery, insufficiency, and anticipatory character. The message includes an invitation to wait for and search out that fullness of God’s plan that the message announces in seed form.

And then, when Adam and Eve heard us tell of Christ’s redemption, they might delightedly insist that this was the real meaning all along. They would laugh at modern fanatics for grammatical-historical interpretation, who foolishly thrust this richer meaning from them in a desire to be historical. These fanatics are historical in a sense without understanding either Adam or Eve, or human nature, or history as it really has significance according to the plan of God.

X. LIMITS ON GRAMMATICAL, LINGUISTIC UNDERSTANDING

Do similar observations hold for the *grammatical* aspect of grammatical-historical interpretation? We are here dealing with language. And what is language? Do we really understand it? In the twentieth century advances in symbolic logic, structural linguistics, and translation theory have given us further tools to aid understanding. But these tools also have their limitations,

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963).

and to some extent may have been made possible only by radical reductionistic assumptions that entered when the attempt was made to make the subject-matter rigorous.⁸

In Genesis 1 God speaks words of command to call the creatures into being. And, having created man, he speaks words of instruction to him, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). From the beginning language, far from being a mindless product of emergent evolution, serves not only human communication but divine communication. Language is a gift that belongs not exclusively to man, but is shared by God and man. And John 1:1 goes further. By calling the Second Person of the Trinity "the Word" and including an allusion to Genesis 1, John indicates that language as we know it has its archetype in the very being of God. Language is incomprehensible, because God is incomprehensible in his trinitarian Being. The meaning of communication has its original in God himself. Meaning is not scientifically isolatable, as if only the creature and not the Creator were involved.

What would it be like for Adam and Eve? They would hear God's address to the serpent and the mention of the offspring of the serpent. Who is the serpent? It is the snake they see before them. But is that all? There can be depths in a reference like this. The literal serpent, because of his role in the temptation, embodies a particular example of the larger issue of evil and rebellion against God. Killing this particular serpent would not necessarily bring an end to sin. Adam and Eve could come to understand that God is making a promise concerning something much larger and deeper than this particular serpent alone. The language about the serpent functions both to point to this serpent and to point beyond it. And the meaning of God's statements will be illumined not merely by subsequent events but possibly by subsequent words that carry further explanation. The explanation will include explanation of what is the larger reality of evil behind the literal serpent. They may also include explanation of the larger reality of redemption alluded to in the expression concerning the offspring of the woman.

We may say that the linguistic communication from God carries a particular meaning because of particular words like "serpent," "offspring," "enmity," "bruise," and so on, and because of the particular grammatical combination of those words.⁹ But understanding a communication like this one does not consist merely in looking up the words in a dictionary and then putting them together in a particular order. We must attend to God's meaning. And God's meaning is not boxed in. Rather, it will become evident in the subsequent events and in the subsequent words of explanation. This early communication already evokes those later realities in anticipation.

One must avoid here a reductionistic approach to meaning. One must not reduce the meaning of a communicative act of God to the joint meanings

⁸ See Vern S. Poythress, "Truth and Fullness of Meaning: Fullness versus Reductionistic Semantics in Biblical Interpretation," *WTJ* 67 (2005) 211–27.

⁹ Or the equivalents in Hebrew or in the language in which God originally spoke to Adam and Eve.

of dictionary words or to their grammatical construction. Thinking and promising and anticipating are going on here. One attends to discourse meaning through grammar and through words. But one misses the point if one attends solely to the grammar and the individual words.

Our modern standard label for rigorous interpretation is “grammatical-historical” interpretation. The first of the two adjectival terms is “grammatical,” not “semantic,” much less “meaning-focused.” In natural languages “grammar” primarily denotes an apparently finite, intellectually analyzable system of rules about constructing words and sentences from simpler components. Grammar is limited—but meaning is not. We use the limited resources of grammar. But on the level of meaning we talk about everything under the sun. Meaning is so rich and complex as to be virtually intractable in comparison with grammar. The label “grammatical” may be used as a synecdoche to stand for the whole. But I fear that, as a label, it can also support the illusion that meaning can be “scientifically” mastered in the same way that grammar apparently can.

The history of structural linguistics shows a whole series of attempts to avoid the full complexities of meaning by various simplifications and reductions in order to establish a field that would be more rigorously tractable. Benefits and insights have resulted. But in the process it is easy to lose sight of the fact that understanding human communication includes understanding references in the world. Reference is usually excluded from internal professional linguistic analysis, for the obvious reason that it is scientifically intractable. And reference is not the only intractable problem. The functions of language in the larger world are richer than what we capture in dictionaries or grammars or discussions of reference.¹⁰ The language of promise in Gen 3:15 evokes anticipation of more words and events. And these words and events, once behind us, we use to see into what God all along had referred to in Gen 3:15.

XI. LIMITS ON UNDERSTANDING READERS

Finally, we confront mystery when we consider readers. We observed earlier that the Holy Spirit is present to inspire the human biblical writers. His presence brings incalculabilities about what human writers may think and imagine. By contrast with the writers, human readers are neither inspired nor infallible. But the Holy Spirit works understanding in them in what theologians call “illumination.” When we are reading the Bible, do we control our own thoughts perfectly? No, because blasphemous thoughts may peak out at us in spite of our general conscious intention. Where do creative ideas come from? What happens when a passage virtually leaps off the page and seems to address a modern reader vigorously, directly, overwhelmingly? What happens, for example, when a layman reads Gen 3:15 and sees as if by immediate intuition that Christ is the seed of the woman, who crushed Satan by his crucifixion and resurrection? Is this the meaning of the text?

¹⁰ See Poythress, “Truth and Fullness of Meaning.”

We must admit that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit when we are hearing the voice of our own desires or even a demonic voice (1 Tim 4:1–2). But then are we to go to the opposite extreme and maintain that the Spirit is present only when we are most rationally aware of the sources of all our thoughts? Are we then deifying our rationalism?

Appeals to the direct voice of the Spirit, as if it were superior to the written text, generate heresies. But rationalism of a certain kind can also produce heresies. Many have rejected the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity because they claim it is irrational.

I think, then, that it is wisest to confess that we have rationality as a gift, but that it is a gift to complete persons who are more than rational. And we affirm that we do not perceive to the very bottom from where our ideas come. Yes, we hope that they come from the text. But the text, by processes of association, and by processes even more mysterious, gives rise to thoughts of very diverse kinds, not all of which were “in” the text in any obvious way.

If one text evokes thoughts in harmony with the direct teaching of another text that is not immediately present to us the harmony we see is one we do not invent. God knew it before we knew it. And if he knew it it would seem that he designed the texts such that together with the operations of our mind and the operations of the Spirit they could and did lead to our perceiving the harmony and the connection that we now perceive. So God intended from the beginning that such should be one effect of this text. And if God intended it, it is an aspect of the meaning. And we may infer that the Holy Spirit has had a role in bringing the meaning to our attention. God is present today with his word, not only to bring to our attention obvious ancient meanings, but to bring to our attention the harmonies and the connections that he brings into our minds for the first time. We have indeed lost autonomous control of our own minds. But then we never had it in the first place.

Thus when the layman sees in Gen 3:15 that Christ is the seed of the woman who crushed Satan he is seeing what the Spirit intended him to see. That is part of the total import of the text as intended by God. The scholar does not control this process.

XII. HARDENING READERS

The Parable of the Sower suggests not only that the word of God can bear copious fruit in the mind and the life. It also suggests that the word of God can fail to bear fruit. Not all hearts are receptive soil. And if not, the true meaning of the word of God remains in part concealed from them. Their hearts are hard. And they may even become further hardened as they hear, by analogy with Pharaoh. God gives the word “so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand” (Mark 4:12). For those who resist his word God can still be present in darkening the mind: “Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth

but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess 2:12). Believers do not control their minds because the Holy Spirit is present to enlighten. Neither do unbelievers control their minds, because God is present to darken—or to enlighten, if perchance they come to know the truth (2 Cor 4:4–6).

XIII. SCHOLARLY RESISTANCE

Most of the scholarly world does not accept the full extent of the mysteries in biblical interpretation. Why not? There are various reasons. Let me focus on two. First, we scholars, like other sinners, may lack humility. The Spirit may even have worked great humility in other areas of our lives. But the intellect may be the last stronghold. It is a precious gift of God and we will not give it up, both for our own sake and for the sake of benefiting the Christian community. The community needs us and our intellect in order to straighten it out and move it forward. But you see how these truths can become a subtle cover for a sense of superiority. We desire to seek God and to love him. But that desire covers a desire to achieve superiority in understanding both by one's own intellectual mastery of the Bible and one's demonstration of that mastery before the rest of the scholarly world, including that large portion of it that does not reckon with divine authorship.

Second, if we are in a dialogue with the scholarly world, what would it mean to acknowledge the presence of God in that environment of dialogue? Acknowledging God's presence leads logically to acknowledging the need for spiritual purity in order to stand in his presence. We need hermeneutical redemption.¹¹ And that brings us right up against the foolishness of the gospel: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:21, 27–29). In a scholarly environment we may rightly wonder whether bringing up the issue of God's presence will simply close the dialogue, because we have shown ourselves to be utterly foolish by the standards of this world (1 Cor 1:26; 2:6; 3:19).

XIV. POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVISM AND UNCERTAINTY

So we must reject modern autonomous rationalism. Do we then follow post-modernism in the opposite direction and become champions of an autonomous irrationalism? Does humility mean that we can never really know the truth and must live in radical uncertainty? By no means. The parable of the talents is pertinent. You must use the truth that God gives you rather than burying it with a false humility as the excuse. You must stand boldly for the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. You must oppose heretics, even

¹¹ See Vern S. Poythress, "Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation," *WTJ* 50 (1988) 305–21.

as Paul and John did. You must bear the reproach of being thought to be a dangerous fanatic because you are certain that you hear the voice of God in Scripture, that you know God, and that you know the one way of salvation. That one way in its exclusiveness will be mightily resisted by the sophisticated postmodernist, who claims that one cannot ever really know truth, and cannot ever have complete certainty, and must always be “tolerant”—except that the postmodernist pronounces that the gospel of Christ cannot be the answer.¹²

XV. CONCLUSION

God as Sovereign is present with human authors, with the text of the Bible, and with the recipients. On all three fronts his presence is the one true foundation for the proper functioning of communication. On all three fronts his faithfulness gives hope for our understanding. God gives us access to genuine truth. But on all three fronts there is no such thing as mastery that evaporates mystery and succeeds in fully controlling meaning.

¹² Cornelius Van Til summed up the non-Christian point of view very aptly: “No one knows [non-Christian irrationalism], but you are wrong and I am right [non-Christian rationalism: whatever may be the case, the Christian position is radically wrong]” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* [1961] 68).