

DISPENSING WITH MERELY HUMAN MEANING:  
GAINS AND LOSSES FROM FOCUSING ON THE HUMAN  
AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATED BY ZEPHANIAH 1:2–3

VERN S. POYTHRESS\*

How important is it for biblical interpreters to focus on the human author and his intention? For many books of the Bible, we know little or nothing about the human author, except what we might tentatively infer from the text itself. We who are inerrantists say that we believe that Scripture has a divine author, and that we have come to know him. What gains are there in focusing on the human author whom we do not know?

People might list several benefits: (1) focus on the historical and social environment, as a context for the text; (2) reckoning with human capacity, the characteristics of human linguistic communication, and the limitations of human understanding; (3) reckoning on limited canon available at the time; (4) reckoning on the structural coherence of a single biblical book, written by a single human author.

All of these are indeed valuable benefits. But a robust conception of divine authorship and divine purpose leads to exactly the same benefits. In addition, focusing on the divine author leads to fewer interpretive problems, because problems are generated by what we do not know about an author.

We will use Zeph 1:2–3 to illustrate the difficulties. In the process, it may seem at times as if we are multiplying the uncertainties about human intentionality. But I believe we can have confidence on the other side of the uncertainties.

### I. THE HUMAN AUTHOR

Consider first what we know about the human author of the Book of Zephaniah. Who was Zephaniah? Zephaniah's paternity, given in Zeph 1:1, shows that he was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, presumably the same Hezekiah who was once king of Judah. Hezekiah was also the great-grandfather of Josiah king of Judah, during whose reign Zephaniah prophesied. In a broad sense, Zephaniah belonged to royalty, and he may have had special access and an honored position in the royal court. Or maybe not. He may have been out of favor or just ignored.

Nothing more is known about Zephaniah the son of Cushi. The Book of Zephaniah contains no personal information, other than what is found in Zeph 1:1. We know that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah king of Judah (640–609 BC), which gives us a rough location in time and space. But that is all.

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\* Vern Poythress is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, 2960 Church Road, Glenside, PA 19038.

Moreover, we do not actually know for sure whether Zephaniah personally composed the book that bears his name. Perhaps he did. But perhaps he entrusted the task to a faithful scribe, in a manner similar to Jeremiah's use of Baruch (Jer 36:4; cf. Rom 16:22). Or perhaps, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, some disciple or disciples of Zephaniah put the book together in its final form after his death. The Book of Zephaniah does not give details, one way or the other. The consequence is that we cannot be certain about such details.

Where now is the unique human author? The superscription, "The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah," indicates that the contents are substantially what Zephaniah received. But is the order and arrangement of the materials due directly to Zephaniah or partly to a scribe or a later disciple or disciples?

By raising these questions, I have no intention of disturbing our confidence in the Book of Zephaniah. I fully endorse the classical church doctrine of inspiration, which I believe is also the biblical doctrine of inspiration. The Book of Zephaniah, not just the oral words that the Lord earlier sent to Zephaniah, "is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). The reason we can know this is not because we can independently check out all the details about what roles Zephaniah himself or his scribe or disciples played in the composition of the book, but because of God's own testimony. This testimony includes the self-authentication of Scripture, the testimony of Jesus (Matt 5:17–18), and the testimony of other parts of Scripture, such as 2 Timothy's testimony to the divine authority of the OT. These arguments are, I trust, well known in evangelical circles, and I do not need to repeat them.<sup>1</sup>

My point, then, is that God's testimony gives us confidence in the divine authorship of the Book of Zephaniah, whether or not the final (autographic) text was personally composed by Zephaniah. We also know that Zephaniah as a true prophet spoke the word of the Lord during the time of Josiah. But we remain with considerable vagueness and unanswerable questions about the human author and/or scribe. Such a situation is not that uncommon, both with respect to many books of the OT and some in the NT. (The Four Gospels are anonymous, as is Hebrews. We know the names of the authors of James and Jude, but little more about them.)

In spite of our lack of information, modern scholarly interpreters are accustomed to devote considerable attention to the human author. Often they treat this procedure as distinct from attention to the divine author. In practice, they may even consider the human author in *isolation* from the divine author. Why? They expect to gain benefits that would not otherwise accrue. Let us consider these benefits one by one.

1. *Reckoning with social and historical circumstances.* First, interpreters are accustomed to think that a focus on the human author helps us by telling us to pay at-

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking especially of B. B. Warfield's classic exposition, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948). We may add John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946) 1–54; and John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

tention to the social and historical circumstances in which the author wrote. For example, the Book of Zephaniah was written during the reign of Josiah king of Judah. Or was it? We already observed that we do not know exactly when it was written. If Zephaniah himself wrote it, he could have written it shortly after he received the prophetic message or the last portion of it. But it is also possible that he wrote the book near the end of his life. The superscription says only that the word of the Lord “came to” him in the days of Josiah. Presumably he delivered his messages during that time. But we do not know, from the text of Zephaniah, whether he initially delivered his prophecies orally, rather than in written form. The patterns with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos show that some of the prophets delivered messages orally. If Zephaniah delivered his messages orally, there might have been a gap in time between the oral delivery and the written composition. We do not know how long the gap might have been.

Moreover, we have no certainty as to whether Zephaniah lived for long afterwards. It is theoretically possible that he was a young man during Josiah’s reign, and that his prophecies were originally sent to him from the Lord near the end of Josiah’s reign. In that case, it is possible that he lived into the exilic period. He might have composed the book in its present written form as late as that. Or, as another alternative, the composition could have been undertaken under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by one of his disciples who outlived him. We do not know.

If the prophecy were originally delivered orally, the composer of the written form might have used memories of Zephaniah’s oral prophecies. He could also have used written notes or written records that contained portions of what is now the Book of Zephaniah. Perhaps there were several written records of individual prophecies, and when taken together they contained all of what is now the Book of Zephaniah. The composer obviously had an interest in the original prophecies. But if he—either Zephaniah or a disciple—was doing the final composition during the last days of the declining kingdom (say, in the time of king Zedekiah) or in the exile, his intentions in composing the book might vary.

One possible intention might be primarily to make a permanent historical record of what Zephaniah said, and to allow readers to appreciate its pertinence first of all to the days of Josiah. The focus would then be almost wholly on the days of Josiah.

Or, alternatively, the editor might be writing primarily with the desire to have people in Zedekiah’s time or in the time of the exile to take to heart the implications of Zephaniah’s words for *themselves* and for *their* later circumstances. For example, the sweeping away mentioned in Zeph 1:2–3 could be intended to function as a prophecy of the coming exile (cf. vv. 4–6). It was pertinent to the days of Josiah, because even though Josiah called the people to reform, the reform was insufficient (2 Kgs 23:26–27). The prophecy was still more pertinent to Zedekiah’s time, when the spiritual situation was spiraling down to a low point (2 Kgs 24:19–20), and when the exile was looming in the immediate future. The prophecy was pertinent to the time of the exile, both because it explains that the Lord’s hand was in the devastation, and because the prophecy is capable of even more climactic ful-

fillment at some future time when God will act decisively to cleanse the whole earth from all wickedness (cf. Isa 25:6–12; 65:17–25).

All in all, there are several possibilities.<sup>2</sup> We cannot confidently choose between them, because we do not have definitive information about the final composition of the Book of Zephaniah, nor do we have definite information about the intentions of the human author/editor to address his immediate contemporaries or future generations or both.<sup>3</sup> Thus, focus on the human author does not help us reach a stable interpretation, but leaves us with unanswerable questions, some of which affect the interpretation of Zeph 1:2–3 in a vital way.

2. *Pertinence of divine authorship.* Now suppose that we focus on the divine author. Some scholars might think that such a focus results in unstable meaning. According to their reasoning, if we just have a divine author, we may end up attributing to him whatever meaning we want. The meaning is whatever pops into our heads—and we may even allege that the Holy Spirit gave the meaning to us. This sense of instability or arbitrariness is probably one of the reasons why some interpreters avoid the divine author and want to think wholly in terms of the human author.

But two counterarguments exist, one from the side of the human author and the other from the side of the divine author. Consider first the human author. In a sense the same potential for instability or arbitrariness exists when we focus on the human author. There are many ways of conducting interpretation in an irresponsible and willful fashion. An interpreter may claim that what has popped into his head is the meaning of the *human* author. In reply, other interpreters appeal to textual evidence that makes his postulated meaning seem unlikely. But when we know nothing about the human author, who can tell for sure? Maybe the human author was a peculiar or mentally odd person, who had strange ideas and expressed them in strange ways.

Now let us turn to consider the divine author. The same textual evidences that interpreters use in weighing possibilities for human meanings are still there when we talk about divine meanings. The main difference in available information is that we know something about the divine author, and this knowledge (derived partly from many other passages of Scripture) assures us that God is not “peculiar” and is not communicating in the odd ways that might characterize some ill-adapted human beings.

The key principles to bear in mind with the divine author are that he is all-wise, and that he has a plan for all of history. As an aspect of working out his plan, he speaks to his people at particular times and places. Those speeches that he causes to be recorded in the canon are also addressed to future generations (Rom 15:4),

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 32–43.

<sup>3</sup> I leave to one side the further issues that are generated by speculation as to whether the books of the Minor Prophets received further editing when they were included in the “Book of the Twelve” (Hosea-Malachi).

as well as to the original generation, that is, the generation in which they were written down autographically.

Because God is all-wise, he takes into account social and historical circumstances when he communicates to people in particular circumstances. In fact, he takes circumstances into account thoroughly, much more so than a merely human author with human limitations.<sup>4</sup> According to God's wisdom, his speech is contextually suitable. It fits with speeches on either side of it within the same larger book. It also fits the larger cultural circumstances. So an appreciation for the wisdom of God actually leads us to a hermeneutical stance very similar to the stance we take in focusing on a human author. The main difference is that God is superior in his knowledge and skill. That additional fact actually increases our confidence in our use of information from social and historical circumstances. So focusing on divine authorship increases our accuracy and skill in interpretation.

This result may seem paradoxical. But why? Let us acknowledge one main concern: over the centuries, the history of interpretation has been littered with examples of people appealing to divine intention in order to do strange and peculiar things with the text of Scripture. But all these examples are actually fighting against the very character of God and the wisdom of his communication. Contrary to naïve impressions, focus on the divine author does not *in itself* cause irresponsible interpretations. Rather, the real cause lies in repeated misconstruals of who God is and how he works. People have not reckoned with the fact that his character leads to rather than opposes the interaction of texts with their contexts.

In fact, then, the nature of God's character calls for more attention to literary and cultural and historical contexts, not less. And the weight of responding to divine speech, instead of merely human speech, calls for greater responsibility, not less.

Reflection on God's divine authorship also alleviates the problems with the *date* of the final composition of the Book of Zephaniah. Whenever the Book of Zephaniah was composed in its final state, Zeph 1:1 was part of it. Through this verse, God says that he is inviting us to see its pertinence first of all to the time of Josiah, and to the circumstances of Zephaniah as a member of the nobility. This observation holds whether or not the final written composition of Zephaniah took place in Josiah's time or later. At the same time, because the Book of Zephaniah is part of the canon, according to God's purposes, we can infer that God intends it to address future generations. It addresses the time of Zedekiah, the exile, the post-exilic returnees, the people of NT times, and we ourselves in our own time. The Book of Zephaniah has a once-for-all historical focus in the time of Josiah, and simultaneously a universal relevance, because God so designed it.

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<sup>4</sup> God's attention to contextual suitability within history has an ultimate foundation in intratrinitarian communication, which always has the context of the three persons of the Trinity in their personal fellowship. Contextual suitability is not a limitation, but an expression of God's divine nature (Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012] chap. 11).

3. *Human authorial intention.* It might seem therefore that we have left the intention of the human author behind. And in one sense this is true, as long as we think in terms of an *isolated* human intention. There are a host of uncertainties about the intentions of an otherwise unknown author, and no feasible way of settling them when the author is dead. But no human being is in fact isolated. All human beings live in the presence of God. Their minds operate in imitation of the mind of God, whether they acknowledge it or not. All the more do these principles operate in the case of an inspired author.<sup>5</sup>

Any author who has come to know God through Christ, and who has communion with the Holy Spirit, has been fundamentally renewed. Therefore, at the deepest level of the heart, he desires to serve God. Yes, all his service is contaminated by sin, but his heart has been renewed. The fullness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit belongs preeminently to the post-Pentecostal age. But the OT saints experienced a foreshadowing of it, or else they would not have been saved. The same is true of OT prophets and any scribal assistants whom God commissioned to write Scripture.

The human writers, we say, wanted to serve God. So they wanted to express spiritual words with spiritual meanings. Consequently, they intended to communicate whatever God wanted to communicate through the Holy Spirit. On one level, this is true for any spiritual person; it is true for anyone who desires to honor God in word and deed. If a person loves God, he does not want his words or deeds to proceed in independence of God. He wants God to be working through them. He wants to be filled with God's wisdom, and to express that wisdom in what he says. He wants God's presence to fill his life and his words, in order that the words may honor God and bring a blessing to those addressed. He wants others to recognize that, in what he says, he is pointing beyond himself. He is not speaking from a platform of self-sufficiency, but in ways that honor God as the source of all wisdom and truth.

These same principles hold preeminently in the case of a writer who is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the intention of the prophet is to express the intention of God. Hence, focus on the intention of the human author, if taken with full seriousness and with attention to depth, leads to focus on God's intention.<sup>6</sup> The human author intends the divine intention. Thus, it is artificial—in the end false—to try to isolate a human author's intention.

Conversely, God's intention is that he would speak *through* the human author whom he has chosen and raised up. Just as God's wisdom leads God to suit his speech to social and historical circumstances, so it leads him to suit his speech to the human intermediary. God himself invites us to reckon with Zephaniah. Only

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<sup>5</sup> Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview* chaps. 19–21, 31; idem, "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notion of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *JETS* 50 (2007) 87–103.

<sup>6</sup> Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241–279; idem, "Presence of God." The significance of language gets even deeper, because no human communication exists in isolation from the original divine communication in the eternal Word (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009]).

we must not construe this reckoning as producing a picture of a human mind in isolation.

Unfortunately, the mainstream of biblical scholarship has developed a firm habit to the contrary. Scholarship tends to treat human meaning as if it were “there” as a fixed, limited object. Scholars ignore the fact that the human author intends the fullness of divine meaning. So let us continue to reflect on what scholars propose to do when they take the route of considering human authors and human intentions *by themselves*.

4. *Benefits of focusing on human language.* The next benefit that many people associate with focusing on the human author is a proper attention to language. The Hebrew text of Zeph 1:2–3 is human language. Zephaniah would have used the language in accord with normal rules and regularities for the Hebrew language of his day. Focusing on the human author encourages us to focus on normal expectations for human language. And the structure of human language provides controlling guidelines for understanding the text. By contrast, so the thinking goes, if we focus on God as divine author, God is unlimited, and so there are no controls for understanding what he says.

We may illustrate using the linguistic contents of Zeph 1:2–3. Suppose a person thinks that a focus on divine meaning leads to uncontrollability. He may reason as follows. Perhaps, because God is uncontrollable, the verses may mean anything at all. Or, if we allow that the words are intended by God to make some sense that is related to their ordinary meanings, we may still postulate in medieval fashion that God intended four levels of meaning, literal, tropological (moral), allegorical (centered on Christ and his church), and anagogical (eschatological). So the interpreter proceeds to find in Zephaniah 1:2–3 a fourfold meaning, which may be expounded as follows.

The literal meaning is directed to Zephaniah’s situation in the time of Josiah. It predicts the future devastation of Judah in 1:4–5. The language about “the face of the earth” applies to the face of the land of Judah (since “earth,” Hebrew אֲדָמָה, is capable of referring to a particular land as well as the universal scope of all the earth).

The tropological meaning applies to God cleansing the soul. By the Spirit of Christ he sweeps away all sin “from the face of” the soul.

The allegorical meaning applies to Christ. Man, beast, birds, and fish stand allegorically for the various types of peoples and nations on earth. When these peoples are united to Christ, Christ renews them through his death and resurrection. In his death he sweeps away the old man; in his resurrection he brings the new man to replace the old (Eph 4:22–24; Col 2:20–3:4).

The anagogical meaning applies to the new heavens and the new earth. God through Christ sweeps away the old earth and its structure in order to bring the new (Rev 21:1–5).

I sympathize with the concern of those who worry about uncontrollability of this kind. It appears that the scheme of fourfold interpretation, already in place as an interpretive method, has forcibly injected four disparate meaning into a helpless

text. Moreover, it may also appear that the fault lies in the interpreter's focus on divine intention.

But appearances may be deceptive. Is the focus on divine intention the real cause? I claim that it is not. The real cause lies in faulty *assumptions* about the nature of divine communication.

To begin with, we may ask whether the same uncontrollability arises with the human author. How do we know whether the human author, either Zephaniah or a later scribe, intended four distinct meanings? The initial reply might be to argue that this supposition is anachronistic, since the fourfold method of interpretation came into use only much later. Yes, but we do not know whether some earlier genius might have gotten the fourfold method or something similar into his head.

Moreover, is it really so fanciful to propose that a human author might have thought in terms of at least two meanings, or even three? For example, could he have prophesied about the coming exile of Judah, and at the same time realized that God is king and judge of all the earth (cf. Gen 18:25)? Since God is always the righteous judge, could the human author have reflected and decided that the small judgment on Judah was a small-scale analogue for a greater, universal judgment to come?<sup>7</sup>

The Book of Zephaniah discusses not only judgment against Judah (1:4) but against Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Canaan, Moab, Ammon, the Cushites, and Assyria (2:4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13). By the time we get to 3:8, we read, "for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed." We may be looking at a universal judgment. If so, is universal judgment already echoing in the background in 1:2–3?

Maybe. But maybe not. Maybe the author just intended local judgment on Judah at that point in the text. Then, when he came to 3:8, he shifted to something broader. How do we know whether he already had universal judgment in the back of his mind when he wrote 1:2–3? If he did have universal judgment in the background in 1:2–3, did he already intend two levels of meaning: a "literal" meaning applying to Judah, and an "anagogical" meaning applying to final judgment?

Pushing even further, how do we know whether the human author saw an analogy between large-scale judgment of nations and small-scale judgment on an individual or on his heart? Even if the author did not consciously contemplate such judgment, did he have a sensitive conscience? And if he did, was he aware that God judges the secrets of human hearts (cf. Rom 2:16)? Would not this imply, at least indirectly, a kind of judgment on the soul? Perhaps it is not so likely that the human author *consciously* had in mind a judgment on the soul. But would it have still been an *unconscious* implication? Authors typically imply (and *mean* to imply) more than they *consciously* have in mind, because they know (tacitly) that the principles that they have in mind have broader applications. So, if there are implications concerning

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<sup>7</sup> David Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) 85.

judgment on the human soul, do we then have in the text a tropological meaning in addition to the other two? How do we tell what was going on in the author's soul?

I think that we confront difficulties when we ask such questions. It is comparatively easy to reject a "classical" fourfold interpretation of Zeph 1:2–3. We reject it because the four meanings seem to have no relation to one another. The isolation of four distinct meanings destroys any organic unity in meaning. But further reflection and further questioning show that there might be a deep organic relationship between modes of judgment. Preliminary judgment on Judah, in the form of Babylonian exile, has an organic relationship to final judgment at the Second Coming. External judgment on the land has an organic relation to internal judgment on the soul. The principle of the universality and justice of God's judgment unite all particular instances of judgment. So it is not so outlandish to wonder whether a human author might or might not have combined more than one "level" of judgment. And the combination could have been partly or wholly unconscious. The implications from one kind of judgment to another could be implicit rather than explicit.

We can go ahead and speculate as much as we wish about possible implications of the text, given the author's disposition. But it is speculation, and it is best to admit to ourselves that that is what it is. We do not know the soul of a man about whom we otherwise know practically nothing. We cannot know. It is speculation to say that he had anagogical and tropological meanings in mind; it is equally speculative to say that he did not intend such meanings in any way (even indirectly or "unconsciously").

Zephaniah 1:2–3 is poetry. It has allusiveness. The allusiveness is not easily controllable. The human author does not say, in so many explicit words, whether he has some added depths of meaning in mind. Maybe he was fairly dull; but in the providence of God, he nonetheless came out with some good poetic lines, in spite of his general dullness. Maybe he was brilliant, and thought about all the things that we have mentioned, and more as well. But even if he thought about them all, how much did he intend to express in print? We might picture him as saying to himself, "Well, I cannot write this all down without taking a lot of space, and the Lord has not commissioned me to write a lengthy essay. I'll just write something simple."

In my opinion, we relieve ourselves of much of this fruitless speculation if we turn to consider the divine author. Turning to the divine author does not mean loosening the meaning of Zeph 1:2–3 from the normal structures of the Hebrew language. Why not? For the same reason that it does not mean loosening ourselves from the social and historical environment. The linguistic environment of Hebrew and its structures is one aspect of the total environment. God sovereignly controls this total environment. In addition, because his plan is unified and wise, what he communicates coheres with the environment that he himself has ordained.

Let us put it concretely: scholarly interpreters think they can have a certain amount of confidence when they try to determine Zephaniah's meaning, because they suppose that Zephaniah knew the Hebrew language and the customs for communication. They suppose that he acted in accordance with that knowledge. Good—though doubts could creep in with a merely human writer. Some merely

human writers just go crazy, and do not keep to normality. But, laying that aside, we can say for God what we just said for Zephaniah. God, having *ordained* Hebrew and having *ordained* all the structures involved in human communication, is surely able to act competently in a manner that coheres with the language and the structures that he has ordained. In comparison with God, Zephaniah is not nearly as competent at the things with respect to which we ascribe him competence! Only the authorship of God is actually capable of giving us good security that Hebrew and communication are in fact being used with thorough competence.

When we come to the question of fourfold meaning, divine authorship again comes to our aid rather than being a barrier—provided first of all that we have reasonable humility before God. The irresponsible interpretations come not from the mere contemplation of divine intention, but from misconstruals of who God is and how he speaks and what our responsibility is. In particular, given the character of God, we ought not, from outside the Scripture, to approach it with an autonomous specification that says that each text must have only a literal meaning, or that each text must have a fourfold meaning. We come to learn. The medieval interpreters doubtless thought that their fourfold approach was not imposed from outside, but discovered from inside. Do modern literal interpreters think the same? Both must exercise care in being ready to reform their ideas in the light of what God teaches about himself and the purposes of Scripture.

When we focus on the purposes of God the divine author, we have the advantage of being able to grow in knowledge of him, rather than remaining at the level of ignorance that we have with respect to Zephaniah or a disciple who compiled his work. We know that, in conformity with God's wisdom, his speeches fit the context, including the historical context and the immediate literary context of Zeph 1:2–3. So we might conclude that the language of “sweeping away” applies first of all to the judgment that will fall on Judah. We also know that God is a God of justice—as Abraham says, “The Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). We know also, in the light of the entire canon, that he will bring a future universal judgment that will fully express his justice (Rev 20:11–15).

God has established a unity between the preliminary judgments and the final judgment, since they both express the same justice—*his* justice. Preliminary judgments anticipate and point to the final judgment (cf. 2 Pet 2:6). Consequently, we can with confidence conclude that God intended us to relate what he says in Zeph 1:2–3 to the final judgment. Just how much emphasis falls on the judgment on Judah in the near future (Zeph 1:4–6), and how much falls on the final judgment in the more remote future? It is impossible to say exactly. But it does not matter that much, once we become convinced that both aspects are implied. We can also ask how much the original audience of Zephaniah understood. Did they understand the relationship between preliminary judgment on Judah and final judgment on the whole world? How much did they reckon with such a relationship? It is impossible to say. But they had an understanding of God's justice, so they could have made the beginning of a connection, even if they did not fully work things out consciously.

We also know that God is the judge and cleanser of human souls. The redemption of individual souls is an aspect of the redemption of the whole world. So an application to human souls, such as the tropological interpretation finds, is actually not alien to the principle of justice and cleansing that the passage literally expresses. There is a connection because of the unity of God's character (justice) and the unity of his plan (wisdom).

Finally, we know that God's plan for the redemption of the world came to a climax in Christ. We know that people are redeemed through being united with the death and resurrection of Christ. This redemption is the climactic redemption that is foreshadowed in all redemptive acts in the OT. Zephaniah 1:2–3 has its focus on negative judgment, rather than positive salvation. But negative judgment, which wipes out wickedness, is one necessary aspect of positive salvation. We must be saved *from* wickedness. Thus the unity of God's plan enables us to see an organic connection between Zeph 1:2–3 and fulfillment in Christ. The connection is organic, based on the character of God—it is not just a fanciful one or one based on a general rule that says that we ought to look for and find an “allegorical meaning.”

We may also freely allow that some verbal, thematic, and theological connections are looser and more distant than others. It seems to me, for example, that the connection between immediate judgment on Judah and final judgment on all the world is fairly near the surface in Zeph 1:2–3, because the actual language has a universal tone, and because of the universal language in later verses (especially Zeph 3:8). The connection with the cleansing of the soul is remote, because nothing in the immediate literary context draws attention to such a connection.

We should underline the fact that the connections to which we point are not just being made up in our heads. We are not talking about uncontrolled subjectivity or uncontrolled license to find allegedly “divine meanings” in whatever direction our fancy flies. We are trying to do justice to the objectivities of the text and to observe organic connections. We are trying to do justice to contexts, because that is what God calls us to do, in harmony with his character and with the purposes in his communication. If we are doing well, the connections are not just whatever pops into the mind, but are discerned by us because they are already objectively present in God's speech to us.<sup>8</sup>

In all of this reasoning, we have avoided the conundrums that arise when we try to figure out how much Zephaniah as an individual human person “knew,” how much he “thought through,” how much he sensed intuitively or unconsciously, and how much he intended to include as implications in what he wrote. We do not know the answers to such questions, and within this life we never will. We do not *need* to know them. And we do not need to remain uncertain about the meaning of

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, people should avoid saying, in a superficial way, that whatever idea they happen to have from interacting with the text is given “by the Holy Spirit.” I believe in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We should praise the Lord for his presence and his work. But I also believe in the ongoing work of human pride and self-deceit and base attempts to baptize our own ideas with divine authority. We must not be naïve about either the positive or the negative sides when we reflect on human subjective impressions.

Zeph 1:2–3 just because we do not know these answers. If we understand God, we grow in our understanding of how Zeph 1:2–3 fits into the revelation of his character and his plan throughout Scripture. And with that knowledge we grow in confidence concerning how Zeph 1:2–3 has relations to the judgment of Judah, the cleansing of the individual soul, fulfillment in Christ, and fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth.

5. *Benefits of reckoning with previous canon.* Next, another of the benefits of focusing on the human author might be that it encourages us to think about the author's writings in the light of the canon of Scripture available at the time he wrote. Suppose that we accept traditional early dates for OT books. Then by the time of Josiah there would be available the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, Proverbs, parts of Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and some other books. But there are also some uncertainties. Was Joel written early or late? Where do we place Nahum and Habakkuk in time, relative to Zephaniah? Are the traditional early dates always the right ones? Inspiration by God guarantees the authenticity of the contents of each book, but it does not by itself indicate when the book was written in its present form.

Even if we knew what canon was available in Zephaniah's time, that knowledge would not give us confident insight as to whether Zephaniah as a mere human being consciously used or alluded to earlier canon, or whether he expected his readers to see such uses and allusions. For example, Zeph 1:3, with its mention of beasts, birds, and fish, shows a possible parallel to Hos 4:3, which says that "the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away" because of Israelite wickedness. Zephaniah's list has the same order as Hosea's, and includes the same three categories of animals. At this point in the text, did Zephaniah the prophet make a deliberate allusion to Hos 4:3? Or are both expressions independent of one another?

Conceivably they could be independent. They do show differences: (1) Zephaniah includes "man" as the first item in his list, before he comes to "beast"; and (2) Zephaniah is talking about divine judgment on Judah, whereas Hosea is talking about the "mourning" of the land and the animals because of human wickedness. The two lists could be similar merely because, if a person draws up a list of animals, a minimal list might obviously include the land animals ("beasts"), the animals of the air ("birds"), and the animals of the water ("fish"). Or both lists could have developed because both human authors intended to allude to Genesis 1, which on days 5 and 6 includes a narrative of the creation of these three groups of animals.

Both Hosea and Zephaniah include the three groups in an order that reverses Genesis 1, but this reversal may be for an obvious reason. The land animals are "closest" to man, because some of them can be domesticated, and they all live in the same "region" as man, namely the dry land. The birds come next, because some would be in the vicinity of human habitations. The fish come last because people have to travel to a stream or to the sea to find them. The order of the list results in a heightening with each new group of animals, because the mention of each new group shows a progressively more extensive devastation.

We may also include another question about Zephaniah's intention. Did he intend to allude to Genesis 1 in addition to or instead of Hos 4:3? It is impossible to say for sure. An allusion is surely possible. In Genesis 1 God produces by the end of the sixth day an ordered cosmos, which includes the order or structure belonging to groups of animals. In Zeph 1:2–3 he “de-creates” or ruins the order, as a judgment on wickedness. On the other hand, we have seen that the mention of the three groups of animals is natural, even if Zephaniah had never read Genesis 1.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the inclusion of animals mainly shows that the destruction will be sweeping, like the destruction of Jericho.

There are still other possible allusions. The complete Psalter of 150 psalms was not available until after the time of Zephaniah. But perhaps Psalm 8 was available in an earlier collection. Psalm 8:7–8 mentions “the beasts of the field,” “the birds of the heavens,” and “the fish of the sea,” in that order—the same order as Zeph 1:3. Does Zephaniah intend to allude to Psalm 8? Or is it just that both build on Genesis 1?

In addition, perhaps the expression “the face of the earth” in vv. 2 and 3 of Zephaniah 1 alludes to Genesis 6:7; 7:3, 4, 23. The flood of Noah swept away man and beast from the face of the earth, and so Zephaniah draws an apt parallel. The parallel is indeed suitable, but did the human author intend it? The expression “face of the earth/land/ground” is common enough (e.g. Num 12:3) that it could easily be used even without the intent to make an allusion.

In a similar way we can consider a possible allusion to Deut 4:17–18. The passage in Deuteronomy warns against making a “likeness” of an animal or bird or fish in order to have it serve as an idol. The sweeping away of animals in Zeph 1:3 may stand for the sweeping away of idolatrous worship associated with the worship of the animal images. But the allusion cannot be considered as firm, since Deuteronomy talks about making a “likeness” of an animal, while on the surface Zeph 1:3 talks about the animals themselves.

When we reckon with the divine author, we can relieve some of the uncertainties. Since God is all-knowing and all-wise, we can be confident that he intended the resonances that we can observe between Zeph 1:2–3, Hos 4:3, Genesis 1, 6–7, and Deuteronomy 4. At the same time, God took into account the circumstances when he addressed his people through Zephaniah. He knew that they would have access to Hos 4:3 and Genesis 1, but not to subsequent canon such as Ezek 14:17. Thus, Zeph 1:2–3 would resonate with Hos 4:3 and Genesis 1, but not with Ezek 14:17—not yet. Psalm 8 may or may not have been publicly available when Zephaniah was written. Knowing the end from the beginning, God also knew that he would later cause other portions of the canon to be written, which have similar themes of destruction, such as Ezek 14:17 and NT passages on judgment. Whether earlier or later, Psalm 8 would fit into the overall picture as well. God intended that

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<sup>9</sup> Adele Berlin points out that “themes from the early chapters of Genesis appear in all three chapters of Zephaniah” (*Zephaniah* 13). The presence of several distinct links raises the probability of direction allusion. But the links are tenuous, and Berlin wisely phrases the commonality in terms of “themes” rather than intended allusions.

Zeph 1:2–3 would eventually contribute to the total picture presented by all the canonical passages on judgment.

Moreover, we can appreciate that the connections with earlier passages have a variety of purposes and a variety of strengths. For example, the connection between Genesis 1 and Zeph 1:2–3 is loosened by the fact that one passage speaks of creation and the other of ruination. But the two sides continue to relate to one another as opposites. Ruination is a kind of “de-creation.” The connection with the flood of Noah in Genesis 6–7 is not a strong *verbal* connection, since it rests mostly on the repetition of the common expression “the face of the earth/land/ground.” But both Genesis 6–7 and Zeph 1:2–3 speak about judgment that encompasses both man and beast, so there is a substantive thematic connection. The connection with Deut 4:17–18 is quite a bit more tenuous, since the likenesses of animals in Deut 4:17–18 are not identical with the animals themselves in Zeph 1:3. Yet there is a common general theme of judgment on human rebellion against God, and this judgment takes into account the relation of human beings to their environment, including the environment of animals. We can speak with confidence about such things because God, unlike man, knows all the connections between passages.

It helps to observe that God not only knows all possible connections between passages, but crafts and appreciates the variations in strength and relevance of different kinds of connections. Not all verbal connections and not all thematic connections are equally pertinent. We may observe a *gradation* in strength, with obvious, tight connections at one end and very loose connections at the other. We need not force ourselves into a black-or-white, yes-or-no dichotomy when we try to evaluate what connections are in play with any starting passage.

6. *Literary unity in Zephaniah.* As a final possible benefit from focusing on the human author, scholars might think of the benefits from appreciating the literary unity of the whole Book of Zephaniah, as it proceeds from the human author. This literary unity invites us to understand Zeph 1:2–3 in the light of its position in the whole book and in light of its thematic unity with later announcements of judgment. The Book of Zephaniah includes (1) judgments on particular groups like Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, etc., in Zephaniah 2; (2) general themes of judgment on the day of the Lord (1:7–16; 2:2); (3) the theme of universal judgment (1:18; 3:8); and (4) the theme of final salvation for God’s people, as a reversal of judgment (3:9–20).<sup>10</sup>

It is indeed profitable to consider the Book of Zephaniah as a literary unity. But the unity exists just as much when we approach the book from the standpoint of the divine author. Both divine author and human author produced the unity. So the appreciation of unity does not really depend on an *exclusive* focus on the human author. God has all wisdom and all mastery. The principle of wisdom implies that he knows how language functions at the level of literary wholes, including whole books. He knows how such contexts affect the use of individual passages such as Zeph 1:2–3. He himself has sovereignly ordained all these literary functions of lan-

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<sup>10</sup> Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* 87.

guage. So he is obviously able and willing to use them competently. Thus, attention to the divine author leads to attention to the literary unity of Zephaniah. This contextually sensitive approach may once again be contrasted with the history of interpretation, where people have sometimes used divine authorship as an excuse for isolating a single verse and ignoring context.

In fact, here as before, the divine author gives us a reliable foundation for considering unity, whereas the human author does not provide such a foundation—at least, if he is taken in isolation from the divine author. The older historical criticism often tended to break up OT books into pieces from various sources. It might allege that these pieces were combined by a redactor or scribal editor who was dull or sleepy. The redactor just collected miscellaneous bits and threw them together, sometimes haphazardly. This kind of sloppy “author” can hardly encourage us to pay close attention to overall structure and themes. In the case of Zephaniah, an inspection of the text and its arrangement shows signs of literary unity. But how do we know whether this apparent unity is an accidentally happy outcome from a scribe who was not paying attention? In the manner of some critical scholars, could an analyst speculate that maybe a sleepy copyist put together fragments from Zephaniah’s prophecies in 1:2–3:8, which have a message of doom, with happy prophecies from some other prophetic figure in 3:9–20, not realizing that the two do not belong together?

On the other hand, a new kind of criticism, oriented to synchronic literary analysis,<sup>11</sup> can travel to the opposite extreme. It might picture the editor/redactor as a super-genius in literary sensitivity, who was aware, perhaps even consciously aware, of every possible nuance and the resonant effects of every turn of phrase. This kind of picture is good in a certain way for encouraging the literary sensitivities of readers, but it may actually promote *over-sensitivity*. The modern literary analyst can be tempted to read in significance. He may pile up alleged artistic, political, economic, and religious agenda even in cases where there is no unambiguously clear evidence. It is all plausible, because the hypothetical ancient author may, after all, have had all these things in mind.

Both of these extremes, the fragmentizing extreme of older criticism and the literarily oversubtle extreme of newer criticism, have a common root: they grow from lack of information. We have virtually no knowledge about the human prophet Zephaniah or of scribes or disciples who may have compiled his prophecies into a single book. In the absence of thorough, substantive information, speculation can grow unchecked. Even though some interpreters may regret the speculation, it almost becomes necessary when we think that the meaning is bound up with the human author (or scribe) as a person in isolation from the presence of God. Even if some interpreters acknowledge in theory the presence of God, they artificially isolate the human source, because only in this way can they control meaning.

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<sup>11</sup> Berlin, *Zephaniah* 20–23, expounds the contrast.

The irony here is that, far from controlling meaning, we lose control and fall into speculation. Many people would admit that we could determine human meaning from a human author in isolation only if we knew lots and lots about the human author, so that we could interpret his concerns thoroughly as we read the text.<sup>12</sup> If we do not have this knowledge, the interpretive process proceeds *of necessity* either to invent it, in the form of speculation, or to refuse to invent it. The latter course leaves us with little to say, because there is too much uncertainty about what the text could mean. In general, the world of scholarship slants in favor of speculation, because the scholar must have some meaningful employment.

The proper solution to the problem is to focus on the divine author. As we have indicated, this focus does not mean *discounting* the presence of the human author. It means rather than we affirm that the human author was in fellowship with the Spirit, and this fellowship meant that he intended to affirm the divine intention. The divine intention is accessible, because we know God, even though we do not know much about Zephaniah. The difficulty with this route is that it destroys the ideal of religious neutrality in scholarship. And, beyond that, it also implies that ultimately none of us is in control of the interpretive process. Interpretation is not *first of all* a method for cross-examining the text. Sound interpretation is first of all encountering God, bowing before him, and humbling asking him to teach and transform us.

## II. THE APOSTLE PAUL AS AN EXCEPTION?

Up to this point we have considered Zephaniah as our illustration for human authorship. Similar reasoning applies to most other books of the Bible, where we know little about the human author.

The biggest exception to this principle would appear to be with the apostle Paul, because we know about him from the Book of Acts as well as from his letters, and in some of his letters his personality comes out strongly.<sup>13</sup> So should not we

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<sup>12</sup> And even then, the interpretation would be artificially skewed, because it would neglect the presence of God in all human life and all human minds.

<sup>13</sup> Next after Paul, in terms of fullness of knowledge available to us, might come Moses, David, and Jeremiah. Let us consider them briefly. The texts deriving from Moses came from God having known Moses "face to face" (Deut 34:10), and God speaking to him "mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD" (Num 12:8). These words offer us an awesome description, confirmed by the fact that Moses's face shone after meeting with the Lord (Exod 34:29–35). Moses's intimacy with God presents us with a caution against any attempt to calculate a merely human meaning.

We also know a good deal about David, from the history recorded in 1–2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. We may also draw on the Davidic psalms. But there are difficulties. For one thing, scholars dispute whether the superscriptions to the psalms mean that David was the author, or the collector, or the one for whom or about whom the psalms were written. In addition, note David's own words about his experience in composing religious songs: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me" (2 Sam 23:2–3). The presence of the Spirit with David on special occasions cautions us against merely interpreting his inspired words on the basis of "ordinary" human backgrounds in David's life.

use this information when we read his letters? Of course we should. But even in this case we know about Paul through what God has given us to know, through Acts and the letters. We know little else, though we can tentatively infer a few things from his being a former Pharisee and a Roman citizen.

As usual, if we bear in mind the divine author we can reach the same conclusions about positively using our information about Paul. God in his wisdom speaks in contexts that he has ordained. In the case of Paul, God speaks to us through Paul in a manner that takes into account the context of who God made Paul to be, what God has accomplished through Paul (Rom 15:15–20), and what God has told us about those contexts through Scripture itself. In particular, God's wisdom invites us to read Paul's letters as a single literary whole, from the point of view of divine authorship, not merely human. They are a single literary whole in God's divine intention precisely because God chose to unify them in the very process of speaking them through Paul as a human author. Similarly, God invites us to read Paul's letters in the context of Acts.

We are using the same principle that we have used before. God's wisdom implies that he speaks in a way that suits the context that he himself has ordained. In the case of Paul's letters, the context includes Paul himself, as the human author. Hence, it is appropriate to note things such as common terms, common themes, common modes of expression, and common styles in theological reasoning that hold among Paul's letters, as distinct from other parts of Scripture that came about through other human authors. The uniqueness of the human author gets affirmed precisely because of the wisdom of the divine author.

It is also appropriate to note common themes between 2 Peter and Jude, which do not share a common human author, or between Revelation and the Gospel of John, where the commonality of authorship is disputed, or between two Synoptic Gospels, or among the OT books of "wisdom literature": Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. We also note special unity in the Pastoral Epistles, because of their overlapping topics and concerns. God has put in place many forms of organic unity. The profundity of his wisdom invites us to meditate on them all.

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Moreover, the inclusion of Davidic psalms within the Book of Psalms has the effect of inviting us to generalize beyond the personal experience of David. The psalms become the hymnbook and prayer book of Israel—both Israel corporately and every Israelite individually. Presumably a scribe or scribes were involved in the final compilation of the book of 150 psalms, in the arrangement that we now have. God superintended this process in inspiration, and the human role of the scribes virtually disappears behind the pre-eminent role of divine authorship in creating the resulting canonical book. So where are the individual human authors of individual psalms? Far in the background. The contents of the psalms are very human in their expressions of suffering, groaning, and exultation. But the voice is the voice of God, and ultimately of Christ the singer (Heb 2:12), teaching Israel through the work of the Holy Spirit to find her own voice in response.

Finally, consider Jeremiah. Jeremiah's struggles with respect to his opponents and with respect to his calling from God come out strongly in the book of Jeremiah. Such struggles reveal his personality. But precisely in his struggles with his calling, we see a distance open up between what God calls him to say and what he himself wants (e.g. Jer 1:6; 11:14; 20:9). Such distance inhibits an interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah in terms of a focus on merely human meaning.

There is room, then, for a distinctively Pauline biblical theology. But how do we do it? Do we do it in a way that presupposes the isolation of the human author from divine communion? We can illustrate the difficulty by asking what Pauline biblical theology really is. Does it mean treating Paul's letters as a God-ordained literary unity? Such an approach is what God's attention to Paul the person already suggests. Or does it in addition mean trying to "climb into Paul's mind"? If the latter, do we conceive of Paul's mind in isolation from the divine mind? And do we think about "what he believes" in isolation from the missionary activities in which God is at work through him?

How many of the modern books on the theology of Paul have had at the heart of their discussion Paul *the missionary*, that is, Paul as sent, empowered, and speaking as an emissary of Christ and a church planter among the nations? Such is the picture given to us both in Acts (9:15; 13:2) and by Paul himself (Rom 15:18).<sup>14</sup> Could it be that the attempt to isolate "Paul's mind" has had a role in minimizing Paul the missionary, the bearer of divinely endorsed good news? Commentaries and books of theology are nowadays written by scholars, and it is easy to reconfigure Paul as primarily a theologian or rhetorician rather than a missionary. If we pay attention to what God tells us about Paul, and what God was accomplishing by speaking through Paul, our reflections may turn out differently.

In saying this, I have no wish to depreciate the modern theologies of Paul, or modern commentaries on his letters, many of which are wonderfully insightful.<sup>15</sup> But some of them may have achieved their positive results in spite of a false method, namely the attempt to isolate a human level of understanding. I am saying that we need to pause before adopting a false method or continuing with it if we have already adopted it. The method of focusing on a human author, as though we could treat his intentions, his meanings, and his ideas in isolation from divine presence, is a false method, and it leads to distortions, speculations, and fogginess about his intentions.

The distortion is obvious with the case of Paul, if the false method has had a part in overlooking the central role of God's speaking in the whole work of Paul. Consider what Paul speaks of

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<sup>14</sup> Years ago I heard Harvie Conn, professor of missions at Westminster Theological Seminary, point out that Herman Ridderbos's monumental *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), a truly admirable piece, has almost nothing on missions.

<sup>15</sup> We leave to one side yet another question, whether an attempt to emphasize the *distinctiveness* of Paul's theology, in contrast to the theologies of other NT writers, runs the danger of producing tension between the modern book about *Paul's* theology and Paul's own understanding that his gospel harmonizes with what other apostles are proclaiming: "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:11). Galatians 2:7–10 indicates a division of labor, but this friendly division presupposes a harmony about the nature of the gospel.

We may point out still another, opposite danger. When we treat Paul's letters together, as witnesses to "Pauline theology," we may minimize the distinctiveness of what takes place in letters directed to distinct missionary situations: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, Thessalonica; or to individuals: the Pastorals. A focus on divine authorship leads to acknowledging the wisdom of God in the distinctive letters, each of which take into account the addressees and their situation.

the grace given me *by God* to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of *the gospel of God*, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. . . . For I will not venture to speak of anything except *what Christ has accomplished through me* to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by *word* and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the *power of the Spirit of God*—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of *the gospel of Christ*. (Rom 15:15–19)

Can we as modern interpreters read these words with full attention, and not realize that Paul is implying that all his letters are part of the mission that God has given him? If so, his letters set forth the message of good news that God is speaking through Paul, in the power of Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Note, for example, what Paul himself says in reflecting on what happened when he brought the gospel to the Thessalonians: “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the *word of God*, which is *at work* in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). Paul’s activities have as their goal “to bring the Gentiles to obedience,” which can only be accomplished when the divine word comes with divine power and works a divine missionary goal. In a broad sense, we ourselves are among the Gentile recipients of Paul’s message. With this in mind, are we going to set ourselves to isolate a merely human meaning from a merely human Paul? Then are we ignoring Paul’s own convictions about his letters, about his apostleship, and about what he says about his message? Is this a good recipe for producing genuine interpretative understanding?

### III. CONCLUSION: GIVING UP ON THE HUMAN AUTHOR

My concluding advice with respect to the focus on an isolated human author is that we give it up. Period. There is no gain to it, and much loss. We who are scholars work on the intentions of human authors as if this focus will give us answers. But we are living an illusion. Instead, let us seek God. If we do so, we will get more spiritual health, because we are encountering God seriously. We will get more accuracy, because we can settle many interpretive questions concerning authorial intention. We will get more candor, because we can give up concealing from ourselves that in most cases we do not know anything about the human author except what we infer from the text, and that many such inferences are questionable.