

WHO MAKES UP THE RULES?

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The term **HERMENEUTICS** frightens people. This is both unfortunate and unnecessary. The word comes from the Greek term *hermeneuein*, which means to explain or interpret. In the Bible it is used in John 1:42; 9:7; Hebrews 7:2; and Luke 24:27. In the Revised Standard Version the latter verse reads as follows: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] *interpreted* to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." The New International Version reads, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] *explained* to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." The word translated "interpreted" and "explained" in these two versions of the Bible is the word [*di*]hermeneuein. A noun formed from this verb, *Hermes*, was the name given to the Greek god who was the spokesman or interpreter for the other gods. This is why in Acts 14:12 we read that after Paul healed a cripple at Lystra, the people thought that the gods had come to visit them. "Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called *Hermes* because he was the chief speaker" (cf. also Acts 9:36; 1 Cor. 12:10, 30; 14:5, 13, 26--28; etc.). The term *hermeneutics*, which comes from these Greek words, simply describes the practice or discipline of interpretation. In interpreting the Bible, who determines the rules?

THE GAME ITSELF:

THE VARIOUS COMPONENTS INVOLVED IN HERMENEUTICS

In all communication three distinct components must be present. If any one is lacking, communication is impossible. These three components are the *Author*, the *Text*, and the *Reader*, or, as linguists tend to say, the *Encoder*, the *Code*, and the *Decoder*. Still another way of describing this is: the *Sender*, the *Message*, and the *Receiver*. (If we carry this over to the analogy of playing a game, we have the *Creator of the Game*; the *Game Parts* [pieces, cards, dice, board, etc.]; and the *Players*.) Unless all three elements are present, communication (the game) is impossible.

The main goal, or at least one of the main goals, of interpreting the Bible is to discover the "meaning" of the text being studied. We want to know what this text "means." Yet where does this meaning originate? Where does it come from? Some interpreters argue that it comes from one component, whereas others argue that it comes from another.

The Text (i.e., the Game Parts) as the Determiner of Meaning

Some have suggested that meaning is a property of the text. It is the text that determines what a writing means. We have probably all heard or even said something like, "Our text tells us ..." And who has not heard Billy Graham say, "The Bible says ..."? Yet those who argue that meaning is a property of the text mean something very different than what Billy Graham means. This view argues that a literary text is "autonomous." As a text it possesses semantic autonomy in the sense that its meaning is completely independent of what its author meant when he or she wrote. What the biblical author was thinking about and sought to convey by the text is quite irrelevant with respect to the meaning of the text. This is because a text possesses autonomy and is totally independent of its author. As a result, reading a related work such as Galatians in order to help us understand what Paul meant when he wrote Romans makes little or no sense. We could just as well read Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. Furthermore, what Paul actually meant when he wrote Romans is no more valuable in determining the actual meaning of Romans than any other person's opinion. According to this view, the text is independent of and has no connection with its author. It possesses its own meaning(s).

For Billy Graham, as he preaches from Romans, "The Bible says" and "Paul means" are synonymous. For those who argue that the text possesses its own meaning, however, these two things are not in any way the same. Every text is an independent work of art that is to be interpreted independently of its author. According to this view, when a work becomes "literature" the normal rules of communication no longer apply; this piece of communication has been transformed into a work of "art." Because it is art, the original composer no longer possesses control of it; the art itself possesses its own meaning completely apart from its creator. If in some way Paul could appear before those who argue for the semantic autonomy of the text and say, "What I meant when I wrote this was . . ." the response would essentially be, "What you say, Paul, is interesting but quite irrelevant." Paul's willed meaning of his text, what he sought to communicate in his writing, is no more authoritative than any other person's interpretation. Thus, it is illegitimate to place any authorial control over the meaning of a text. This is a very popular approach among literary critics.

Perhaps the biggest problem with this view, that the text itself is the determiner of meaning, involves what a "text" is and what "meaning" is. A written text is simply a collection of letters or symbols. Those symbols can vary. They can be English or Greek letters, Japanese symbols, or Egyptian hieroglyphics. They may proceed right to left, left to right, up or down. They can be written on papyrus, animal skins, stone, or metal. Yet both the letters and the material upon which they are written are inanimate objects. Meaning, on the other hand, is a product of reasoning and thought. It is something only people can do. Whereas a text can convey meaning, it cannot produce meaning, because it cannot think! Only the authors and readers of texts can think. Thus, whereas a text can convey meaning, the production of meaning can only come from either the author or the reader.

The Reader (i.e., the Player) as the Determiner of Meaning

Some interpreters claim that the meaning of a text is determined by the reader. (This “reader” is sometimes called the “implied reader,” the “competent reader,” the “intended reader,” the “ideal reader,” the “real reader”). The person who reads the text gives to it its meaning or "actualizes" it. This should not be confused with thinking that the reader learns-deciphers-discovers-ascertains the meaning the text possesses in and of itself (the view described above). Nor should it be confused with the view that the meaning is determined by what the author meant when he or she wrote the text (the view described below). On the contrary, this view maintains that the person who reads the text determines its meaning. Each individual as he or she reads the text creates the meaning!

According to this view (sometimes called “reception theory,” “reception aesthetics,” “reader-response criticism,” etc.), if different readers come up with different meanings, this is simply due to the fact that a text permits the reader to discern multiple meanings. Thus, we can have Marxist, feminist, liberationist, egalitarian, evangelical, or Arminian “readings” or interpretations of a text. This view assumes that there are many legitimate meanings of a text, for each interpreter contributes his or her meaning to the text. The text functions somewhat like an ink blot into which the reader pours his or her own meaning. Sometimes, in popular usage, we hear an individual say something like, “What this biblical text means to me is ...” or, “This passage may mean something different to you but for me it means ...” As we shall see later, however, such statements are best understood as describing the many different applications (or implications) of the author's intended meaning.

The Author (i.e., the Creator of the Game) as the Determiner of Meaning

The more traditional approach to the study of the Bible has been to see the meaning as being controlled by the author. According to this view, the meaning of a text is what the author consciously intended to say by his text. Thus, the meaning of Romans is what Paul intended to communicate to his readers when he wrote his letter. This view argues that if Paul were alive and told us what he meant to convey in writing Romans, this would settle the issue. The text means what Paul just told us he meant. (This is why in seeking to understand Romans it is more helpful to read Galatians, which Paul also wrote, than to read Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* or Homer's *Iliad*.) Similarly, the meaning of the Gospel of Luke is what Luke purposely willed to convey to Theophilus when he wrote.

This view argues that the Bible and other great works of literature are not to be treated as unique works of “art” possessing distinct rules supposedly appropriate only to art. On the contrary, they are to be interpreted in the same way that we interpret other forms of verbal communication. This is essentially the common sense approach to

communication. All normal conversation assumes that the goal of interpretation is to understand what the speaker or writer means by the words he or she is using. We cannot even argue against this view without at the same time agreeing with it, for we must seek to understand what writers mean by their words in order to engage in discussion with them. For instance, in your attempt to understand this paragraph are you not seeking to understand what I wanted to communicate by it?

This issue has been a major one in the 1980s and 1990s with respect to constitutional law. The basic issue at stake in the Supreme Court nomination hearings of Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas involved whether the meaning of the Constitution is determined by what the original framers of the Constitution meant when they penned these words (the author) or what the present judges think that the words of the Constitution mean apart from the original intent of its framers (the text or the reader). On the one side a Supreme Court judge has stated that the desire to follow the original intent of the framers of the Constitution is "Arrogance cloaked as humility" and that "it is arrogant to pretend that from our vantage we can gauge accurately the intent of the framers ... to specific, contemporary questions." On the other hand, James Madison argued long ago that if "the sense in which the Constitution was accepted and ratified by the nation be not the guide in expounding it, there can be no security ... for a faithful exercise of its power."

It has been argued that "literature" is to be interpreted differently from all other forms of written communication. In other written works, as well as in general communication, we are to seek the author's intended meaning, but when a work becomes "literature" it is no longer to be treated in this manner. Literature does not fall under the rules of written communication but of "art." As a result the author's willed intention, what he meant when he wrote, is to be rejected or ignored, and meaning is to be determined either by the text itself or by the interpreter.

But who determines what is "literature"? There is no rule, law, or consensus that can be used to determine what is literature and what is not. (If we say that a work of literature is one that has been acknowledged over a period of time, then there is no such thing as a twentieth-century work of literature. If we say, on the other hand, that a work becomes literature when it has gained great popularity, then Mickey Spillane is the greatest writer of literature in the world!) The very fact that the classification of a work as "literature" is quite arbitrary indicates that to interpret such a work differently from all other written forms of communication is based on a debatable classification from the start.

Second, no one has yet been able to prove that "literature" should be interpreted by a different set of rules than other writings. There is no convincing answer to the question "Why should this written work be interpreted differently from other written works?" Surely the burden of proof lies with those who would argue that a particular written work (arbitrarily called "literature") should be interpreted differently from the way all other works (nonliterature) should be interpreted. Yet such a proof has not been demonstrated.

To deny that the author determines the text's meaning also raises an ethical question. Such an approach appears to rob the author of his or her creation. To treat a text in complete isolation from its author's intended purpose is like stealing a patent from its inventor or a child from the parent who gave it birth. If we list a work under the name of its author, we are at least tacitly admitting that it "belongs" to its author. He or she "owns" this work. To take it and place upon it our own meaning is a kind of plagiarism. There is a sense in which we have stolen what belongs to someone else. A text is like a "will" the author leaves for his or her heirs. It is mischievous to interpret such a will and ignore the intention of its author. For a will's executor to ignore what the author intended by his or her will is criminal and violates everyone's sense of fairness. For an interpreter to do the same with an author's literary work likewise seems unethical and disrespectful of the willed legacy of the author.

OBJECTIONS TO THE AUTHOR AS THE DETERMINER OF MEANING

Several objections have been raised against the view that the meaning of a text is determined by the author, and that in seeking the meaning of a text we are in essence trying to understand what an author like Paul consciously willed to communicate by his text. One of the most famous of these objections is called the "intentional fallacy." This objection, made famous by William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe Beardsley, argues that it is impossible to climb in to the mind of an author, such as Paul, and experience everything that was going through his mind as he wrote. A reader can never relive the experiences of the author. The innermost emotions, feelings, and motives Paul had as he wrote are simply not accessible to the reader, unless the author chose to reveal them in his text. As a result of such considerations, it is argued that the meaning Paul willed is inaccessible.

But when reading a Pauline text, the primary goal is not to experience or reduplicate Paul's mental and emotional experiences when he wrote. Rather the goal is to understand what Paul "meant," what he consciously sought to communicate to his readers by what he wrote. This objection confuses two different aspects of communication. The first involves the mental and emotional acts experienced by Paul; the second involves what Paul wanted to communicate. A careful distinction must be made between what Paul wished to convey in his text and the mental, emotional, and psychological experiences he went through while writing. What Paul sought to convey by his text is in the public realm, for he purposely made this available to the reader in the text itself. On the other hand, the inner mental and emotional experiences of Paul, or his "mental acts," are private and not accessible to the reader, unless Paul explicitly revealed them in his text. The goal of interpretation is not to relive Paul's emotional and mental state, but to understand what he meant by the written text he gave us. The intentional fallacy appears to confuse the meaning of a text with the experiences of the writer as he wrote. A text means what an author such as Paul wished to convey by his words. We have access to this because we have access to Paul's words. We do not have access to his mental acts.

The intentional fallacy has also argued that an author at times may intend to convey a particular meaning but be incapable of adequately expressing this. The author may be linguistically incompetent. All of us at some time or other have realized that we may not have expressed adequately what we wished to communicate. Even very capable communicators can at times fail to express correctly what they meant. It is therefore quite possible that an author could fail to express in an understandable way what he or she sought to communicate. Authors could even mislead the reader by a poor or wrong choice of words. This objection, however, tends to be more hypothetical than real. Most writers, such as Paul, possess sufficient literary competence to express their thoughts adequately. In fact, those who write articles outlining this problem and drawing it to their readers' attention usually think that they are sufficiently competent to express their thoughts quite adequately. If they did not, why would they write? Why then deny this competence to other writers?

For the Christian, an additional factor comes into play at this point. The belief that the Bible is inspired introduces a component of divine enabling into the situation. If in the writing of Scripture the authors were "moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21), then it would appear that the authors of the Bible were given a divine competence in writing. This competence enabled them to express adequately the revelatory matters they wanted to communicate in their writing.

Another objection to the view that the reader should seek the authorial meaning of the text involves the psychological differences between the author and the reader. Since the psychological makeup of each individual is unique, it is argued that a reader cannot understand the thoughts, emotions, and feelings the author possessed when he or she wrote. The reader is simply too different psychologically. As a result, a reader can never understand what an author truly meant by his or her text.

A related objection is the view that a modern reader is not able to understand the meaning of an ancient author such as Paul. The radical difference between the present situation of the reader and that of the author does not permit this. How can the modern-day reader, familiar with computers and megabytes, jet airplanes and international travel, television, heart transplants, lunar landings, and nuclear power understand an ancient author writing thousands of years ago in a time of sandals, togas, and animal sacrifices? According to this view, the culture of the author and the culture of the reader are so radically different that it is impossible for a present-day reader to understand what an ancient writer meant. The author and reader live too many centuries, even millennia, apart.

These objections are well taken, and should not be minimized. The differences between the time and thought-world of an ancient author and the modern reader are very real. Far too often we tend to modernize ancient writers and assume that they thought exactly like twentieth-century Americans. Consequently we misunderstand them. On the other hand, we can also overemphasize these differences. After all, we are not trying to understand the thoughts of worms or toads! The common humanity we share with the authors of the past and the fact that we both have been created in the image of God

facilitate bridging this gap of time. The basic needs for food, clothing, warmth, security, love, and forgiveness the ancients had are still the basic needs we have today. Thus, while difficult, understanding an ancient author is not impossible. In a similar fashion the common possession of the image of God assists in overcoming the psychological differences between the author and reader as well.

One final objection that can be raised with regard to the interpretation of the Bible involves those texts in which an author appeals to a faith experience. How can an atheist or unbeliever understand the meaning of the psalmist when he states, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me” (Ps. 32: 1-4a). Whereas a believer may be able to understand the experience of faith that the author is talking about, how can an atheist? We must, however, distinguish here between understanding what the author means by these words and understanding the subject matter he is discussing. An atheist can understand that the psalmist is talking about the joy of being forgiven by the Lord and the personal agony that preceded this. On the other hand, an atheist cannot understand the experience, the subject matter, of which the psalmist is speaking. He or she may in fact seek to explain that subject matter via Freudian psychology because of not being able to accept the divine element involved in it. Yet an atheist can understand what the psalmist means by his discussion of this issue. The psalmist is speaking of the agony of guilt and the joy of forgiveness. An atheist, however, can never understand the truth of the subject matter, the experience, of which the psalmist speaks....

THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR

Texts do not simply appear in history. They do not evolve from trees or from papyrus plants or from animal skins. An ancient text did not come into existence because some animal lost its skin or some papyrus plant shed its bark and written symbols miraculously appeared on it. Someone, some time, somewhere wanted to write these texts. Someone, some time, somewhere willed to say something and have others read it. If this were not true, these texts would never have appeared. A thinking person consciously willed to write a text for the purpose of conveying something meaningful to the reader. Since this took place in past time, what the author willed to convey by the linguistic symbols used (whether the symbols were Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or Latin is immaterial) possesses a meaning that can never change. What a biblical author willed by his text is anchored in history. It was composed in the past, and being part of the past, what the author willed to communicate back then can never change. What a text meant when it was written, it will always mean. It can no more change than any other event of the past can change, because its meaning is forever anchored in past history.

Yet what an author such as Paul consciously willed to say in the past also has implications of which he was not necessarily aware. Those implications are also part of the meaning of the text. When, for instance, Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:18, “Do not get

drunk on wine,” he was consciously thinking that the Ephesian Christians should not become intoxicated with the mixture of water and wine (usually two to three parts water to one part wine) that they called “wine.” This saying, however, has implications that go beyond what Paul was consciously thinking. Paul gave a principle or pattern of meaning that has implications about not becoming drunk with beer, whiskey, rum, vodka, or champagne. If asked, Paul would state that although he was not consciously thinking of these other alcoholic beverages, he meant for Christians not to become drunk by using them as well. Certainly no one in Ephesus would have thought, “Paul in his letter forbids our becoming drunk with wine, but I guess it would not be wrong to become drunk with beer.” Paul’s text has implications that go beyond his own particular conscious meaning at the time. These implications do not conflict with his original meaning. On the contrary, they are included in that pattern of meaning he wished to communicate. It is true that they go beyond his conscious thinking when he wrote, but they are included in the principle Paul wished to communicate in this verse. Thus, what an author of Scripture stated in the past frequently has implications with respect to things of which he was not aware or did not even exist at the time the text was written!

The purpose of biblical interpretation involves not just understanding the specific conscious meaning of the author but also the principle or pattern of meaning he sought to communicate. If Paul did in fact prohibit becoming drunk with whiskey and modern-day alcoholic beverages, does he also forbid in Ephesians 5:18 the unnecessary use and abuse of narcotics? That other statements of Scripture forbid the abuse of the human body in such a manner is clear. But does this specific passage forbid its use? If we understand Paul’s command as a principle, then it would appear that this passage does indeed prohibit the use of narcotics. If the principle or pattern of meaning willed by Paul in this saying is something like “Do not take into your body substances like wine that cause you to lose control of your senses and natural inhibitions,” then the use of narcotics is likewise prohibited by this verse. If we were able to ask Paul about this latter instance, would he not reply, “I was not consciously thinking of narcotics when I wrote, but that’s exactly the kind of thing I meant”? The fact is that every text has implications or unconscious meanings its author was not aware of but which fit the meaning willed in the text. More often than not, the main concern of interpretation is to understand what the legitimate implications of an author’s meaning are.

We might pause for a moment to consider whether Jesus was thinking along these lines when he said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder . . .’ but I tell you...” or “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you . . .” (Matt. 5:21-48). It appears that Jesus here describes what is involved in the higher righteousness referred to in Matthew 5:20 by bringing out the implications of Moses’ commandments. Whether Moses was consciously thinking of these implications when he wrote these commandments is immaterial. They are legitimate implications of the principles he wished to convey in them. At this point someone might raise the following objection: “But isn’t God the author of Scripture?” This sounds devout enough, but Scripture does not claim God as its immediate author. Paul’s letters do not begin, “God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the church at Rome.” No book of the Bible claims God as its immediate author! Christians, of course,

believe that behind the books of the Bible stands the living God, who has inspired His servants in the writing of these works. But the Scriptures were written by men, not God. As a result, to understand the meaning of the biblical texts we must understand what their human authors consciously willed to convey by their texts. The divine meaning of the biblical texts is the conscious willed meaning of God's inspired prophets and apostles. To understand the divine meaning of Scripture, then, is to understand the conscious meaning of God's inspired servants who wrote them. It is in, not behind or beyond, the meaning the author wished to share that we find the meaning God wished to share in the Scriptures!

The term *conscious* has been used on numerous occasions with respect to the willed meaning of the author. Although this may seem awkward, it has been used intentionally. The reason for this is to avoid two errors. One involves those interpreters who argue that "myths" are present throughout the Bible. According to this view the miracle stories found in Scripture are to be understood not as historical accounts, but as fictional stories or myths. The meanings of these myths, they argue, are "subconscious" truths and Christian values that were at play in the subconscious thinking of the early church and the Christian writers. Thus the meanings of these "myths" are not found in what the authors of Scripture consciously sought to express in the pattern of meaning they wrote. The "meaning" of these myths were, on the contrary; totally unknown to them and are independent of any conscious pattern of meaning they wished to convey. The meaning lies in their subconsciousness, which gave rise to these myths. They were, however, completely unaware of this. Attributing the meaning of a text to the "conscious" willed meaning of the author avoids this error.

The term *subconsciousness* must not be confused with what is referred to as the "unconscious" meaning of the text. "Unconscious" meanings, or implications, are indeed unknown to the author, but they fall within his conscious, willed pattern of meaning. The "subconscious" meaning sought in this mythical approach, however, has nothing to do with what the author consciously wished to convey. In fact, it is usually quite opposed to the author's willed meaning, because the author believed in the facticity of the events he was reporting and wished to share the meaning of those events with his readers. . . .

On the opposite extreme are those who argue that the Bible must be interpreted literally at all times. This, too, is an error, for it loses sight of the fact that the biblical writers used various literary forms in their works such as proverbs, poetry, hyperbole, and parables. They never intended that their readers should interpret such passages literally. They intended for them to be interpreted according to the literary rules associated with such forms. Thus, the conscious willed meaning of Jesus when He said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-yes, even his own life-he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26), is not that His disciples must literally hate their parents. It means rather that to be disciples of Jesus we must place Him before everything and everyone. The meaning of Luke 14:26 is therefore what Jesus and Luke consciously sought to communicate by these words and not the literal meaning of the words. Similarly, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is to be interpreted as a parable, and thus according to the rules governing the

interpretation of parables. It is not to be interpreted as a historical account. (Luke reveals this by the introduction “A certain man . . .” which is used in the Gospel to introduce parables [cf. Luke 10:30; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12]. This is clearer in the Greek text than in most translations, but it is fairly obvious in the NASB.)

THE ROLE OF THE TEXT

A text consists of a collection of verbal symbols. These symbols can be various kinds of letters, punctuation marks, accents (Greek), or vowel pointing (Hebrew). A biblical author could have used any symbols he wanted to write his text. In fact, he could have invented a language that only he, and those whom he chose, knew. Special codes are created for this purpose. A secret code is a text that authors want to keep hidden from others; they will reveal the meaning only to those who know the “code.” In times of war such codes are especially important. When others “break” that code, as U.S. naval intelligence did in World War II at the Battle of Midway, this may have disastrous consequences for those assuming that only their side understands the code.

However, if an author wishes to convey meaning to as many people as possible, as the biblical authors did, then he or she will choose a code, a collection of verbal symbols, which the readers will understand. This code will involve consonants, vowels, punctuation, words, idioms, and grammar that the author and readers share in common. In writing, an author therefore creates a text that possesses “shareability.” Shareability is the common understanding of a text's words and grammar possessed by both author and reader. Apart from this a reader cannot understand what an author wills to say. As a result an author purposely submits himself or herself to the conventions and understanding of language possessed by the readers. Thus, if we understand how the author's intended audience would have understood the text, we, as readers today, can also understand the meaning of that same text. Because we can learn how a contemporary of Paul would have understood the Greek words (vocabulary), grammatical construction (syntax), and context of the text, we can also understand Paul's meaning, for the apostle purposely submitted himself to the norms of the language of his readers.

Because of the need for shareability, an author will abide by the “norms of language” and use words and grammar in a way familiar to his audience. If he uses a word in an unfamiliar way, a good author will explain this in some way to his reader. (Cf. how the author of Hebrews explains what he means in 5:14a by “mature” in 5:14b; how John explains what Jesus meant in 2:19-20 by “temple” in 2:21; and what he meant by 7:37-38 in 7:39.) Within the norms of language, however, words possess a range of possible meanings. We can find this range of meanings in a dictionary or lexicon. An author is aware, when he uses his words, that they must possess one of these meanings. But when he uses these words, the context he gives to them narrows down the possible meanings to just one—the specific meaning found in the statement itself.

For example, the word *love* can mean a number of things. It can mean such things as profoundly tender, passionate affection; warm personal attachment; sexual intercourse;

strong predilection or liking; a score of zero in tennis; a salutation in a letter. In the sentence “He lost six-love,” however, it can only mean a zero score in tennis. The sentence “Let us love one another,” on the other hand, is quite ambiguous. It can mean one thing when found in the context of Jesus’ teachings and quite another thing in the context of a pornographic magazine. Through the specific context an author provides his verbal symbols—the sentence in which these symbols occur, the paragraph in which they are found, the chapter in which he places them - he reveals the specific meaning of his words. Linguists sometimes use the French word *langua* to describe the range of possibilities that a word possesses in the norms of language and the French word *parole* to describe the specific meaning of the word as it is used within the sentence, that is, the norms of the utterance.

Because of the shareability of the verbal symbols the biblical author uses, a text can communicate his meaning. A text, however, can communicate a great deal more. A text can open up to the reader vast areas of information. By reading a text a reader may learn all sorts of historical, psychological, sociological, cultural, and geographical information. A text can be a storehouse of information, “subject matter,” and a reader can investigate a text to acquire such information. We can read the Gospel of Mark, for instance, to learn about the history of Jesus, about the shape and form of the Jesus traditions before they were written down, about the Markan literary style. We can study the book of Joshua to learn about the geography of Palestine or second-millennium military strategy. We can study the Psalms to learn about ancient Hebraic poetry or Israelite worship. All this is both possible and frequently worthwhile, but when this is done, we should always be aware of the fact that this is not the study of the text’s meaning. The meaning of those texts is what the authors of Mark, Joshua, and the Psalms willed to teach their readers by recounting this history, these traditions, this geography, this poetic form.

As a result, when investigating an account such as Jesus calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41), we must be careful to focus our attention on the meaning of the account rather than on its various subject matters. The purpose of this account is not to help the reader acquire information concerning the topography of the Sea of Galilee (a lake surrounded by a ring of high hills) and how this makes it prone to sudden, violent storms (4:37). Nor is it primarily about the lack of faith on the part of the disciples (4:40) or the shape and size of boats on the Sea of Galilee in the first century (4:37). On the contrary, Mark has revealed in the opening verse of his Gospel that this work is about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This account, therefore, should be interpreted in light of this. The meaning that Mark sought to convey is also clear from the account itself. The account reaches its culmination in the concluding statement, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (4:41). The meaning of this account, what Mark sought to convey, is therefore that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God. He is the Lord, and even nature itself is subject to His voice!

Perhaps the greatest need in reading the Bible is to distinguish the vast amount of information that we can learn from the biblical texts from the meaning the authors give to that information.

THE ROLE OF THE READER

Using the verbal symbols of the author, that is, the text, the reader seeks to understand what the author meant by these symbols. Knowing that the author intentionally used shareable symbols, the reader begins with the knowledge that the individual building blocks of the text, the words, fit within the norms of the language of the original readers. (This means that in reading the works of Shakespeare we must use a sixteenth- rather than a twentieth-century English dictionary!) Seeing how the words are used in phrases and sentences, and how the sentences are used within paragraphs, and how paragraphs are used in chapters, and how chapters are used in the work, the reader seeks to understand the author's intent in writing this work. This process is called the "hermeneutical circle." This expression refers to the fact that the whole text helps the reader understand each individual word or part of the text; at the same time the individual words and parts help us understand the meaning of the text as a whole. This sounds more confusing than it really is, for all this goes on simultaneously in the mind of the interpreter. The mind is able to switch back and forth from the part to the whole without great difficulty. It functions like a word processor in which the computer switches back and forth at great speed when copying from disk to disk. Similarly, the mind switches back and forth from the meaning of the individual words and the general understanding of the whole text until it comes to a successful resolution of the text's meaning.

Because the reader is interested in what a biblical author meant by his text, he or she is interested in his other writings as well, for these are especially helpful in providing clues to the meaning of the words and phrases in his text. Other works written by people of similar conviction and language are also helpful, especially if they were written at the same time. The writings of people who had different convictions but lived at the same time may also be helpful, but less so, in revealing the norms of language under which the author worked. As a result, to understand what Paul means in a particular verse in Romans the reader should look at the way he thinks and writes in the verses surrounding that text, in the neighboring chapters, in the rest of that book, then in Galatians (which is the Pauline writing most like Romans), then in 1 and 2 Corinthians, and then in the other Pauline writings. After having worked through the Pauline materials, the reader can also look elsewhere. Probably the order of importance after the Pauline materials would be: the rest of the New Testament; the Old Testament; the intertestamental literature; the rabbinic literature; the early church fathers; contemporary Greek literature. (This order would be determined by which of the others best reflects the way Paul thought.) In a similar way a verse in the Gospel of Luke is best interpreted by the verses surrounding it, the paragraphs and chapters surrounding that verse, the rest of the Gospel of Luke, and then the book of Acts. Acts would reveal better how Luke thought than Matthew, Mark, or John, but other Gospels would be better than Isaiah, which in turn would be better than Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century.

It is also important for the reader to understand the particular literary form being used by the author, for different forms of literature are governed by different rules. If the author has expressed his willed meaning in the form of a proverb, we must then interpret that proverb by the rules governing this literary form. If he has used a parable, we must

interpret the parable in light of the rules associated with parables. The careful argumentation of Paul in Romans must be interpreted differently from the poetic form in which the psalmist has expressed his meaning. What is common in the interpretation of every literary form, however, is that we are in each instance seeking to understand the meaning the author willed. Furthermore, we can assume that, since he sought to share that meaning with his readers, he was abiding by the common rules associated with the particular literary form he was using.

Once the reader knows the meaning of the author, he or she will need to seek out those implications of that meaning that are especially relevant. If the pattern of meaning Paul willed when he wrote Ephesians 5:18 is "Do not take into your body substances like alcohol that cause you to lose control of your senses and natural inhibitions," what implications arising out of this paradigm of meaning are most relevant for the reader? Because Paul's text has far-reaching implications that he was not aware of, the value of a text, its "significance," is multiple and varied. Although the meaning of a text never changes because it is locked in past history, its significance is always changing. This is why some people claim that the Scriptures have different "meanings." Yet a text does not have different "meanings," for an author like Paul willed a single specific pattern of meaning when he wrote. (The instances in which an author willed a "double meaning" pun are quite rare.) A text, however, has different "significances" for different readers. For example, the words of Jesus, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), have a single meaning. Jesus wanted to see the message of the Gospel spread throughout the entire world. Yet the value of various implications, the significance of Jesus' words, will no doubt vary a great deal for each reader. For me it involves teaching in a theological seminary; for my daughter and son-in-law it involves going overseas to a foreign land to work among an unreached people; for my sons and their wives it involves working in their local churches. For others it may involve working in a rural church or in the inner city or witnessing about Christ at work. For a non-Christian it no doubt would involve a rejection of the meaning. There is one meaning to a text, that meaning consciously willed by the author, but the particular way that meaning affects the readers, its significance, will be quite different.

