

A Voice Like the Sound of Many Waters: Inspiration, Authorial Intention, and Theological Exegesis

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IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION, Jesus speaks with a voice “like the sound of many waters” (Rev 1:15).¹ At least since Irenaeus, this verse has been taken to describe how God speaks to us through Scripture: with a single voice formed from the roar of a multitude.² This understanding of Scripture, so paradigmatic for patristic and medieval exegesis, challenges us today. In academic theology, the search for what God wants to say through the text of Scripture—the search for God’s own voice, and God’s own intentions—has largely been abandoned. When it is not rejected as misconceived,³ it is typically set aside in favor of other hermeneutic objectives.⁴ And for understandable reasons: the individual human voices of Scripture, for too long, had been neglected, marginalized, and forced into boxes into which they did not fit,

¹ Scripture translations are from RSV throughout, occasionally modified.

² See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.14.2.

³ For a representative example of skepticism about the hermeneutic usefulness of appeals to authorial intention, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), xxx–xxxiv.

⁴ Recent publications on scriptural exegesis and theological exegesis usually give little attention to the category of authorial intention, human or divine. For example, a recent work on the theological reading of Scripture (which begins with a survey of the current state of the question) mentions intention hardly at all. The author explains that this omission was conscious and deliberate. “This project has not foregrounded authorial intention, but has put its focus on how the biblical text signifies something about its subject matter” (Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 306n44).

especially when they were inconvenient to ecclesial traditions or theological systems—often precisely through tendentious appeals to God’s authorship and inspiration. Yet faith in God’s unity compels us to acknowledge that if God speaks through Scripture, he must speak with a single voice. Likewise, faith in God’s wisdom gives us confidence that if God speaks to us, he does not speak to no purpose, and he must make it possible to know what he wants to say, at least to some extent.

This article will offer an account of how God speaks through the many waters of Scripture. It will argue that God speaks through every word of Scripture, but that he speaks through those words differently from the human authors. Then it will discuss principles for discerning what God wants to say in any given passage of Scripture. Along the way, it will aim to rehabilitate a nuanced appreciation for authorial intention, both human and divine. It will also defend notions like plenary verbal inspiration and attempt to show that they can be understood in ways compatible with post-critical scholarship. If this article does not succeed in these objectives, at the very least it hopes to demonstrate that fundamental theology remains relevant for exegetical praxis, and that attempting to ground theological exegesis in sidelined topics like authorial intention, inspiration, and divine authorship need not seem stubbornly antiquated from the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics or contemporary biblical studies.

It will proceed in the following way. First, drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s and Elizabeth Anscombe’s analyses of intention, and developing Gottlob Frege’s distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*), it will offer some clarifications about authorial intention and its relationship to the literal sense or meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture.⁵ Second, building on these clarifications, and reflecting on the New Testament’s interpretation of the Old Testament, it will draw conclusions about how God’s intended meaning relates to the human authors’ intended meaning.⁶

⁵ To avoid the confusion that would result from translating both the Latin word *sensus* and the German word *Sinn* as “sense,” from here on this article will generally translate the Latin word *sensus* as “meaning.” For similar reasons, rather than speaking of the different “senses” of Scripture, it will generally speak of the literal or spiritual “meanings” of Scripture.

⁶ In my review of the literature, I have not been able to find anything written in the past fifty years that discusses at any length how the intentions of the human authors relate to the intentions of the divine author, with the exception of Michael Gorman, “Inspired Authors and Their Speech Acts: A Philosophical Commentary on the Essay by Denis Farkasfalvy,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4, no. 4 (2006): 747–60. In his article, Gorman makes some observations about seeming disjunctions between divine and human intention in Scripture. He explores and critiques

Finally, it will discuss the implications of these conclusions for inspiration, the truth of Scripture, and theological exegesis, thus hopefully contributing to the fulfillment of Pope Benedict XVI's "fervent hope" that research on the inspiration and truth of Scripture "will progress and bear fruit both for biblical science and for the spiritual life of the faithful."⁷

The central thesis of this article is that, properly applied, Frege's distinction between sense and reference has great potential for solving many long-standing puzzles about inspiration, authorial intention, and theological exegesis.⁸ But while this central thesis is relatively straightforward, to explain what it entails and demonstrate its potential, it is necessary to touch on a number of highly contested topics. Consequently, while this article makes an attempt to engage a wide range of sources and respond to possible objections, it cannot discuss all the relevant secondary literature, nor can it adequately develop its proposals to address all of the many legitimate concerns that might be raised. Whether or not these omissions are ultimately justified, it is hoped that this article will be judged not for any individual failure in this regard, but rather for what it is: an attempt to pick up a conversation about inspiration and authorial intention that, after being advanced considerably by *Dei Verbum* (especially in paragraphs 11 and 12), dropped off abruptly and still awaits resolution, and to suggest a possible way forward.

Philosophical Clarifications

Before proceeding to questions about Scripture, we first need to clarify some philosophical issues about intention, meaning, and the way that words work. We need these clarifications because confidence in our access to authorial intention, now widely held in doubt, is crucial to this article's proposal, and because a sound appropriation of Frege's distinction between sense and reference opens up possibilities for clarifying how God's intended

different ways to account for them, and then argues for one of them. His approach and his tentative solution, however, differ from those proposed in this article.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), §19.

⁸ After realizing that Frege's distinction between sense and reference could be helpful for solving certain problems regarding inspiration and authorial intention, I looked to see if others have made similar applications. It seems not, but a recent article defends Origen's exegetical method using Frege. Its argument, while more theoretical, is highly complementary to the proposal given here, not least in its common sympathy with Origen; see Sergey Trostyanskiy, "Reading Origen of Alexandria from the Perspective of Contemporary Semantics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63, nos. 3–4 (2012): 34–43.

meaning relates to the human authors' intended meaning in Scripture.⁹

Intentions, Actions, and Words

Intending is a component of conscious action. It is a kind of wanting, but more than mere wishing. When we intend something, we want it to happen, but we also *cause* it to happen, or at least attempt to cause it to happen. To put it otherwise: when we perform conscious actions, we are seeking to cause certain effects. Our seeking to cause these effects is our intending. The same physical action can be intended for very different reasons. For example, we can give money to a needy person out of compassion, or we can give money to a needy person in order to fool our friends into trusting us so that we can defraud them later. In both cases, we intend to give money, but our ultimate objectives differ.¹⁰

That much is fairly straightforward and uncontroversial. Many aspects of intention, however, are notoriously subtle and complex. It is easy to get tangled in partial but incomplete insights. Confused notions are pervasive.

Three misconceptions are particularly widespread. The first is that intentions are hidden and invisible, entirely removed from the realm of the physical. Wittgenstein explodes this misconception with a simple observation:

What is the natural expression of an intention?—Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape.¹¹

We do not need to get inside the cat's head to know what it wants. We can figure it out by just looking at what the cat is doing. Intentions are partly invisible and partly private, but due to the fact that we perform our actions with our bodies, they are also partly visible and partly public. We can learn something about what people intend by observing their bodies and the movements of their bodies. We do not need to get inside their heads.

The second misconception is that intentions are separable from actions. According to this misconception, intentions are mental acts attached to

⁹ When contrasting humanly and divinely intended meaning, this article habitually speaks of "human authors" in the plural, not just because different authors wrote different books of the Bible, but because with any portion of Scripture, more than one human author may have been involved in producing the text as we now have it.

¹⁰ For a fuller description of my account of intention, see Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–41.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §647.

self-contained, ontologically distinct actions. They can be detached from actions without damaging the integrity of either intention or action. Yet agents intend something only in the course of performing actions. Intentions can be isolated conceptually, but they cannot be isolated ontologically. Intending is constituent of conscious action. Intention is not external to action; intention is *in* action.

The third misconception is that, as Anscombe puts it, “‘intention’ has a different sense when we speak of a man’s intentions *simpliciter*—i.e., what he intends to do—and of his intentions in doing or proposing something—what he aims at in it.”¹² This misconception grows out of the fact that, in the order of deliberation, we start with an objective and then settle on a means to achieve it. Given the significant difference between means and end, it seems natural to say that our intending of present effects and our intending of future effects are very different kinds of intending. But our present and future intentions are equally intentions, because both involve wanting to cause effects through our actions. The only difference is that one set of effects concerns the present and the other set of effects concerns the future.

These philosophical clarifications about intention apply to words as well as physical actions.¹³ Words, after all, are the fruits of intentional actions. Consequently, everything we have said about intention applies to words, both spoken and written. The implications are numerous.

First, verbal intentions are not entirely private. They are partly private, but they are also partly public. Just as our physical actions make our intentions perceptible, so too our words make our intentions perceptible. We might speak words that are vague and ambiguous, or we might be speaking with hidden motives. Nevertheless, just as the movements of our bodies reveal a great deal about our intentions, so too our words always reveal a great deal about our intentions. They also significantly constrain any plausible speculation about our hidden or unexpressed intentions. When we say, “I would like a hamburger and a large fries,” for example, we might

¹² G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), §1.

¹³ My approach to verbal intentions has been greatly influenced by the work of Ben F. Meyer, especially: *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Alison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989), 17–55; *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical, 1994), 87–101. For a different but complementary approach to verbal intentions, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller (Carlisle, England: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1–49, esp. 11–13.

plausibly be taken as trying to cause offense, if we speak them at a fine French restaurant, but we cannot plausibly be taken to be asking about the weather.

Second, words and intentions cannot be separated. Words are not separate, self-contained realities to which intention is attached. Without the implicit intention to communicate, words would not be words; they would not even be symbols. They would be mere sounds or lines on a page. Intentions are not external to words; intentions are *in* words. In fact, we might say that words are mental intentions made perceptible. Spoken words are mental intentions made audible; written words are mental intentions made visible.

Third, authorial intention is not just about our future and final objectives, nor is it merely about our desire to communicate thematic points. Authorial intention includes our more prosaic intentions, such as our intention to convey meaning through recognized, established symbols.¹⁴ Consequently, even when an author's ultimate intentions are inaccessible or unverifiable, we still have access to authorial intention. We may not be able to discern the author's ultimate objectives, but as long as we can understand the language, we can still discern what meaning the author wanted to convey, at least to a significant extent, and thus access the author's intentions.

This last conclusion is especially important for the argument of this article, but it runs counter to many current views about authorial intention. For some time, especially since the publication in 1946 of W. K. Wimsatt's and M. C. Beardsley's seminal article "The Intentional Fallacy," skepticism about our access to authorial intention and its relevance to textual hermeneutics has been widespread.¹⁵ Wimsatt and Beardsley are

¹⁴ In his comments about the human authors of Scripture, Thomas Aquinas affirms a similar view of authorial intention. Authors intend not only the end (*finis*) to which their words are directed; they also intend the meaning (*sensus*) of their words; see Timothy Bellamah, "Qui Primo Per Verba Intenditur: Notes on Thomas's Understanding of Authorial Intention and the Literal Sense," in *Dominicans and the Challenge of Thomism*, ed. Michał Paluch and Piotr Lichacz (Warsaw: Instytut Thomistyczny Warszawa, 2012), 261–77.

¹⁵ See W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468–88. For a strong but carefully nuanced defense of our epistemic access to authorial intention, and the impossibility of interpreting texts without some implicit reference to authorial intention, see John C. Farrell, *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). On our access to authorial intention in the context of interpreting Scripture, see: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge

correct that our access to future and final intentions is tenuous. They are also correct that an author's ultimate objectives have only limited relevance to textual interpretation and literary criticism. They are wrong, however, to draw categorical conclusions.¹⁶

The fact that words work—the fact that we can read words and find them intelligible—implies that we have a great deal of access to authorial intention. Considered as mere sensible phenomena, as mere sounds or lines on a page, words can mean anything; they do not give us any direction about how to interpret them. Only when we consider words as intended by their authors—as having been written by their authors to communicate something—do we find them intelligible. To find words intelligible, we do not need to know who wrote them, or what the author's ultimate objectives were. We do, however, need to read them as though they were intended by someone. Otherwise, they cease to be intelligible.

For example, suppose we find a slip of paper on the ground with these words: "Get on the next train." We have no idea if the words are an actual instruction to someone, a coded message, or a line from a poem. In short, we know very little about what Wimsatt and Beardsley meant by "authorial intention." Yet we still understand what the words mean, and the fact that we find the words intelligible implies that we are looking at them *as though* they were intended by someone, and *as though* this person knew English and meant to communicate something through conventional symbols. If we did not read the words as though intended by someone, we could not find the words intelligible; we would see lines on a page but no words.

All these reflections lead to a simple but important conclusion: we are not wrong to read texts thinking that we have significant access to the intentions of their authors.

Sense, Reference, and Intended Meaning

In an article published in 1892, Frege makes a distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). He writes:

University Press, 1995); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 71–87.

¹⁶ As Meyer writes: "It is perfectly true that the object of interpretation is not the intention of the writer as in the writer, in other words, as extrinsic to the text. But the definers of the so-called intentional fallacy overlooked the far more basic issue of intention precisely as *intrinsic to the text*" (*Reality and Illusion*, 97).

A proper name (word, sign, sign combination, expression) *expresses* its sense, *refers to* or *designates* its referent. By means of a sign we express its sense and designate its referent.¹⁷

The precise meaning of Frege's distinction is difficult and somewhat obscure.¹⁸ There are also disagreements about translation.¹⁹ His essential point, however, is straightforward. There is a difference between *what* words refer to (reference) and *how* they evoke their reference (sense). He uses the example of the planet Venus. The expressions "morning star" and "evening star" both in fact designate the planet Venus. Yet if we did not know that the two expressions ultimately refer to the same celestial body, we might incorrectly suppose that a claim about the morning star could be true while the same claim about the evening star was false. Consequently, the two expressions cannot have the same meaning. Frege concludes that we must distinguish between an expression's sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*).

His argument is widely regarded as having established something important and true.²⁰ Evidence for its essential validity is found in the fact that many other philosophers have made similar distinctions, such as the distinction between connotation and denotation, or between intension and extension. Frege's distinction also closely parallels the medieval distinction between signification and supposition,²¹ a distinction which

¹⁷ Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," *Philosophical Review* 57, no. 3 (1948): 209–30, at 214.

¹⁸ On Frege's distinction and its origins, see Michael Kremer, "Sense and Reference: The Origins and Development of the Distinction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frege*, ed. Tom Ricketts and Michael Potter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 220–92.

¹⁹ In English, *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* are most commonly translated as "sense" and "reference," but the latter has also been translated as "meaning" even in the context of this pairing because that is its usual translation in English (when not in the pairing). For a persuasive defense of the standard practice of translating *Bedeutung* as "reference," see David Bell, "On the Translation of Frege's *Bedeutung*," *Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1980): 191–95.

²⁰ It has not been universally accepted, however. For a defense of Frege's distinction against critics such as Donald Davidson, W. V. O. Quine, and Saul Kripke, see Michael Dummett, "Frege's Distinction between Sense and Reference," in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 116–44.

²¹ This observation is made frequently in the literature. For example: "Just as signification corresponds most closely—though not exactly—to contemporary ideas of meaning or sense, so supposition corresponds in some ways to modern notions of reference, denotation and extension." (Stephen Read, "Medieval Theories: Properties of Terms," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2015, plato.

sets medieval logic apart from its Aristotelian sources.²²

For our purposes, it is not necessary to grasp fully the way that Frege understood his own distinction, let alone follow him on every point. What is important for us is that his observations bring to light an essential aspect of words. Words do not simply signify referents; they also *present* what they signify.²³ Accordingly, we can and must distinguish between *how* words signify (sense) and *what* they signify (reference).

We might say—though Frege does not put it this way—that sense and reference are two components of an expression’s meaning. The sense is *how* the expression signifies what it signifies. The reference is *what* the expression signifies. Of these two components, sense is more intangible. While reference has a definite grounding—namely, the world and all that exists—sense has no such independent grounding. Sense exists only in our minds. It does not correspond to anything in the world (that is, apart from our thinking about the world, which, of course, is also part of the world). Moreover, reference designates something in the world, but sense is not a thing, nor is it even a mental entity or a miniature model of the reference in our heads; it is merely the medium through which our mind grasps a reference.²⁴ Sense presents reference.²⁵ We could even say that sense *is*

stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/medieval-terms/).

²² For an overview of medieval supposition theory, see Catarina Dutilh Novaes, “Supposition Theory,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 1229–36.

²³ For a phenomenological reflection on how words present their referents in the context of Scripture, and how words, to a certain extent, even make it possible to think, see Robert Sokolowski, “God’s Word and Human Speech,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 1 (2013): 187–210.

²⁴ Here I am applying Robert Sokolowski’s reflections on the ontological status of concepts to the category of *Sinn* (“Exorcising Concepts,” *Review of Metaphysics* 40 [1987]: 451–63).

²⁵ Frege does not put it this way, but he comes close when he describes the sense of a sign as containing “the mode of presentation” (“Sense and Reference,” 210). Emphasizing how sense *presents* reference helps to draw out some underappreciated connections between analytic philosophy and phenomenology. It is widely recognized that Frege and his distinction between sense and reference were foundational for the analytic tradition. It is not so widely recognized, however, that Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, developed many of his distinctive ideas in the course of reflecting on Frege’s notion of sense (for example, about how objects present themselves to our consciousness), and that phenomenology, therefore, also traces back to Frege in some of its most foundational commitments. See David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, “Intentionality via Intensions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 18 (1971): 541–61. The intellectual fecundity of Frege’s distinction is further proof of its truth and importance. For a related

presentation. And just as the act of presenting implies something being presented, so too sense implies reference. Sense exists only in conjunction with reference.²⁶ Likewise, reference implies sense, because references must be presented. Therefore, while sense and reference are distinct, they cannot be separated.

Attention to the way that meaning involves both sense and reference sheds light on a striking feature of words: the interplay of the universal and the particular. On the one hand, words are universals. The same word can refer to many different things (or actions, or qualities, or states of affairs). Words are oriented toward the world in definite ways established by custom and convention, but their orientation toward the world is vague and provisional. On the other hand, words are particulars. They take on a definite meaning only in actual use. For example, the expression “that man” directs us toward the world in a definite way, toward a range of possible referents. Apart from its actual use, however, the expression does not refer to anyone in particular. Even when we isolate words from ordinary usage and engage in second-order reflection, even then words do not cease to be particulars. For example, when we talk about the expression “that man” in the abstract, it does not lack a reference. It may not designate a particular individual, but it still designates something: in this case, a mental abstraction.

The distinction between sense and reference allows us to account for the interplay of the universal and the particular in words. Sense is what makes words universal, while reference is what makes words always and everywhere particular. The same word can be used to designate multiple references because its sense can *present* multiple references. The expression “that

argument (with which I agree) that the analytic tradition would be well advised to draw on the resources of phenomenology to explain the distinction between sense and reference, see Shannon Vallor, “Frege’s Puzzle: A Phenomenological Solution,” *Philosophy Today* 46, Supplement (2002): 178–85, and “The Intentionality of Reference in Husserl and the Analytic Tradition,” in *Intentionality: Past and Future*, ed. G. Forrai and G. Kampis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

²⁶ Frege holds that sense can exist without reference. For example, he maintains that the name “Odysseus” has a definite sense, but as the historical existence of Odysseus is doubtful, it may not have a referent (Frege, “Sense and Reference,” 215–16). Yet, applying Frege’s own principles, we might well argue that the name “Odysseus” does have a reference. Fictional characters exist in the minds of those thinking about them. It is a different kind of existence from that of an actual historical person, but there is something in the world to which the name refers. Kremer likewise holds that, according to Frege’s own principles but contrary to his conclusions, we need not grant the possibility of sense without reference (Kremer, “Sense and Reference,” 290–92).

man” can present a variety of individuals because its sense is universal. And yet, whenever the expression is used, it always has a reference as well, no matter how abstract that reference might be. Just as sense and reference always exist side by side and cannot be separated from each other, so too every word is both universal and particular at one and the same time.

This analysis of sense and reference applies not just to words but also to complete sentences as well. (Here I am applying Frege’s distinction in a way that he does not.)²⁷ For example, a drama teacher could tell her students, “that’s the worst acting I’ve ever seen,” in order to shock her students into seriously rethinking their acting, but without meaning her words literally. Or she could speak the same words simply out of amazement, without intending to help her students, because it was in fact the worst acting she had ever seen. In these two scenarios, even though the drama teacher says the same words, her intended meaning differs. What differs is not the intended sense of her words, but their intended reference: that is, how she intends the sense of her words to latch on to the world.

Sense presents reference, but sense does not determine reference. For example, just knowing the sense of the expression “that man” does not tell us which man is being designated. The sense of the expression narrows down the range of plausible references, but it does not determine reference. The same sense remains capable of presenting multiple references. Consequently, something other than sense must determine reference. *Intention* is what determines reference. Out of all the many possible referents an expression could designate, intention selects one. In this way, intention joins sense to reference. Meaning is not possible without intention, because without intention there would be nothing to join sense and reference. In his famous article “On Referring,” P. F. Strawson makes a related point. “‘Mentioning,’ or ‘referring,’” he writes, “is not something an expression does; it is something that some one can use an expression to do.”²⁸ Expressions do not refer because expressions do not intend. It is the speaker who intends, and therefore it is the speaker, not the expression, that determines the expression’s reference. Consequently, to discern the meaning of an expression, we cannot avoid attending to the speaker’s intentions. Otherwise, we have no grounds for attaching the sense of the expression to any particular reference, and without reference, there can be no meaning.

²⁷ According to Frege, the referent of an expression terminates in the world, but the referent of a sentence is its truth value. This aspect of Frege’s account has not been widely accepted.

²⁸ P. F. Strawson, “On Referring,” *Mind*, n.s., 59, no. 235 (1950): 320–44.

Intended Meaning and Intended Purpose

When we speak, we do not merely intend to convey meaning. We also intend other objectives. For example, when we say to someone, “please go to the store and buy some milk,” we do not merely intend to convey meaning. We also intend for our words to prompt someone to go and buy some milk. Furthermore, in verbal performances, intending to do more than convey meaning is not simply a possibility; it is a logical necessity. Whenever we speak, we always intend some larger purpose as well. In this article, we are interested primarily in meaning, not purpose, but for the sake of completeness, it is important nonetheless to clarify the distinction between them.²⁹

²⁹ This analysis of verbal performances bears some similarity to speech act theory. In speech act theory, as established by John Austin and developed by John Searle, and as appropriated by theologians such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and Kevin Vanhoozer, verbal utterances are categorized according to a threefold distinction: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. The precise meaning of each category is debated, but the threefold distinction can be roughly summarized as follows. Locutionary acts consist in the sheer conveying of meaning through words (e.g., “this book is long”). Illocutionary acts convey something through words beyond the mere conveying of meaning (e.g., “please buy some milk,” insofar as the speaker makes a request). Perlocutionary acts are similar to illocutionary acts in that they go beyond the mere conveying of meaning, but whereas illocutionary acts are defined by the intention infused in the words themselves, perlocutionary acts are defined by the intended effect of those words on the listener (e.g., “please buy some milk,” insofar as the speaker aims to have someone buy some milk). The same verbal utterance might be classified as more than one kind of speech act. Illocutionary acts typically presuppose locutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts typically presuppose illocutionary acts. Like speech act theory, the account given here recognizes that verbal utterances not only convey meaning; verbal utterances are also directed toward purposes. Nevertheless, the terminology of speech act theory has not been followed here, for a few reasons. First, speech act theory does not prioritize Frege’s distinction between sense and reference, nor can it easily accommodate the understanding of sense and reference given above. Second, since this article is concerned mainly with intended meanings, not intended purposes, much of the work done in speech act theory is irrelevant to its interests. Third, the terminology of speech act theory is cumbersome, and potentially misleading: rather than talking about multiple kinds of speech acts, with the same verbal utterance potentially being classified as more than one kind of speech act, it seems better to say that the same verbal utterance might be informed by multiple kinds of intentions. See John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* and “The Promise of Speech-Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation,” in Bartholomew, Greene, and

The case of lying illustrates this point well. Two individuals might say exactly the same thing, each intending to convey exactly the same meaning, but with different purposes, because one is lying and the other is telling the truth. The case of lying helps us to notice that we cannot avoid intending more than the sheer conveying of meaning. We always have a larger purpose, even when that purpose is simply to inform someone of what we know. Our verbal intentions thus encompass two elements: first, the intent to convey meaning, which includes both sense and reference; and second, the intent to accomplish objectives that go beyond the conveying of meaning, which we might call purpose, and which explains why we are attempting to convey meaning in the first place. (Quentin Skinner makes a similar distinction between intentions and motives;³⁰ so does Aquinas, who distinguishes between the *sensus* that authors intend by their words and the *finis* to which their words are directed.³¹)

Authorial Intention and the Literal Meaning of Scripture

Going back at least to Jerome and Augustine, the bulk of the Christian exegetical tradition has hermeneutically privileged what it calls the literal meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture, especially in contradistinction to the spiritual meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture. Thomas Aquinas, for example, maintains that the literal meaning provides the foundation for the other meanings of Scripture.³² Yet for all its emphasis on the literal meaning, the Christian exegetical tradition has never come to agreement about what exactly the literal meaning is, or how it relates to authorial intention, or how it should be distinguished from the other meanings (*sensus*) of Scripture.

The case of Thomas Aquinas provides an illuminating example of the tradition's ambiguity about how the literal meaning of Scripture relates to authorial intention. In an important article in the *Summa theologiae* [ST], Thomas Aquinas identifies the literal meaning with the author's intended meaning, and then notes that the author of Scripture is God.³³ Clearly, therefore, Scripture's literal meaning is intended by God. Aquinas does

Moller, *After Pentecost*, 1–49. See also Kit Barker, "Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Canonical Hermeneutics: Making Sense of 'Sensus Plenior,'" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 227–39.

³⁰ Quentin Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 393–408. Mark Brett ("Motives and Intentions in Genesis I," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 42, no. 1 (1991): 1–16) and Fowl ("Role of Authorial Intention," 74) each make this distinction their own.

³¹ See Bellamah, "*Qui Primo*."

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1.

³³ ST I, q. 1, a. 10.

not, however, say whether it is also intended by Scripture's human authors. Interpreters of Aquinas have come to different conclusions. Some hold that, for Aquinas, the literal meaning is always intended by both God and the human authors.³⁴ Others hold that Aquinas never fully worked out his account of the literal meaning and its relation to the human authors, and that his views are fundamentally "underdetermined."³⁵ Setting aside which interpretation is best, for our purposes the important point is that Aquinas never explicitly identifies the literal meaning with human authors' intended meaning, nor does he ever explicitly claim that what the human authors intend is necessarily intended by God.³⁶ In this respect, Thomas Aquinas is not an outlier.³⁷ Precritical exegesis generally refrains from identifying the literal meaning with the human authors' intended meaning,³⁸ yet without necessarily ruling out that identification, and sometimes positively encouraging it.

Then, in the nineteenth century, Christians found their beliefs challenged by early forms of historical-critical exegesis. In response, many Christian exegetes started to rally around the idea that proper attention to authorial intention would fend off the challenge and allow them to appropriate the tools of historical-critical methods for themselves. They began to emphasize that it was not the words per se that were theologically relevant, but rather what the human authors intended to communicate

³⁴ Mark F. Johnson, "Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992): 117–41, at 119; Bellamah, "Qui Primo," 267–68.

³⁵ Eugene F. Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 1 (1996): 64–81, at 66–67; Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, "(Mis)Reading the Face of God: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513–28, at 519.

³⁶ In "Qui Primo," Bellamah implicitly concedes as much: while he provides numerous instances where Aquinas associates the literal *sensus* with what the human authors intend, he does not cite any text where Aquinas defines the literal *sensus* in terms of human intentionality, seemingly because none exists.

³⁷ Augustine, for example, encourages the identification of the literal *sensus* with the human authors' intended meaning in some places and discourages it in others; see David Graham, "Defending Biblical Literalism: Augustine on the Literal Sense," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 2 (2016): 173–99, at 180–82.

³⁸ See: Brevard S. Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge Zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 80–93; Charles J. Scalise, "The 'Sensus Literalis': A Hermeneutical Key to Biblical Exegesis," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42, no. 1 (1989): 45–65; Ayres and Fowl, "(Mis)Reading," 519–20.

through the words. Naturally, they framed their new method in terms of the theological tradition they had received, which put great emphasis on the literal meaning of Scripture, and they began to define the literal meaning in terms of authorial intention. Very quickly, they came to identify the literal meaning of Scripture with the meaning intended by the human authors—perhaps without fully realizing that the tradition had never settled on a common definition for the literal meaning, or that their absolute identification of the literal meaning with the human authors' intended meaning was a new theological development. Official Catholic teaching gave significant encouragement to this new, totalizing identification of the literal meaning with the human authors' intended meaning. Beginning with *Providentissimus Deus*, magisterial documents started emphasizing the literal meaning of Scripture and the importance of attending to what the human authors meant to say.³⁹ While magisterial documents never explicitly or definitively identify the literal meaning with the human authors' intended meaning, they sometimes say things that can be taken as encouraging such an identification.⁴⁰

By the late twentieth century, a definition of the literal meaning as the human authors' intended meaning seems to have become normative among most exegetes.⁴¹ Not everyone welcomed this development. After the literal meaning had become widely identified with the human authors' intended meaning, many scholars began to sound the alarm, noting that this identification went beyond what Christian tradition had established and posed serious exegetical problems. While continuing to give herme-

³⁹ Mark Reasoner, "Dei Verbum and the Twentieth-Century Drama of Scripture's Literal Sense," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 15, no. 1 (2017): 219–54. In the course of his narrative, Reasoner suggests that, since *Dei Verbum*, magisterial documents have been moving beyond constricted definitions of the literal sense and an earlier one-sided emphasis on its exegetical significance, most notably in *Verbum Domini*.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), §§26, 34.

⁴¹ In the late 1980s, Raymond Brown wrote: "Without denigrating the ongoing interpretative possibilities of the biblical text (which some literary critics less confusingly designate as 'literary' rather than literal), most exegetes, if we may judge from the commentaries on Scripture, would be working with a definition of the literal sense closely resembling the following: *The sense which the human author directly intended and which the written words conveyed*" (Raymond E. Brown and Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990], 1146–65, at 1148). Joseph Fitzmyer repeats this definition of the literal sense and describes it as "a standard, modern definition" of the literal sense (*The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008], 87).

neutic priority to the literal meaning of Scripture, they argued that it should not be identified with the human authors' intended meaning.⁴² Currently, the debate remains unresolved, and great disagreement continues to pervade discussion of the literal meaning of Scripture.⁴³

Clarifying the Literal Meaning Vis-à-Vis Authorial Intention

The philosophical clarifications of the previous section allow us to resolve much of the ambiguity that has plagued discussion of authorial intention and the literal meaning of Scripture.

First, these clarifications make plain that we cannot bracket authorial intention from the literal meaning of Scripture. In keeping with trends in literary criticism, many exegetes and theologians have argued that we should move away from trying to discern authorial intention and instead focus on the literal meaning of Scripture. Yet, however we define the literal meaning, we cannot bracket authorial intention from our reading of Scripture. The reason is that we cannot bracket authorial intention from words. Intentions are *in* words. Without intentions, words would be mere lines on a page. Therefore, we cannot hope to discern the literal meaning of Scripture without reference to the human authors' intentions.⁴⁴

⁴² See, e.g.: Childs, "Sensus Literalis"; Sandra M. Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies* 39, no. 4 (1978): 719–36; Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36–77; Scalise, "Sensus Literalis."

⁴³ For a discussion of the literal meaning of Scripture from the perspective of contemporary biblical criticism, see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 69–116. In his book, Barton distinguishes between what he calls the original sense, the intended sense, the historical sense, the literal sense, and the plain sense. Barton's categories are somewhat idiosyncratic and lack philosophical precision, and thus obscure as well as illuminate, but he offers many perceptive observations related to the literal meaning of Scripture. Furthermore, and less contestably, being the work of an eminent representative of his exegetical approach (which, for thoughtful and well-defended reasons, he prefers to call "biblical criticism" rather than "the historical-critical method"; see 31–68), Barton's analysis provides a good introduction to the sort of exegetical and methodological quandaries currently facing practitioners of biblical criticism when it comes to talking about the literal meaning of Scripture.

⁴⁴ For arguments that the words of Scripture gives us genuine albeit limited access to the human authors' intentions, and that they do so necessarily, see: Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 17–55 ("Primacy of the Intended Sense"); Max Turner, "Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B.

Yet it is also true that we do not have complete and unrestricted access to the human authors' intentions. Frege's distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) allows us to make an important clarification. As with any text, every passage of Scripture has both a sense and a reference. While mastery of ancient languages in their historical context usually suffices to determine the human authors' intended sense, determining their intended reference—that is, how the human authors intended their words to latch on to the world—often requires conjecture and speculation. As a result, we can often have a firm grasp on the intended sense of a passage without possessing any certainty about its intended reference.⁴⁵ For example, consider the story of Samuel anointing David as future king of Israel (see 1 Samuel 16:1–13). Among those able to read Hebrew, the intended *Sinn* of the passage is obvious and uncontroversial. No one claims that the passage is about, for example, Portuguese spice traders in the sixteenth century. The intended *Bedeutung*, however, is neither obvious nor uncontroversial. Did the human authors intend the story as a historical claim? Or do historical categories not apply because they merely intended to retell an edifying story without any concern for its historicity? Or did they intend something in between history and fiction? In short, assuming we can read the original languages, or trust the translators, we have ready access to the intended sense of any passage of Scripture, but we do not necessarily have ready access to the intended reference.

Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 44–70; Fowl, “Role of Authorial Intention.”

⁴⁵ Exegetical strategies that prioritize authorial intention are often criticized on the grounds that they are chasing an illusory objective. For example, Reimund Bieringer writes: “If texts were static semantic containers, interpretation would amount to the effort of a neutral observer to identify the meaning contained *in* the text by identifying the intention which the author put there. If this were a correct model, we would have to expect that the search for the author's intention would lead to more unanimity among neutral observers” (“The Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology,” in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd [Leuven: Peeters, 2010], 27–45, at 40–41). Bieringer's remarks are correct when authorial intention is understood to encompass both sense and reference (as are his cautions about overlooking the reader's subjectivity and the fusion of horizons between reader and text that takes place in the interpretative process), but when we focus on merely the intended sense (*Sinn*) of texts, there is often great unanimity among neutral observers. The fact that neutral observers can usually agree about the intended sense of a text defuses this line of criticism, at least insofar as it touches the argument of this article.

This distinction sheds light on the ambiguity surrounding the literal meaning of Scripture. Historically, the Christian exegetical tradition has not distinguished between anything like sense and reference. It distinguishes between literal meaning and spiritual meaning, but it does not distinguish between sense and reference. Yet, as we have seen, the distinction between sense and reference is unavoidable; it is essential to the way that words work. Even when we do not think in terms of sense and reference, the distinction captures something that is truly there, and we cannot help stumbling over it. If we take the literal meaning of Scripture to encompass both sense and reference, various results follow concerning the relationship between the literal meaning of Scripture and authorial intention; if we take the literal meaning of Scripture to encompass merely its sense, other results follow; and if we fail to apply either definition in a consistent way—which is what has been happening most of the time—we get chaos and confusion.⁴⁶ We can of course define a technical term like “the literal meaning of Scripture” any way we like, but if we fail to give it a consistent definition with respect to sense and reference, we have compromised its usefulness.

Consequently, the Christian tradition’s ambiguity about the literal meaning and its relationship to authorial intention should not surprise us. It is the inevitable result of a corporate failure, first, to distinguish between sense and reference, and second, to come to a consensus about whether the literal meaning of Scripture should be defined as including both intended sense and intended reference or only intended sense. As a result of this corporate failure, there is nothing to prevent even the same exegete from moving back and forth between two contradictory definitions of the literal meaning without realizing it, thus generating immense confusion for both the exegete and the exegete’s readers.

Divine and Human Intended Meaning in Scripture

Using Frege’s distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) and applying it to Scripture, let us now consider the following hypothesis. In every passage of Scripture, the following premises apply at one and the same time. First, God always intends the sense that the human authors intend, and possibly some of the same references. Second, God may intend references that the human authors do not intend. Third, the human authors may intend references that God does not intend.

⁴⁶ We will return to the question the literal meaning and its relationship to authorial intention in the later sections of this article, when we turn to the topic of theological exegesis.

God Always Intends the Sense Intended by the Human Authors

Christian tradition attributes to Scripture a stable, divinely intended meaning which, at least in principle, is accessible to all. Unless at least some of its divinely intended meanings were both stable and universally accessible, Scripture could not fulfill its normative function for Christian belief and practice. Christian tradition has always accepted that particular passages might be obscure, and that certain interpretative questions might be humanly unresolvable, but it has always believed that Scripture, taken as a whole, has a stable, accessible meaning which is normative for Christian belief and practice.⁴⁷

To account for this stable, accessible meaning, we must posit a stable, permanent connection between the words of Scripture and God's intended meaning. And since the words of Scripture are not mere lines on a page, but lines infused with the intentions of their human authors, we must also posit a stable, permanent connection between the human authors' intended meaning and God's intended meaning. To put it otherwise, God's intentions must always overlap with the human authors' intentions, at least to some extent, and they must overlap in a stable, reliable manner. Otherwise, we could not move with any confidence from the words of Scripture, considered as words and not mere lines on a page, to God's intended meaning.

The minimum possible overlap is the intended sense. Therefore, at bare minimum, God must always intend the sense intended by the human authors. God and the human authors may also intend some of the same references—"This I command you, to love one another" (John 15:17) is one of the most obvious examples; both human and divine authors mean to convey the same divine command—but they must always intend at least the same sense.

God Intends References That the Human Authors Do Not

While Christian tradition has always affirmed that Scripture has a spiritual

⁴⁷ We see an early witness to this confidence in Augustine. In a letter to Jerome, he writes: "I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it" (Letter 82, no. 1.3, trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co., 1887], 1:350; translation modified).

meaning which goes beyond its literal meaning,⁴⁸ it has never reached consensus about exactly what this spiritual meaning is, or how it relates to the intentions of its human and divine authors, or whether God could be said to intend more than the human authors of Scripture.⁴⁹ Consequently, when historical-critical methods began to draw more attention to the category of authorial intention and these questions became more prominent, there were no default answers to fall back on. Theologians and exegetes had to develop their own.

Starting in the early twentieth century, the question was addressed especially under the rubric of the *sensus plenior*, a term coined by Andrés Fernández in 1926. The *sensus plenior* is typically defined as a fuller meaning of the literal meaning of Scripture, which God intends but the human authors do not.⁵⁰ Many scholars used the concept of the *sensus plenior* to articulate their conviction that God does in fact sometimes intend more meaning than the human authors. They saw it as a helpful way to talk about what Christians have always believed about the Old Testament. Others rejected the concept. Some rejected it because they held for a strict identity between human and divine intentions; others because they thought that the new, nontraditional classification was redundant and only injected additional confusion into the ongoing discussion about the senses of Scripture.⁵¹ Still others rejected it because, in their opinion, it undermined efforts to root exegesis in the human authors' intentions⁵² or improperly claimed access to God's own intentions.⁵³ As the discussion progressed, the concept of the *sensus plenior* both lost ground and gained ground. Many of its initial proponents, including Raymond Brown, came

⁴⁸ The classic works on the senses of Scripture in ancient and medieval Christianity are: Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Marc Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998–2009).

⁴⁹ For an overview of more-than-literal senses from Christian origins to the recent past, with some attention to the question of what God intends, see Raymond E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 605–23, at 610–19; Brown and Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990 ed.), 1153–58.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, MD: St. Mary's University Press, 1955), 92.

⁵¹ Raymond E. Brown, "The History and Development of a *Sensus Plenior*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1953): 141–62, at 148, 153.

⁵² Bruce Vawter, "The Fuller Sense: Some Considerations," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26 (1964): 85–96, at 86; Brown, "Hermeneutics," 615.

⁵³ Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense," 727–29.

to distance themselves from it.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, it also acquired new adherents, spreading from Catholic circles to Protestant circles; it was also taken up by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its landmark 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.⁵⁵

Putting aside the question of the *sensus plenior* and its usefulness as a concept, acceptance of Christian revelation leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that God sometimes intends meaning—and, specifically, references—that the human authors did not. Christianity was founded on the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures. Many of these prophecies can be recognized as prophecies only in hindsight, in the light of Jesus's life and teaching, strongly suggesting that God intended references that the human authors of those prophecies did not.⁵⁶

The sacrifice of Isaac, for example, has long been interpreted as prophetically foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion, including, seemingly, in Hebrews 11:17–19.⁵⁷ Just as Isaac, the “only one” of Abraham, carries wood on his back to the place of sacrifice in obedience to his father's command, so too Jesus, the only-begotten Son of the Father, carries wood on his back to his place of sacrifice in obedience to the Father's will. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, did God intend more than the human authors? We have three main options. First, we could say that it is pure coincidence, and that neither God nor the human authors intended Genesis 22 to prophesy Christ's crucifixion. Second, we could say that God gave the human authors supernatural insight into the full meaning of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and that both God and the human authors intended it as a prophetic type of Christ's crucifixion. Third, we could say that God intended a deeper meaning, but the human authors did not.

Of these options, the third is by far the most plausible. In the context

⁵⁴ Matthew W. I. Dunn, “Raymond Brown and the *Sensus Plenior* Interpretation of the Bible,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 36, no. 3–4 (2007): 531–51.

⁵⁵ Dunn, “Raymond Brown,” 544–47. For a defense of the *sensus plenior* using speech act theory, see Barker, “Speech Act Theory.”

⁵⁶ On the evangelists' reading of the Old Testament as full of prophetic types fulfilled in Christ, but identified as prophetic only in retrospect, see Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). See also Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

⁵⁷ On the history of Christian theological interpretation of Gen 22 and its prophetic foreshadowing of Christ's crucifixion, see Carey Ellen Walsh, “Christian Theological Interpretations of God's Grace in the Binding of Isaac,” *Perichoresis* 10, no. 1 (2012): 41–66.

of Christian faith, the idea that it was all just a big coincidence is not plausible. And while the possibility of infused supernatural insight cannot be excluded, the text gives no indication that the human authors intended the story to be prophetic, let alone prophetic of God having a Son and handing him over to be crucified for our sake. We are left to conclude that God intended a deeper meaning—a reference—that the human authors did not. Arguably, it is precisely the fact that the human authors seem to have no clue that Genesis 22 foreshadows Christ's crucifixion in eerie detail that explains its prophetic power and its grip on the Christian imagination. In a similar way, it is highly implausible that the human authors of the book of Jonah intended Jonah to serve as a prophetic type of Jesus in the way that Christians have always understood him to be, or that the human authors intended the three days that Jonah spends in the belly of the whale to be the source of the early Christian conviction that the Scriptures had prophesied that Christ would rise on the third day (as it seems to have been).⁵⁸ Based on these two examples alone, and of course many more could be considered, Christians have sufficient reason to conclude that God sometimes intends more than the human authors of Scripture—or more specifically, that he sometimes intends references that the human authors did not.

The Human Authors Sometimes Intend References That God Does Not

In the first half of the third century, Origen faced a pastoral challenge virtually unknown today: a significant number of Christians in his congregations believed that they were obligated to observe Jewish ritual laws.⁵⁹ Apparently, their reverence for the Old Testament had led them to think that they were obligated to keep its ceremonial precepts, or at least some of them. In his homilies, Origen corrects members of his congregation for attending Jewish synagogue on Saturdays in addition to Christian liturgies on Sundays, and for keeping the feast of unleavened bread.⁶⁰

Origen's corrections flow from a carefully worked out account of Scrip-

⁵⁸ On the significance of the book of Jonah for early Christology and the probability that Jonah 2:1 was at the root of the early Christian conviction that Jesus's resurrection on the third day had been prophesied by Scripture, see Lombardo, *The Father's Will*, 212–21.

⁵⁹ Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Countours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 148–56.

⁶⁰ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.8.3 and 10.2, and *Homilies on Jeremiah* 12.13.1. For my understanding of Origen's exegetical method and why he is concerned about exegetical literalism, and also for the texts cited here and below, I am indebted to Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 133–60.

ture, which includes a distinction between literal and spiritual meaning.⁶¹ In his response to Celsus, for example, Origen explains: “The reason why we do not live like the Jews is that we think the literal interpretation of the laws does not contain the meaning of the legislation.”⁶² Likewise, at the beginning of his homilies on Leviticus, Origen cautions against reading Leviticus according to the letter. He warns that this exegetical approach would “draw out” the voice of the lawgiver, namely Moses, and thereby compel Christians to keep Jewish sacrificial precepts, missing the true spiritual meaning of Leviticus.⁶³ For Origen, reading Old Testament laws according to the letter—and, implicitly, according to what the human authors intended to communicate—misses God’s intended meaning. God intends both less and more than the human authors: less, because he does not require perpetual observance according to the letter, and more, because he requires Christians to observe them in a deeper spiritual way. Furthermore, for Origen, this exegetical approach is not one option among many. It is necessary for Christians to make sense of the Old Testament.⁶⁴ It is also implicitly mandated by the letters of Saint Paul, according to whom “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).⁶⁵

The arguments Origen deployed in the third century remain equally valid today. By any reasonable application of historical-critical methods, we must conclude the human authors of the Pentateuch understood its legislation to be permanently binding on their fellow Israelites. And yet, after a period of disagreement, still visible in the various strata of the New Testament, the earliest Christians reached the conviction that God no longer required even Jews to observe Jewish ritual precepts. The New Testament canonized this discernment. The New Testament does not merely teach that Gentiles need not keep Jewish ritual observances; it implies that Jews also are exempt.⁶⁶ And by canonizing this discernment,

⁶¹ For Origen’s views on Scripture, see especially his *On First Principles* 4.

⁶² *Against Celsus* 5.60, in *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

⁶³ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1–2, in *Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. G. W. Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1990); see also Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 136–37, 42.

⁶⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2–3, esp. 4.2.2 and 4.3.4. Against the claim that Origen’s position can be accurately categorized as supersessionist, see Michael G. Azar, “Origen, Scripture, and the Imprecision of ‘Supersessionism,’” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10, no. 2 (2016): 157–72.

⁶⁵ Origen, *On First Principles* 1.1.2. On the reception history of 2 Cor 3:6, see Bernardin Schneider, “The Meaning of St. Paul’s Antithesis ‘the Letter and the Spirit,’” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1953): 163–207, at 164–87.

⁶⁶ From the earliest Christian sources until the present day, the New Testament has

the New Testament also canonized the exegetical principle that God sometimes intends less than the human authors of Scripture—or more precisely, that the human authors sometimes intend references that God does not.⁶⁷

One might object that the human authors of the Old Testament did not rule out the possibility that God would one day change the law or abrogate some of its precepts. Consequently, their intentions need not be seen to diverge from God's intentions. Yet, even if we grant that this argument succeeds with most Old Testament laws, it does not work with all of them.

been overwhelmingly read as implying that Jewish Christians, and not merely Gentile Christians, no longer needed to keep the ceremonial precepts of the Mosaic law, and that Paul and Peter felt free to depart from Jewish purity laws when it suited them (see esp. Acts 10:1–11:18; Rom 14:1–15:6; Gal 2:12–16). In recent years, a small but significant wave of scholarship has challenged this view. It argues that Paul never departed from full Torah observance, and that he never meant to teach Jewish Christians that they were free to do so, either. See, for example, Mark Nanos, “The Myth of the ‘Law-Free’ Paul Standing between Christians and Jews,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; David Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Romans 14:14, 20,” in *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Carlos A. Segovia, Gabriele Boccaccini, and Cameron J. Doody (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 151–81. This line of scholarship has shone a light on ambiguities in the texts and overlooked complexities in Paul's understanding of the law. Nevertheless, its main line of argument contradicts the most obvious reading of multiple independent texts, and it runs against a consensus that has been near unanimous for most of Christian history. For a reading of Paul in keeping with that consensus, see: John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). For critical responses to this new wave of scholarship, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, “Why the ‘Weak’ at Rome Cannot Be Non-Christian Jews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2000): 64–82; Philip La G. Du Toit, “Was Paul Fully Torah Observant According to Acts?,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (2016): 1–9.

⁶⁷ In his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure proposes a similar exegetical principle, seemingly also rooted in observations about certain Jewish ritual precepts described in Scripture as perpetually obligatory. “The third rule is this: When a certain Scriptural passage has a possible literal and spiritual meaning, the interpreter ought to judge whether that passage relates better to the literal or to a spiritual meaning—if, that is, it cannot be accepted in both senses. For if it can be accepted in both senses, then it ought to be given both a literal and a spiritual interpretation. But if it is capable of only one interpretation, then it must be taken in the spiritual sense alone. Examples of this are the statements that the law of the Sabbath has perpetual force, that the cultic priesthood is eternal, that Israel's possession of the land is unending, and that the covenant of circumcision is everlasting. All of these statements have to be referred to their spiritual meaning” (*Breviloquium*, prologue, 6.3, trans. Dominic V. Monti [St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2005], 21). I am grateful to Matthew Ramage for bringing this passage to my attention.

A handful of laws and statutes are described as binding in perpetuity (see Exod 12:17; 31:16–17; Lev 16:29–31, 34; 24:8). In these texts, God does not merely command ritual observances. God states that their observance shall be perpetual and everlasting.

Granted, we could imagine describing commands as binding in perpetuity for rhetorical emphasis, without meaning to imply that they must be observed through all generations until the end of time. It is not plausible, however, to say that the human authors meant their words to be understood in this way. Every reasonable application of historical-critical methods leads to the asymptotically certain conclusion that the human authors meant for their words to convey the idea that these ritual practices were permanently required of their fellow Israelites.⁶⁸ And yet, for Christians, God could not have meant for their words to be understood in that way, because according to near unanimous opinion among Christians, the Holy Spirit teaches the opposite through the New Testament. Unless we hold that God changed his mind, or that Christians have misinterpreted God's revelation in Christ virtually from the beginning and that Jewish Christians are not in fact free from the obligation to keep Jewish ritual practices, we must conclude that the human authors of the Pentateuch intended to convey meaning—references—that God did not.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ By “historical-critical methods” I mean all recognized methods for clarifying the meaning of texts in their original historical and literary contexts, without meaning to imply that there is a monolithic understanding of historical-critical exegesis, and without meaning to favor one approach over any other. My claim is that any reasonable attempt to understand the texts in their original context, without appealing to special claims about divine revelation or the status of inspired Scripture, will inevitably arrive at this conclusion.

⁶⁹ A common reading of *Dei Verbum* §11 has encouraged the opposite view among Catholic scholars. According to this common reading, whatever the human authors intend to affirm, God intends to affirm as well. See, for example, Matthew Levering, “The Inspiration of Scripture: A *Status Quaestionis*,” *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 281–314, at 301. This reading of *Dei Verbum* has its roots in a strong trend among Catholic exegetes in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council. At that time, it was common to take this view of the relationship between divine and human intentions. For example, in 1955, Brown writes: “The literal sense must be *intended by both God and the human author*. It is the meaning which the human author, inspired by God, wanted to express when he composed a passage” (*Sensus Plenior*, 5; emphasis original). When *Dei Verbum* was promulgated, this paragraph was naturally read in light of this trend; indeed, its phrasing was likely influenced by this trend as well.

Dei Verbum §11, however, states only that “everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit.” It does not state that everything that the human authors *intend* to affirm is necessarily

We can say even more: insofar as Christian belief is founded on the conviction that the Jewish Scriptures were inspired by God, and insofar as Christianity as a social phenomenon is founded on the conviction that even Jewish Christians are now free from the obligation to observe the ritual practices legislated in those Scriptures, Christianity in its beliefs and essential culture is founded on the conviction that God sometimes intends less than the human authors of Scripture. And since this exegetical principle is canonized by the New Testament, and since the New Testament is constitutive of Christian revelation, this exegetical principle and its associated exegetical practices can be said to be revealed by God.

To be clear, to say that God intended Jewish ceremonial precepts differently from the human authors does not mean he did not intend the ceremonial precepts at all. Nor does it mean that the Jewish covenant has been revoked and superseded by the new covenant in Christ. It simply means that God intended the ceremonial precepts differently from the human authors. While the authors of the Old Testament intended the precepts in a straightforward way, not aware of their provisionality, God intended their literal observance as a stage of divine pedagogy, fully valid in itself, but imperfect and destined to give way to a deeper fulfillment,⁷⁰ as when the Sabbath rest finds fulfillment in the everlasting rest of heaven (Heb 4:8–11). God intends to communicate his message precisely through the flawed and limited understanding of the human authors, without positively willing the flaws and limitations of their understanding. In this way, to say that God intends less than the human authors does not mean that God did not intend the precepts at all, nor does it allow for neo-Marcionite interpretations which would render the Old Testament and God's covenant with the Jewish people a kind of divine pantomime, something which did not have any point other than to provide matter for Christian interpretation.⁷¹

affirmed by the Holy Spirit. Different parties can make verbally identical assertions but mean them differently. Consequently, *Dei Verbum* need not be read as implying that the Holy Spirit intends to affirm whatever the human authors intend to affirm. In fact, a subsequent line can be read as suggesting, or at least supporting, the view that the human authors might intend an assertion in a way that the divine author does not: "The interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to perceive clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, must carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, *and what it pleased God to manifest through their words*" (*Dei Verbum* §12; emphasis mine).

⁷⁰ See Gal 3:19–25 and *Dei Verbum* §15.

⁷¹ It also does not rule out the possibility, contrary to the main line of Christian tradition over the centuries, but consonant with the convictions of a substantial number of Jewish Christians of the first century, that God still wants some Christians to witness to the Jewish covenant by observing at least some of its ceremonial

Furthermore, while it is not tenable from the perspective of the New Testament to claim that God intends certain precepts of the Mosaic law as literally as their human authors, it does not follow that the Old Testament is for that reason reduced in stature to a kind of second-rate revelation. A key reason why is that whenever God intends less, he also intends more. When God intends less about the day of atonement (Lev 16:29–34), or the feast of unleavened bread (Exod 12:17), or the bread of the presence (Lev 24:8), or the Sabbath (Exod 31:16–17), he also intends more: the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, its memorial in the Eucharist, and the eternal rest of heaven. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Letter to the Hebrews focuses not merely on Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament, but specifically on Christ's fulfillment of those Old Testament precepts that have attached to them a stipulation of perpetual observance: the Sabbath rest as a type of heaven; the day of atonement as a type of Christ's priestly sacrifice; and possibly the unleavened bread as a type of Eucharist (see especially references in Heb 5–7 to Melchizedek, the priest who offered bread and wine in Gen 14:18, as well as to the altar from which gifts are eaten in Heb 13:10). It is quite possible that the author of the letter decided to focus on these precepts not simply to illustrate Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament, but also because he and other early Christians were keenly aware that the Old Testament had commanded them to be kept in perpetuity, and that therefore no longer keeping them literally demanded greater theological justification than with other ritual precepts.

The story of Caiaphas's prophecy supports the idea that the human authors of Scripture sometimes intend references that God does not. In John's Gospel, Caiaphas declares, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." Afterward, the evangelist comments: "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:49–52). The clear implication is that, on an account of his office, Caiaphas was speaking under God's influence, and that, ironically, his words were true but not for

precepts (though without regarding them as salvific in and of themselves; see Gal 5:4). For an exploration of this possibility from the perspective of Messianic Judaism, see Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Judaism: A Constructive Approach* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2009). From within the Catholic tradition, see: Gavin D'Costa, "The Mystery of Israel: Jews, Hebrew Catholics, Messianic Judaism, the Catholic Church, and the Mosaic Ceremonial Laws," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 16, no. 3 (2018): 939–77; D'Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on Jews after the Second Vatican Council* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

the reasons that he thought. When Caiaphas affirms the value of one man dying for the people, he is referring to the benefits of getting Jesus out of the way, but God is referring to the benefits that come from Jesus humbly accepting death for our sake. Applying Frege's terminology, Caiaphas and God each intend the same sense, but they do not intend the same reference. The evangelist does not draw any implications for scriptural inspiration from his narrative, but we can: the story and the evangelist's commentary—each of which themselves Christians hold to be inspired by God—strongly suggest that God can use the words of Scripture to convey meanings that are different from, or even opposed to, the meanings intended by the inspired writers.

The idea that God's intended reference can differ from the human authors' intended reference resolves numerous exegetical dilemmas. Consider the story of Saul and the conquest of Amalek.⁷² God commands Saul to put the Amalekites under the ban and kill every man, woman, and child in Amalek (1 Sam 15:1–3).⁷³ We cannot rule out the possibility that the human authors of this passage intended to make a positive historical claim about what God commanded. If we hold that everything intended by the human authors is also intended by God, but balk at the idea of God commanding genocide, we are cornered. Either we must prejudge the results of historical-critical inquiry, and hold that the human authors could not possibly have intended to make a positive historical claim about what God intended, no matter what the evidence suggests, or we must make our peace with a sword of Damocles forever hanging over heads: "I am pretty sure that God's goodness precludes the possibility that he might actually command genocide, but if new evidence comes to light proving that the human authors of 1 Samuel thought that he did, then I might have to revise my opinion." But if we grant that the human authors sometimes intend references that God does not, the exegetical dilemma evaporates. Whether or not the human authors intended to make a historical claim about the ban becomes irrelevant. Even if they did, we need not conclude that any divine order was actually given. Of course, we may still conclude that, as a matter of fact, God did order Saul to wipe out the Amalekites, but we are not *compelled*

⁷² For a history and analysis of exegetical attempts to interpret these sorts of passages in light of Christian belief, see Christian Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide: Christian Interpretation of Herem Passages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷³ God gives a similar command to Moses in Deuteronomy (see Deut 7:1–2; 20:16–18).

to make this inference. Other exegetical dilemmas can be resolved along similar lines.⁷⁴

Jewish Readings of Scripture

Among the most serious objections that can be raised against this threefold hypothesis are those concerning its implications for Jewish readings of Scripture and for Jewish–Christian relations. According to these objections, the claim that some of God’s intended meaning in the Old Testament can be discerned only in the light of Christian revelation is problematic because it denigrates Jewish readings of Scripture and ultimately Judaism itself. It thus flies in the face not only of Christian repentance for past anti-Semitism, ecclesial declarations such as *Nostra Aetate*, and other advances in Christian appreciation for Judaism, but also Christian Scripture itself, which states that God’s covenant with the Jewish people is “irrevocable” (Rom 11:29).

To these objections, it must immediately be conceded that, if this threefold hypothesis did in fact have implications that, however unintentionally, denigrated Jewish readings of Scripture or Judaism itself, then it would be problematic for that reason alone. Yet it need not be construed to have any such implications. Setting aside questions of biblical interpretation, we can observe that friends frequently disagree about the meaning of an existentially important text, and tell each other so, while also showing great respect for each other’s reading of the text and even learning from each other.

Consequently, to someone who might object that it is one thing for

⁷⁴ Joseph Ratzinger comes close to affirming that the human authors of Scripture sometimes intend to convey meaning that God does not. In the face of the apparent errors found in Scripture, he occasionally speaks about what Scripture intends, seemingly in opposition to what the human authors intend. He does not clarify what he means when he talks about Scripture intending something. Nevertheless, he appears to hold that what Scripture intends—and by implication what the divine author intends—does not necessarily encompass all that the human authors intend. See: Jared Wicks, “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as Peritus before and During Vatican Council II,” *Gregorianum* 89 (2008): 233–311, at 269–85, esp. 280; Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5; Aaron Pidel, “Joseph Ratzinger on Biblical Inerrancy,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12 (2014): 307–30, esp. 311–16. According to the most natural reading of certain critical passages, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s recent document, *The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture: The Word That Comes from God and Speaks of God for the Salvation of the World*, also seems to assume or acknowledge that the human authors sometimes intended to make claims that were inaccurate (see §§ 108, 123, 134).

Christians to find Christological meaning in an Old Testament text, but to claim that God put it there—that this meaning informs the text intrinsically, from the inside—is intrinsically denigrating of Jewish readings of Scripture, we have reason to say that the burden of proof is with objector.⁷⁵ In any event, as many Christian scholars have demonstrated, it is indeed possible to hold simultaneously for the truth of Christian readings of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in Christ, on the one hand, and the irrevocable nature of the Jewish covenant and the enriching value of learning from Jewish readings of Scripture, on the other.⁷⁶ Also, as Reinhard Hütter has pointed out, a strongly Christological reading of the Old Testament offers a corrective against the perennial Marcionite temptation to disregard or downplay the importance of the Old Testament for Christianity.⁷⁷ Christological readings of the Old Testament can be used to justify chauvinistic disrespect for Judaism, but they also provide a reason for Christians to take the Old Testament seriously and honor the Jewish people from whom they receive it. By thus countering the Marcionite dismissal of the Old Testament and its sweeping disregard for Jewish belief and practice, Christological readings of the Old Testament are not merely compatible with respect for Judaism; when properly contextualized, they play an important role in *enhancing* Christian respect for Judaism.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that concerns about the implications of this article's threefold hypothesis for Jewish readings of Scripture and for Jewish–Christian relations are valid and important, and require greater attention than can be given here.

Implications for the Inspiration and Truth of Scripture

The principle that God and the human authors always agree on the intended sense, but sometimes differ on the intended reference, has a

⁷⁵ For a helpful discussion of supersessionism and how Christian readings of Jewish Scripture can be distinctive without being denigrating of Jewish readings, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 129–31. See also Claire Mathews McGinnis, “Stumbling over the Testaments: On Reading Patristic Exegesis and the Old Testament in Light of the New,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 1 (2010): 15–31.

⁷⁶ See, e.g.: Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002); Matthew Levering, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue and the Life of Wisdom: Engagements with the Theology of David Novak* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁷⁷ Reinhard Hütter, “In’: Some Incipient Reflections on ‘The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,’” *Pro Ecclesia* 13, no. 1 (2004): 13–24, at 23.

number of implications for the theology of inspiration.⁷⁸

The Metaphysics and Psychology of Inspiration

Assuming that the human authors sometimes intend to affirm things that are not in fact true (for example, that the Jews are bound to specific ritual observances in perpetuity), and that God, it is widely agreed, cannot inspire falsehood, then it cannot be the case that God inspired every aspect of the human authors' intending. God inspires many aspects of the human authors' intending, but he cannot inspire *every* aspect of their intending, because that would imply inspiring falsehood. It does not matter that the human authors may be speaking the truth as best they know it. Even if the human authors lack any intention to deceive, God knows the truth, and he cannot inspire them to affirm something that he knows is false. The fact that, on a deeper level, what the human authors say is true in ways that they do not realize—for example, about the perpetual obligation of Jewish ritual practices, which in the Christian dispensation is fulfilled in spiritual ways—is irrelevant. It does not change the fact that some of what they *intend* to affirm is false. And since God could not have inspired them to intend anything false, some of the human authors' intended meaning must come entirely from themselves.

This striking conclusion points to an excess of intended meaning in Scripture: an excess that comes purely from the human authors, beyond what God inspires. While the human authors choose their words for reasons that are inspired by God, they also choose their words—at least occasionally—for reasons that are entirely their own, reasons that are somehow outside the sphere of God's direct inspiration. To put it otherwise, as the human authors choose their words, the Holy Spirit does not inspire every aspect of their choosing. Something about their choice of words must originate entirely in the human authors themselves, from well-springs that do not trace back to the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

⁷⁸ The theology of inspiration, widely regarded as having stalled over the past few decades, has been undergoing a revival in some circles. On the state of contemporary theology of inspiration, see Matthew Levering, "The Inspiration of Scripture: A Status Quaestionis," *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 281–314; Philip Moller, "What Should They Be Saying about Biblical Inspiration? A Note on the State of the Question," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 3 (2013): 605–31. For two recent attempts to revive the theology of inspiration, see: Denis Farkasfalvy, *A Theology of the Christian Bible: Revelation—Inspiration—Canon* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018); Gerard O'Collins, *Inspiration: Towards a Christian Interpretation of Biblical Inspiration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Strictly speaking, we can demonstrate the existence of this excess only when it is absolutely clear that the human authors intend something that the divine author does not, like when they describe certain ritual precepts as binding in perpetuity. Yet in thinking about how divine inspiration would have to work to account for these clear-cut instances, the most natural conclusion is that these instances are not exceptions, but limit cases. They are occasions when the veil is lifted on the hidden mechanism of inspiration. Assuming that we can indeed extrapolate from these clear-cut instances to a general rule, then it must be the case that in the composition of each and every word of Scripture, the human authors are not merely expressing what God inspires them to say. They are also and always writing for their own independent reasons, reasons which God may well approve but which somehow fall outside the sphere of his direct inspiration. To put it another way: the human authors have many reasons for choosing their words. Some of these reasons trace back to God's inspiration, but others do not.

This excess of intended meaning in Scripture suggests a complex psychology of inspiration. It suggests that God influences the human authors without overwhelming them.⁷⁹ God inspires them as they choose their words, so that they choose them for his reasons, but they also choose their words for their own reasons. There is a dialogical element to inspiration.⁸⁰ The inspired writers may not perceive what is happening as they write, but regardless of what they perceive, they experience in their subjectivity a dialogical interplay between the impulse of inspiration and their own normal psychological functioning. God guides them along paths of thought and emotion, but he does not walk the paths for them. God leads them along paths that they would not have chosen otherwise, in a direction he has chosen, but they walk at their own pace, in their own way, until they arrive together with God at their destination: words that are truly God's and truly theirs. The human authors thus contribute something to Scripture that is neither inspired by God nor determined by God: something that is truly from them.⁸¹

⁷⁹ In a presentation delivered during the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger stresses that, counter to theories tracing back to Philo and Augustine which take their origin from Middle Platonic mysticism, God's inspiration should not be understood as overwhelming the human authors or swallowing them up (Wicks, "Six Texts," 278).

⁸⁰ Wicks, "Six Texts," 269–85.

⁸¹ The communities of Scripture's human authors also contribute something to Scripture. Since these communities shaped the sensibilities and religious horizons of the human authors, they contribute to Scripture not merely historical backdrop,

The Truth of Scripture

Traditionally, convictions about the truth of Scripture have flowed from convictions about inspiration. Since Scripture is inspired, the reasoning goes, it must be free from all error.⁸² Theological reasoning does not usually run in reverse. Theologians do not usually argue that Scripture's evident freedom from all error means that it must have been inspired by God. There are too many problematic passages in Scripture.⁸³ The compelling truth of individual passages of Scripture may well convince someone that the whole of Scripture must be inspired, and therefore inerrant, but convictions about the truth of Scripture taken as a whole typically derive from convictions about inspiration. Naturally, different understandings of inspiration lead to different understandings of the truth of Scripture.

According to the account of inspiration given here, God's inspiration does not extend to every aspect of the human authors' intended meaning. God's inspiration always encompasses their intended sense (*Sinn*), but it does not always encompass their intended reference (*Bedeutung*). Under the assumption that only what God inspires need be immune from error, two important consequences follow. First, to know what Scripture teaches without error, we must first discern God's intended meaning. It does not suffice to discern the human authors' intended meaning. The human authors' intended meaning may not correspond to God's intended meaning, because the human authors sometimes intend references that God does not. Second, there is no great difficulty in acknowledging that the human authors of Scripture sometimes intend to make claims that are not in fact correct. God's intended reference is what is immune from error, not the human authors' intended reference.

One might object that this account of the truth of Scripture reduces to a trivial tautology: whatever truth God intends to communicate through Scripture is true. In response, it can be granted that, yes, it can be reduced to that premise, but it is not for that reason a trivial tautology.

literary context, and modes of expression, but something that is truly from them. The text of Scripture reflects not only the human authors' free and creative contributions and the human authors' inner dialogue with God, but also those of their communities.

⁸² See, for example, Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), §§20–21, and *Dei Verbum*, §11.

⁸³ Famously, Cardinal Franz König cited some of them on the floor of the Second Vatican Council. See (*History of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, vol. 4, *Church as Communion—Third Period and Intersession, September 1964 – September 1965* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Leuven: Peeters, 2004], 220).

The reason is that, according to the account of inspiration given here, God always inspires the sense (*Sinn*) intended by the human authors. Since the intended sense significantly constrains our attempts to discern God's intended reference, claiming that "whatever truth God intends to communicate through Scripture is true" does not open the door to an exegetical free-for-all, nor does it reduce Christian convictions about the truth of Scripture to an empty cipher. It does indeed allow for a great deal of interpretative leeway, but difficult passages in Scripture often require that interpretative leeway in order to be read in ways compatible with fundamental Christian beliefs.⁸⁴ It also helps to explain the role of—and points to the need for—ecclesial authority. If anyone with a grasp of Scripture's humanly intended meaning could infallibly judge what God meant to assert, there would be substantially less need for authoritative interpretations of Scripture.

Plenary Verbal Inspiration

Despite being the default assumption from the early Church through the nineteenth century, plenary verbal inspiration—the view that every word of Scripture is inspired by God—has fallen on hard times. Objections have centered on its alleged inability to explain Scripture's evident humanness, especially its apparent errors, and its seeming implications for theological exegesis. For example, Sandra Schneiders rules out plenary verbal inspiration as "theologically untenable" for "almost inevitably lead[ing] to fundamentalism in interpretation and to irresolvable conflicts with empirical data."⁸⁵ To better account for the empirical data, alternative theories of inspiration have been proposed. Johann Baptist Franzelin theorized that God inspired the human authors with concepts and nonverbal messages and then stepped back and let them express those concepts and nonverbal messages as they saw fit.⁸⁶ Around the same time as Franzelin, John Henry Newman and others proposed that Scripture includes incidental remarks by the human authors,

⁸⁴ See, for example, the challenge posed by "dark passages of the bible" for traditional theories of Scripture: Matthew J. Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013). Applying this article's threefold hypothesis—and especially the idea that God need not intend every reference intended by the human authors of Scripture—allows us to regard these "dark passages" as divinely inspired and yet also fully compatible with a maximal account of God's goodness.

⁸⁵ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 48.

⁸⁶ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 88–120.

obiter dicta, which do not share in the charism of inspiration.⁸⁷

If we grant, however, that God sometimes intends less than the human authors, these concerns about plenary verbal inspiration can be addressed easily. The key point is that plenary verbal inspiration need not imply that God and the inspired writers intend the same reference, only that they intend the same sense. With this point in mind, these sorts of objections evaporate. God inspires every word of Scripture, but he does not predetermine every word of Scripture. Rather, God and the human authors find the words together. As the human authors compose each phrase of Scripture, they are drawing on their own freedom and creativity in what they say and how they say it, but God is also guiding them so that, without depriving them of their freedom or their creativity, they consign to writing “everything that he wanted, and only what he wanted.”⁸⁸ There is plenary verbal inspiration, but not *predetermined* plenary verbal inspiration.

The idea of God finding the words with the inspired writers can seem to reduce God to the status of mere coauthor. Christian tradition, meanwhile, while generally recognizing that God’s authorship must be understood in analogous terms, has typically referred to God as the principal author of Scripture.⁸⁹ This account of divine inspiration, however, does not demote God from principal author to mere coauthor. It still has God transcendently guiding the process from beginning to end. Furthermore, when we reflect on the obvious fact that the inspired writers could only choose words that they already knew, the idea of God finding the words with the inspired writers does not appear reductive, but instead necessary. Consider, for example, the fact that every inspired writer wrote in languages that they already spoke before being inspired. This obvious fact

⁸⁷ John Henry Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture* (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1967); Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 65–79; Raymond F. Collins, “Inspiration,” in Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1023–33 at 1030.

⁸⁸ *Dei Verbum* §11.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1. Karl Rahner and others have rightly cautioned against understanding God’s authorship of Scripture in ways too closely analogous to human authorship: Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, trans. Charles H. Henkey (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964), 13–18, 58–66; Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 213–19; Moller, “What Should They Be Saying?,” 621–22. Nevertheless, while acknowledging that God’s authorship differs from human authorship, for God’s authorship to mean anything, he must want to say something through the words of Scripture, and he must somehow be involved in the actual choosing of each and every word.

means that their words did not come into their minds *ex nihilo* from God. God worked with what they gave him. And since verbal performances necessarily originate from unique and unrepeatable movements of thought (that is, we never say the same words for exactly the same reasons), it is, arguably, ontologically impossible for God to inspire words except by finding them with the human authors, if God's inspiration is to leave their freedom intact. In short, this account of inspiration does not deny or minimize God's status as principal author of Scripture. It is rather the necessary implication of affirming that the inspired writers are themselves true authors—or of calling God the principal author of Scripture in the first place, since the title implies that he is not the *only* author of Scripture.

Implications for Theological Exegesis

These reflections on the inspiration and truth of Scripture have numerous implications for theological exegesis.

The Literal Meaning and Theological Exegesis

In theological readings of Scripture, the primacy of the literal meaning of Scripture continues to be asserted across a wide range of theological perspectives. Among theologians relying primarily on historical-critical methods, neo-Scholastic categories, canonical criticism, or insights drawn from contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, and everything in between, there is great consensus that the literal meaning is foundational to theological exegesis. Yet as discussed earlier, there is no agreement about what it is, or how it relates to authorial intention, or how exactly it should function in theological exegesis.

Applying the distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) allows us to clarify the role of the literal meaning in theological exegesis. On the one hand, if we define the literal meaning as encompassing both the human authors' intended sense and their intended reference, as Origen seems to do when arguing against keeping Jewish law according to the letter, then we must significantly qualify the primacy of the literal meaning. Since the human authors sometimes intend references that God does not, we will sometimes need to interpret Scripture not according to the literal meaning, but against it. In these cases, we will need to kick it away like a ladder after we have ascended to God's intended meaning. On the other hand, if we define the literal meaning as encompassing the human authors' intended sense, but excluding their intended reference (as seems to be required if we hold, as Aquinas does, that the literal meaning is always intended by God, because the human authors sometimes intend references that God does not), then we could hold for the hermeneutic

primacy of the literal meaning without any qualification. We can define the literal meaning either way; there is nothing preventing us from defining a technical term however we please. But however we define the literal meaning of Scripture, if we want to privilege the literal meaning in our exegetical method, we must somehow take into account the excess of intended meaning in Scripture: the meaning intended by the human authors but not by God.

Given that we can define the literal meaning either way, can we draw any conclusions about which definition would be preferable? Yes, we can. The whole point of privileging the literal meaning of Scripture is to provide a stable foundation for theological exegesis. Yet we have easy and reliable access only to the intended sense (*Sinn*). We do not have easy and reliable access to the intended reference (*Bedeutung*). Consequently, if we want to privilege the literal meaning of Scripture in our exegetical method, it is more logical to identify the literal meaning of Scripture with the intended sense alone, rather than as encompassing both intended sense and intended reference.

The claim that we have easy and reliable access to the intended *Sinn* of a text was explained and defended above, but it bears repeating and elaborating here, because a lot hangs on this claim, and it is easily misunderstood. To say that we have easy and reliable access to the intended *Sinn* does not mean that we therefore have easy and reliable access to the intended meaning; it simply means that, if we speak a language, we necessarily have knowledge of its conventions, and therefore easy and reliable access to the range of references typically associated with particular words and expressions. For example, to return to an earlier example, if we come across a slip of paper with the words, "Get on the next train," we have easy and reliable access to the intended *Sinn*, but without further context, we have neither easy nor reliable access to the message it was intended to convey. Is it an actual instruction to someone, a coded message, or a line from a poem? We do not know. Likewise, when considering the story of God's command to Saul to kill the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:1–3), we have easy and reliable access to the text's intended *Sinn*, but we have neither easy nor reliable access to the message either God or the human authors intended to convey. Is it a historical account, historical fiction, a fable, or what? Is it meant as a factual account of something that really happened, coupled with a religious message about faith and obedience? Or is it not meant to be taken as something historical, but simply as a dramatic device, something meant to communicate the radical necessity of cleaving to God in faith, and the importance of eliminating anything that could pose an obstacle to living a life of faith? Coming to a conclusion on this score is neither easy nor

uncontroversial. In short, our access to the intended *Sinn* is secure, but this secure access does not get us what we are most interested in: the intended meaning, for which we also need access to the intended reference, which is much more elusive, and often requires great effort and a lot of training, both intellectual and spiritual, to acquire—and perhaps a bit of luck, too.

The Seed That Must Die to Bear Fruit

Over recent decades, after a great deal of struggle and debate, a tentative, ecumenical consensus about theological exegesis has begun to take shape. Gradually, more and more exegetes and theologians have come to agree on a number of hermeneutical principles, largely drawn from the tradition in one way or another, as a foundation for postcritical theological exegesis.⁹⁰ The following provides a representative list. First, we should interpret each part of Scripture in view of the whole, reading individual passages in light of the entire canon,⁹¹ and giving pride of place to the Gospels.⁹² Second, Scripture can be properly interpreted only according to the rule of faith and the Christian community which preserves and interprets it.⁹³ Third, we need to read Scripture through the lens of the Paschal mystery.⁹⁴ Fourth,

⁹⁰ For a survey of contemporary approaches to theological exegesis, see Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*, 1–72.

⁹¹ See *Dei Verbum* §12 and the genre of canonical criticism initiated by Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). For a survey of recent applications of canonical criticism, see Ron Haydon, “A Survey and Analysis of Recent ‘Canonical’ Methods (2000–2015),” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (2016): 145–55.

⁹² *Dei Verbum* §18.

⁹³ In *On First Principles* (preface, 2; 4.2.2), Origen is among the first Christian authors to appeal to “the rule of faith” as a guide for the interpretation of Scripture (see Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 105, 13, 27–31). On the rule of faith in early Christianity, see: Ronnie J. Rombs and Alexander Y. Hwang, eds., *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010); Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 233–55. On the rule of faith in contemporary theological exegesis, see Leonard G. Finn, “Reflections on the Rule of Faith,” in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Word of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz, Kent Harold Richards, and Robert C. Kashow (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

⁹⁴ For an illuminating exchange on this subject, see Ayres and Fowl, “(Mis)Reading,” and Roland E. Murphy, “Quaestio Disputata: Is the Paschal Mystery Really the Primary Hermeneutical Principle?” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 139–46. While Murphy objects to Ayres and Fowl describing the Paschal mystery as a hermeneutical principle, let alone *the* primary hermeneutical principle, preferring to describe it as a context which Christian reading of Scripture presumes, they ultimately agree

God speaking his Word in human words parallels God sending his Word to become human, and so Scripture should be understood in terms analogous to the Incarnation.⁹⁵ While these principles are often given different theoretical justifications and applied in very different ways, even contradictory ones, they are now well established and widely accepted. All of them have some role to play in passing from the words of Scripture to God's intended meaning.

Of themselves, however, none of these principles can account for a crucial characteristic of Scripture: its excess of intended meaning, that is, the references intended by the human authors but not by God.⁹⁶ This lacuna can be supplied by thinking of Scripture as a seed, an image well justified by the words of Jesus in the New Testament. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus uses the image of a seed and its sowing to describe God's word, variously describing it as either simply "the word" (Mark 4:14), "the word of the kingdom" (Matt 13:18), or "the word of God" (Luke 8:11). In John's Gospel, in the context of discussing his own impending death, Jesus describes how a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit (John 12:24). Even without the gloss of Jesus's explanation in John, the image of a seed inevitably suggests the seed's growth, and the seed's growth inevitably suggests the casting aside of its shell—all in order that the seed may cease being a seed, and the life that is the seed's innermost reality may continue to grow and become more fully what it already is.

In this way, the image of the seed that must die to bear fruit perfectly captures the occasional necessity of transcending the human authors' intended meaning in order to arrive at God's intended meaning. In the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, Stephen Langton wrote, "Christ's passion, like a key, has opened for us the understanding of sacred Scripture."⁹⁷ He meant that Christ's Passion has opened for us the understand-

about the central significance of the Paschal mystery for Christian exegesis.

⁹⁵ Origen, *Philocalia* 15.19; *Dei Verbum* §13; Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §18; Mary Healy, "Inspiration and Incarnation: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith," *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 27–41. For a more critical view, see James B. Prothro, "The Christological Analogy and Theological Interpretation: Its Limits and Use," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2020): 102–19.

⁹⁶ Which is not to say that those employing these principles fail to accommodate the excess of intended meaning in Scripture in actual practice; in fact, quite often and generally speaking they do. The point is that these principles, of themselves, cannot account for the excess of intended meaning in Scripture.

⁹⁷ Stephen Langton, *Commentary on Micah*, 6. Paris, BnF lat. 505, fol. 73ra; Vaticano, BAV vat.lat. 1295, fol. 95va. I am indebted to the late Dominican scholar

ing of Scripture's meaning. But we might also say that Christ's Passion has opened for us the understanding of Scripture's *nature*, because the form of Scripture is Christ himself. Like Christ himself, Scripture passes from death to life. It gives up its outer form for the sake of its inner life, and then, after that outer form has been buried underground by those who loved it, Scripture rises glorified and transformed.

The key innovation of Christian exegesis was the conviction that the Jewish Scriptures testified to Jesus of Nazareth, often in ways that the inspired writers could not have foreseen. But there was another innovation, which the first generation of Jewish Christians often struggled to accept, and which is much less appreciated today: the conviction that God sometimes intends less than Scripture's human authors. The second innovation followed from the first. Once the disciples of Jesus realized that God's intentions could go beyond the human authors' intentions—a possibility they had no reason to entertain until they read the Jewish Scriptures in light of the Paschal mystery—they came to conclude that God sometimes intended less than the human authors, precisely because Jesus fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures not merely by way of glorification, but also by way of casting off, like a new shoot shedding the husk of its shell.

In many ways, it was this second exegetical innovation, not the first, that was the greater obstacle to Jewish acceptance of Christian beliefs. And for good reason: if Scripture is truly inspired by God, how could God not endorse the meaning obviously intended by its human authors?⁹⁸ Yet without this second innovation, Peter and Paul would not have felt free to depart from Jewish observance. The history of Christianity would have played out very differently, too. It would have taken the legs out of the mission to the Gentiles. For good reason, then, this second innovation was canonized by the New Testament and absorbed into Christian culture. Consequently, Christian theology that does not accept this second exegetical innovation is performatively incoherent, both on intellectual grounds, for contradicting key elements of Christian revelation, and on existential

Louis Bataillon for the original Latin of this quotation and the manuscript citations.

⁹⁸ Paul seems to have understood the seriousness of this intellectual difficulty. In his letters, Paul often speaks about stumbling blocks to faith (Rom 11:9; 14:13, 20; 1 Cor 1:23; 8:9; Gal 5:11), which center on three things: dietary observances, circumcision, and the Cross of Christ. Each of these stumbling blocks—including the Cross of Christ, since in Galatians 5:11, Paul seems to suggest that Christ's crucifixion is a stumbling block for Jews precisely because, properly understood, it leads to the relativization of circumcision—pertain to the intellectual difficulty of thinking that God might intend less than the human authors of Scripture.

grounds, for contradicting Christian self-identity. Nevertheless, it is a radical innovation, in some ways more radical than the first. Appreciation for the depth of its radicality—and the ways that it challenges even many traditional Christian readings of Scripture—should give Christians greater respect for the reasons that Jews have for reading their Scriptures differently from Christians.

Practical Applications

Practically speaking, how should we apply these exegetical principles? How should we go about trying to determine what meaning God intends to convey in a particular passage of Scripture? Exegesis can never be reduced to an algorithm—exegesis always involves irreducibly complex judgments—but the following sketch gives a very rough sense of how these exegetical principles might be applied in practice.

As the Christian exegetical tradition has long affirmed, our first point of departure for theological exegesis must remain the literal meaning of Scripture—but for the reasons discussed above, the literal meaning understood as the human authors' intended sense (*Sinn*) alone, and not as encompassing both their intended sense (*Sinn*) and their intended reference (*Bedeutung*), because we have easy and reliable access only to the former. And since the literal meaning of Scripture is a human construction (albeit divinely inspired), it is fully proper to enlist all the tools of historical-critical exegesis to clarify what it might be.⁹⁹

After determining the human authors' intended sense, which we know must also be God's intended sense, we can then turn to investigating God's intended reference. This inquiry proceeds by asking ourselves: given what we know about God, the world, and God's interventions in human history, what could God plausibly intend to communicate through the intended

⁹⁹ While theological exegesis is not interested in the human authors' intended reference for its own sake, we cannot ignore their intended reference, either. The reason is that sense does not exist apart from reference. Sense exists only in the mind as an abstraction of concrete particulars. As a result, we cannot clarify the intended sense of an expression without implicit attention to the range of its possible references. Consequently, when we set out to clarify the human authors' intended sense, we must also pay attention—however implicitly—to the range of their possible intended references, which often requires historical and critical expertise, and not just a dictionary. A dictionary does not suffice because this historical and critical expertise involves the ability to recognize and interpret literary genre, a capacity which goes far beyond grammatical and lexical fluency, and which generally requires hard-won familiarity with the historical, literary, and cultural context in which the text was produced.

sense of this passage? That is, what reference might God plausibly intend to *present* through this passage? The human authors' intended reference might be a good place to start, but depending on the passage, it might not be. Fortunately, we do not need to know their intended reference to come to conclusions about God's intended reference. We simply need to ask ourselves: given the text's intended sense, and given what we know about God from other elements of revelation (including natural revelation), what could God mean by this text?

To arrive at a satisfactory answer, we need to balance respect for the constraints of the text with theological imagination.

On the one hand, the meaning of words is not infinitely malleable. The intended sense of a text constrains speculation about God's intended reference. The sheer movement of our bodies drastically constrains any plausible speculation about our intentions. For example, when we see baseball players swing at a pitch, we can plausibly infer that they are trying to hit the ball, or at least trying to make it look like they are trying to hit the ball (in the event that they have been paid to throw the game). We cannot plausibly infer that they are trying to repair a garage door. In the same way, from the words of a text, we are limited in the plausible stories we can tell about what the author is trying to communicate. For example, we cannot plausibly interpret the instruction manual for a rice cooker to be a critical analysis of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The words of the text constrain us. Likewise, after clarifying the intended sense of a Scripture passage, we are severely limited in the range of plausible stories we can tell about what God was trying to communicate. The words of the Scripture constrain us. There is certainly room for twisting the words of Scripture to suit a theological agenda, but even so there are limits. We cannot plausibly argue that a baseball player swinging at a baseball is trying to make an espresso. The movements of his body constrain the set of plausible constructions of his intentions. Likewise, the human authors' intended sense constrains the set of plausible constructions of God's intended reference.

On the other hand, we must be ready to exercise our imagination, because God's intended reference might depart considerably from the human authors' intended reference. For example, in Genesis 1:27, God uses the first-person plural, saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The human authors could not have intended this grammatical form to hint at the Trinity, or at least it is extraordinarily implausible to think that they did. But might the divine author have intended to allude to the Trinity? As early as the second century, Christians such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus read this passage as an instance of Trinitar-

ian discourse.¹⁰⁰ Many contemporary scholars, though, reject this sort of reading as forced and implausible. Who is right? Our own answer will ultimately take the form of a judgment of plausibility, and judgments of plausibility are not an exact science. The hermeneutic principles discussed above may help, but in the end these principles can only inform our judgment; they will not make it for us.

We must also be ready to exercise our imagination in another, more difficult manner. We must be ready to abandon deeply held theological convictions if the intended sense of the text admits of no other plausible option. We might even need to abandon what we had previously taken to be the only possible way to understand Christian doctrine. It is not enough to read each passage with the rule of faith and the rest of Scripture. Since every portion of Scripture is itself constitutive of Christian revelation, we must also be ready to let that passage correct our reception of the rule of faith and the rest of Scripture. But that requires humility, imagination, and courage. It requires a lively awareness of the limitations of our grasp of Christian revelation (and more than just a superficial awareness); it requires imagination, in order to entertain alternative conceptions of Christian doctrine; and it requires the courage to accept them, whatever the consequences, assuming they are compatible with Christian revelation, if that is where the text leads us.¹⁰¹

In sum, in order to arrive at God's intended meaning in any particular text, we need to take a twofold approach that joins historical-critical exegesis with the standard methods of patristic and medieval exegesis. On the one hand, after determining the intended sense through the best historical-critical tools available, we must respect its constraints. On the other hand, we must also read the text with an imagination formed by the whole of revelation and the whole of our personal and communal experience of faith, and with a mind open to the possibility that God intends to convey a meaning that the human authors do not. And as patristic and medieval authors were keenly aware, we also need a minimum amount of virtue,

¹⁰⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 62; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.1.

¹⁰¹ Which does not mean relativizing or disregarding the definitive judgments of the Christian community, as expressed by its authoritative representatives, nor does it mean asserting that "a meaning (*sensus*) may be assigned to the doctrines proposed by the Church which is different from that which the Church has understood and understands," a notion rejected by the First Vatican Council in *Dei Filius*; rather, it means being open to the possibility that we have not yet fully grasped what "the Church has understood and understands" (*Dei Filius*, canon 4.3, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2 [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990]), 811; translation modified).

both intellectual and moral. When we read any great work of literature, we are not the only ones doing the interpreting. The text is also interpreting us: questioning us, probing us, challenging us, expanding our horizons.¹⁰² And when the text is the Word of God, “it pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).¹⁰³

In many cases, after carefully parsing the intended sense of a text and exercising our imagination, we might well find ourselves in a state of genuine uncertainty about just what meaning God intends to convey. Perhaps God’s reference is the same as the human authors’ reference; perhaps God’s reference is different; we are not sure. In such cases, as long as both possibilities are compatible with the rule of faith and the hermeneutical principle of interpreting individual passages of Scripture in light of the entire canon (and especially the Gospels), we can remain comfortable in our uncertainty. The fact that God’s meaning is theoretically knowable does not imply that, in our concrete existential situation, we will ever come to know it. It is also possible that God does not want us to understand everything he says, at least not yet. Sometimes we say things to people when they

¹⁰² See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 152–53: “The major texts, the classics, in religion, letters, philosophy, theology, not only are beyond the initial horizon of their interpreters but may also demand an intellectual, moral, religious conversion of the interpreter over and above the broadening of his horizon.” In the end, we may not be up to the challenge of interpreting a text; there is such a thing as a bad interpretation. As Meyer puts it: “When the literature to be interpreted is great, it may well call for an understanding of the world and a self-understanding on the part of the interpreter that at the moment are simply beyond him” (*Critical Realism*, xiii).

¹⁰³ Arguably, the exegetical approach outlined here is not far from what many theologians and biblical scholars actually do—whatever their preferred mode of exegesis—when they turn their attention to theological exegesis. Yet without explicit recognition that the human authors might mean something different from the divine author, and vice versa, it is easy to fall into one of two exegetical errors. The first error is to think that, once the meaning of text—considered from the point of view of the human authors—has been exegeted, we have immediate access to God’s intended meaning, or (more typically, and more ambiguously) the “theological” meaning of the text. The other error is to think that we can read Scripture theologically without regard for the human authors’ intended meaning. When both divine and human authors intend largely the same meaning, falling into one or the other error matters little or nothing, in terms of practical exegetical results. But when the meaning of a text varies significantly depending on whose authorship we consider, these errors can have grave exegetical consequences. Very frequently, they also lead to useless exegetical controversies which pit historical-critical methods against theological methods.

are sleeping that we would not say to them when they are awake. Perhaps God does something like that too. In any event, even if we fail to catch what God is saying, or even come to the wrong conclusion, the spiritual exercise of attempting to discern God's meaning will have borne spiritual fruit in ourselves. It will also have trained us to interpret Scripture more insightfully in the future—and to recognize God's voice when he speaks in other ways.¹⁰⁴ N&V

¹⁰⁴ This article is the final result of many drafts and revisions, and I would like to express my gratitude to the many friends, colleagues, and reviewers who read some version of it, or responded to one presentation or another, for their comments, suggestions, and bibliographical recommendations. I am especially grateful for their criticisms, which saved me from many errors, and which pushed me to dig deeper for more satisfying answers.