MEANING, REFERENCE, AND TEXTUALITY: AN EVANGELICAL APPROPRIATION OF HANS FREI

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INTRODUCTION

Hans Frei, former professor of religious studies at Yale University, is one of the most influential theologians of this past century. David Ford calls him the most significant figure in North American theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century,[1] while William Placher writes that he is possibly the most important American theologian of his generation.[2] Frei and George Lindbeck are known as the patriarchs of postliberal theology.[3] With the publication of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1974,[4] Frei established himself as a significant observer of the theological scene. In subsequent publications, such as *The Identity of Jesus Christ*[5] and 'The 'literal reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it

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1 David F. Ford, 'On Being Hospitable to Jesus Christ: Hans Frei's Achievement', *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995): 532.

2 William C. Placher, 'Hans Frei and the Meaning of Biblical Narrative', *The Christian Century* 106 (1989), 556.

3 In 1985, Brevard Childs included Frei, Lindbeck, David Kelsey, and Gene Outka as proponents of a 'New Yale Theology'. Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (New Haven: n.p., 1985), 541. The more common label for such thinkers, however, is 'postliberal', a term derived from George Lindbeck's monograph, *The Nature of Doctrine*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

4 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

5 *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

Stretch or Will it Break?',[6] Frei also emerged as a constructive theologian with whom to be reckoned.

The purpose of this paper is: (1) generally, to understand Frei's two major publications in order to provide context; (2) specifically, to understand his discussion of meaning and reference in *The Eclipse*; and (3) to argue that Frei's distinction between meaning and reference can be of significant, though qualified, help to evangelicals in the task of faithfully interpreting and preaching the Scriptures.[7]

THE ECLIPSE AND *THE IDENTITY*

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei argues that the nature of the Bible as realistic narrative was once recognized by interpreters, but has been abandoned. Beginning with Johannes Cocceius and continuing through nineteenth century interpreters, Frei demonstrates that a confusion of meaning and reference has led to this eclipse of biblical narrative. Modern hermeneutical theory has failed to find biblical meaning in the text. Instead, it has searched for meaning in some extra-textual referent. Frei proposes a return to an interpretation of the Bible as realistic narrative, finding the meaning in the narrative itself rather than in the events depicted in the text.[8]

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6 '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. by GET ED]] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), [[GET PP]].

7 For the overview of Frei's thought and the explication of his distinction between meaning and reference, we draw heavily upon Bruce Riley Ashford, 'Wittgenstein's Impact on Anglo-American Theology: Representative Models of Response to Ludwig Wittgenstein's Later Writings'S, (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), pp. 96-121.

8 Although Frei always retained a textual framework for interpretation, his conception of it changed over the years. Whereas the early Frei believed that the Bible 'means what it says', the later Frei found meaning in community consensus. In *Types of Christian Theology*, he writes, '[T]he literal meaning of the text is precisely that meaning which finds the greatest degree of agreement in the use of the text in the religious community. If there is agreement in that use, then take that to be the literal sense' (Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992), p. 15). Our view is more similar to that of the early Frei, although we do not overlook the significance of the community of believers who work together for consensus on the meaning of the canon.

This return to the biblical narratives is exemplified, says Frei, in Karl Barth[9] and, most especially, in Erich Auerbach.[10] For Frei, this return entails at least four things. First, Frei recognized that the narratives are history-like. Second, it follows that these history-like stories (though they are not necessarily historical)[11] use ordinary characteristics and actions of people to render the extraordinary. Third, the biblical narratives are intransitive.[12] In Nicholas Wolterstorff's understanding of this aspect of Frei's theory, sometimes the biblical writer's 'intention in telling a story is such that achieving the intention logically requires telling this story and logically requires that one's readers or auditors grasp this story'.[13] The intransitive nature of the narratives set them apart from stories that merely illustrate or bring an insight to the forefront. Frei writes: 'Many biblical narratives, especially the synoptic gospels . . . [are] indisposable.'[14] Fourth, the narratives are character-rendering. Here, Frei follows Auerbach's argument in *Mimesis* but also supplements it substantially. That a narrative is character-rendering means that the identity of a person is set forth in the narrative in his 'singular unsubstitutable identity', including their inner subjectivity and their 'capacity as doers and sufferers of actions or events'. The *person*, therefore, is rendered *by the story*.[15] This is what Frei means by 'realistic' narrative. He writes:

> The term realistic I take also to imply that the narrative depiction is of that peculiar sort in which characters or individual persons, in their internal depth or subjectivity as well as in their capacity as doers and sufferers of actions or events, are firmly and significantly set in the context of the external environment, natural but more particularly social. Realistic narrative is that kind in

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9 An excellent concise discussion of the influence of Barth on Frei may be found in John F. Woolverton, 'Hans W. Frei in Context: A Theological and Historical Memoir', *Anglican Theological Review* 79 (1997), 382ff.

10 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953 [orig. 1946]).

11 For Frei, history-like is not equated with historicity, although he points out that for pre-critical interpreters the Scriptures were historical truth. Frei, *The Eclipse*, p. 11.

12 Perhaps Nicholas Wolterstorff is the first to use this term to describe Frei's understanding of this aspect of narrative. Wolterstorff's discussion is found in Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Will Narrativity Work as Linchpin? Reflections on the Hermeneutic of Hans Frei', in *Relativism and Religion* [[, ed. by GET ED]] (London: MacMillan, 1995), p. 78.

13 Ibid.

14 Frei, *The Eclipse*, p. 13.

15 Ibid.

> which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other.[16]

Along with a restoration of biblical narrative, Frei proposes a return to a literal and figural interpretation. Before the eclipse, interpreters saw the Bible as rendering one cumulative story, which they understood as describing the real historical world.[17] In order to fit the array of stories together, interpreters made use of the figural-typological sense of the texts. Frei makes a point to distinguish between allegorical and figural-typological interpretation. Indeed, not only is figural not the same as allegorical, but it is actually the natural extension of a literal reading.

In a figural interpretation, stories are separated chronologically but are able to fit into a coherent whole. A text may refer to an event, but that event depicted may refer to another event. Stories retain their independence, and yet are naturally wed because of their 'family resemblance' and 'mutual supplementation'.[18] When the interpretation of the text as realistic narrative fell into disuse (with its stress on the significant relations that sequential texts have upon each other), Frei points out, figural-typological interpretation also was abandoned.

Finally, Frei is concerned that interpreters have abandoned the view that the story of Scripture absorbs the world. In the past, interpreters absorbed the extra-biblical world into the world of the text. They did so by wedding figural interpretation of Scripture with their own actions, thoughts, and beliefs. Writes Frei, 'Not only was it possible for him, it was also his duty to fit himself into that world. . . . He was to see his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era's events as figures of that storied world."[19] Therefore, Frei seeks to bring back Scripture as realistic narrative, and the corollary literal-figural interpretation, as well as restoring the view that the story of Scripture absorbs the world.

Frei's second monograph, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, was first published in *Crossroads*, a Presbyterian church education magazine. In *The Identity*, Frei demonstrates a post-critical version of realistic narrative interpretation as he exegetes the gospels and sets forth the identity of Jesus Christ.[20] Frei's contention is that the gospels are stories designed to

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., pp. 2-4.

18 Ibid., p. 28.

19 Ibid., p. 3.

20 Two good discussions of *The Identity* can be found in James O. Duke, 'Reading the Gospels Realistically: A Review of Hans Frei's 'Eclipse of Biblical Narrative' and 'Identity of Jesus Christ"', *Encounter* 38 (1977) '. 298, and Mike

render the identity of Jesus. He sets forth Jesus' ministry in three parts: the pre-public ministry, the public ministry, and the passion-resurrection sequence. It is in the passion-resurrection sequence that Christians see Jesus' identity in a most direct and focused manner. Through these three phases, and culminating in the third, the gospel writers primarily answer the question 'Who is Jesus?', and *not* primarily the question, 'Does our depiction of Jesus correspond to what actually happened?'[21]

As Higton and others have pointed out, Frei's *reason* for insisting on a literal reading of the Bible as realistic narrative changed over the years.[22] In his early writings, Frei grounded his argument in the nature of the narrative genre, claiming that the structures and genre of the text provided the necessary reason to find the identity of Jesus Christ in the biblical narratives, and most centrally in the passion-resurrection sequence. In his later writings, however, Frei admitted that the church has played a role in making narrative reading central. Other types of readings of the gospels are possible. Higton writes of Frei's initial 'grandiose' claims about narrative:

> Frei realized that this was perhaps the most vulnerable part of his argument, and that therefore he might be subject to a similar criticism to that which we have discussed with respect to Lindbeck – that his theology is only as useful as a rather dubious literary theory. Colourfully, Frei later spoke of this as putting the cart before the horse, then cutting the lines and claiming that the vehicle is self-propelled.[23]

So Frei retained narrative, but his reasons for doing so changed somewhat.

Such are the broad contours of Frei's work. What is lacking still is a more detailed account of Frei's discussion of the relation of meaning and reference.

Higton, 'Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Theory', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997), 86.

21 Frei, however, does show some interest in matters of reference. In *The Identity*, he argues that the passion-resurrection sequence is the most natural point where Christians move from literary explication to ontological assertion. In personal correspondence with John Woolverton, he several times speaks of the possibilities of factual depiction by the text. Woolverton, 'Hans W. Frei', pp. 369-93.

22 Higton, 'Frei's Christology', p. 91.

23 Ibid.

MEANING AND REFERENCE

The central question answered in Frei's *Eclipse* is, Why did realistic narrative, the figural-typological interpretation, and absorption of the world into story fall into disuse? Frei's answer is that interpreters failed to find the locus of meaning in the narrative itself, and began to locate meaning in the events behind the text.

Frei begins his history of interpretation with the Reformers,[24] especially with Calvin. For the Reformers, says Frei, the explicative meaning and the historical reference of the text were identical. What the Bible meant corresponded with reality. Calvin's interpretation, for example, was realistic and figural-typological, which is to be distinguished from allegorical. In contrast to an allegorist, who would try to find a 'deeper' meaning in the text, Calvin relied upon the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the reader of the reality of the narrative world.

The Pietists, who were post-Reformation, were not nearly as literal as the Reformers. Their aim was to transcend the literal meaning of the text. Rambach, for example, believed that an interpreter needs to 'be able to discern a spiritual sense above the grammatical and logical senses in at least some of the sacred words'.[25] It is ironic, says Frei, that the Pietists (in 'transcending' the literal interpretation) were some of the first to contribute to the rise of biblical criticism.[26]

As the seventeenth century progressed, the split between the explicative sense of a text and its ostensive reference can be seen in such differing interpreters as Spinoza and Cocceius. Spinoza drove a wedge between literal meaning and historical reference.[27] The religious lessons of those two entities were not the same, he said. While the textual lesson is one thing, the real religious meaning could be found in the historical environment, among other things.

Johannes Cocceius, on the other hand, is an especially intriguing case for Frei. Though he was an orthodox theologian, he was quite similar to Spinoza in his divorce of narrative reading and historical reference. Cocceius' contribution to this divorce lay in his 'unsteadiness of focus' on the relationship between history and the biblical depiction. Whereas Calvin saw the unity of the OT and NT in the depiction by the text, Cocceius saw the unity in a process of successive promises and fulfillments. As such, the focus of the interpreter shifted from the text to an extra-textual schema

[24] Frei, *The Eclipse*, p. 18.
[25] Ibid., p. 38.
[26] Ibid., p. 39.
[27] Ibid., p. 42.

of chronological historical events. After being referred to by the text, the events spoke for themselves. Frei writes:

> The story itself no longer rendered the reality of the history it depicted. Coccеius' case is interesting because it shows what could happen to a conservative whose theology was strongly biblical and who was a forerunner of a new endeavor to set forth the unity of the Bible.[28]

Next, Frei moves to a discussion of the eighteenth century. With the rise of the Enlightenment came a sustained attack upon the factual truth of the biblical texts, most specifically the prophecies. The most interesting thing about this attack, says Frei, was that both the attackers and defenders of Scripture's factuality found the locus of meaning in the ostensive referents rather than in the text itself. For the Deists, historical revelation had not occurred and was not credible. With this emphasis on the impossibility of revelation, the groundwork was laid for a continuation of the hermeneutical shift from 'What is the meaning of the Bible?' to 'Is the Bible true?'[29]

This debate over the 'general credibility' of miracles led both proponents and opponents of divine revelation to answer in *general* terms that 'God can intervene supernaturally' or 'God cannot'. The question of whether God performed the *specific* miracles described in the text was left in the background. As a result, textual depictions of miracles were often relegated to a minimal 'something supernatural'. The textual depiction was in the background while the philosophical concept of positivity took forefront.

Next, Frei discusses the Latitudinarians and Neologians,[30] before coming to John Locke, Anthony Collins, and William Whiston.[31] The raging eighteenth century debate was over fulfillment of OT prophecy in the NT. The specific problem was concerning the use of the OT by NT writers, in a manner that the OT author did not seem to intend. In the

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[28] Ibid., p. 48.

[29] Note that Frei is not saying that there was simply a movement from interpretation to appropriation and apologetics. He is saying, rather, that there was movement from the question of 'What is the meaning of the Bible?' to the question of 'Is the Bible true?' within the field of hermeneutics. An interpreter's opinion of the truth or falsity of a text changed his interpretation of it.

[30] Frei's discussion is found in *The Eclipse*, pp. 60-5. The brevity of this paper does not allow for a summary of this element of Frei's argument. Frei himself treats the Latitudinarians and Neologians in brief fashion.

[31] Frei's discussion of these three men is in *The Eclipse*, pp. 66-85.

midst of this, William Whiston sets forth the case that the OT text as it now stands does not lend itself to the type of interpretation given by Jesus and the disciples. Whiston's attempt at solving the problem was to agree that the Jews had blemished the text to remove any evidence that would favor a Christian interpretation. Anthony Collins, a friend of Locke's, responded with an attack on Whiston and orthodox interpreters. The reason the OT quotes do not fit with NT usage for fulfilled prophecy, argues Collins, was that the NT writers were influenced by the hermeneutical techniques of the early rabbinical writings.

The orthodox interpreters (vs. Lockeans such as Collins), says Frei, had a way of reconciling text and historical event.[32] Standing on the shoulders of interpretive tradition, they believed that meaning and fact find their unity in God himself. Indeed, for them:

> The identity of literal and historical sense of Scripture involves a cognate unity on the part of God: the divine author of the book is the same as the governor of the history narrated in it. Being both author of the text's meaning and governor of actuality he unites meaning and fact, so that it does not occur to the orthodox interpreter that there is a distance between words and their reference. . . .[33]

While the orthodox were influenced by interpretive tradition, which finds unity in meaning and facts, Collins was influenced by a Lockean thesis that factuality is to be weighed in the empirical court of (extra-biblical) historical evidence. Further, Collins was influenced by Locke in his ideas about language. For Collins, as for Locke, 'The rational use of language is not only a matter of logical coherence but of externally received impressions or ideas to which words correspond'.[34] An idea is what it is, and it cannot be identical both with 'what it is' and with 'something else' at the same time.

The result of this, in Collins' thinking, was the impossibility of a figural-typological interpretation. Whereas traditional interpreters found the meaning of a word in the literal (and as an extension, the figural) sense, Collins found meaning in the historical referent of the literal sense. Thus, for Collins, 'wood/tree' in Exod 15:25 only refers to the historical event of Exod 15:25 and could not also be a reference to Christ's death on the cross. Meaning, then, is not found in the biblical narrative but in the ostensive historical referent.

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[32] Ibid., p. 74.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., p. 81.

Collins' assumptions found their way into the interpretation of an orthodox conservative, Sigmund Jakob Baumgarten. Frei states, 'Baumgarten tended to distinguish sharply between the words and the subject matter of the Bible and to equate the latter much more than the former with revelation.'[35] Though Baumgarten believed in an inspired text, he nonetheless let historical procedure dominate interpretation.[36]

Next, Frei turns to a discussion of philosopher Christian Wolff, whom he believes was as influential as Locke in the field of hermeneutics.[37] For Wolff, words signify concepts rather than things. As such, biblical words do not refer to real events in the historical world, but rather to an ideal referent. This ideal reference is in contrast to Locke's ostensive reference. Many who came after Wolff, then, focused on the ideal referents of biblical narrative. Kant, for example, found morality to be the ideal referent of the Scriptures. Schleiermacher located meaning in the mind and context of the authors, while Hegel found the locus of meaning in the historical dialectic.

Frei continues his interpretive history with a description of the rise of the British novel. This development lent credence to an emotional and artistic (therefore, non-cognitive) understanding of stories. Germans, on the other hand, were deprived of a legacy of good novel and as such saw *only* cognitive meaning. Both the British and the Germans, writes Frei, were in need of correction from each other, and both were partners in the eclipse of realistic narrative.

Some of these interpreters, like Wolff and Kant, denied that the biblical text's meaning was found in its reference to the historical world, but they still found the text to be *meaningful.* Hermann Samuel Reimarus, however, denied not only factual reference, but also meaningfulness.[38] Whereas biblical critics before him had found the Bible's meaning in non-literal senses (because they found the literal sense to be non-factual), Reimarus located meaning in the literal sense and rejected the Bible as being non-valuable (because the literal sense was not factually true). Reimarus' unique contribution, therefore, is that he dismissed the explicative sense on the grounds of his belief that the literal meaning was not factually true. Along with Reimarus, and following him, came a host of historical reconstructions, as well as the 'History of religions' and 'Biblical Theology' movements. But none of these helped locate the meaning of the text in the literal-figural sense of the narrative.

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35 Frei, *The Eclipse*, p. 89.

36 Ibid., p. 93.

37 Ibid., p. 96.

38 Ibid., p. 114.

THE EVANGELICAL CONNECTION: INSPIRATION & TEXTUALITY

The Doctrine of Inspiration. The first part of this article has been an attempt to explain Frei's two major publications in order to provide context and more specifically, to understand his distinction between meaning and reference in *The Eclipse.* We now seek to understand how his discussion of meaning and reference holds promise for evangelical appropriation. Frei's point is that the Christian community of scholars traditionally has found the meaning of the text in the text, rather than seeking it outside of the text through referential frameworks of interpretation. In other words, biblical interpretation has been done within a textual frame of reference rather than within a historical frame of reference. This text-driven hermeneutic was increasingly forsaken, however, beginning with Cocceius and others in the seventeenth century.

Evangelicals likewise share a concern about the eclipse of the text in biblical interpretation; and in addition to Frei's considerations, we are further motivated, even centrally motivated, by our doctrine of Scripture. We understand the doctrines of inspiration, sufficiency, and clarity to be of particular importance in this regard. This doctrine of inspiration is grounded in 2 Timothy 3:16 which states that 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God'. In a very real way, the words of Scripture are the words of God. Carl Henry's definition is exemplary: Inspiration is that 'supernatural influence upon divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the Spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation'.[39] We affirm that the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers (2 Pet 2:21) to pen inspired texts (2 Tim 3:16).[40] Inspiration has to do with message that God gave to the biblical writers, a message which was set forth in human language. While God has revealed himself in the past in both text and event, in the present *the text* is the only inspired locus of God's revelation.[41] Scripture refers to the text of Scripture, and not the events *qua* events behind the text, as *theopneustos* and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

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[39] Carl Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (6 vols; Waco: Word, 1976-83), vol. 4, p. 129. Also see, for example Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), pp. 53-106, and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 74.

[40] For further explication of the doctrine of inspiration see David Dockery and David P. Nelson, 'Special Revelation', in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. by Daniel L. Akin (Broadman & Holman, 2007), pp. 128-34.

[41] Jeffrey P. Keegan, 'The Locus of Revelation in Relation to Text and Event in Light of the Doctrine of Inspiration' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995).

Corollary to the orthodox doctrine of inspiration are the doctrines of the sufficiency of Scripture and the clarity of Scripture. The doctrine of sufficiency entails the affirmation that Scripture is itself sufficient for doctrine and life. That is, the believer is not lacking adequate revelation since the inspired Bible itself provides all the revelation necessary sufficient for knowing God and living as God intends. The doctrine of sufficiency does not indicate that revelation is exhaustive or that it contains all knowledge about the subjects taught therein, but that it is sufficient such that further divine revelation is not necessary beyond the scope of Scripture for faithfully living the Christian life. The doctrine of clarity of Scripture entails the affirmation that Scripture is written in such a way that it may be understood by those who, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, read or hear the biblical text. The doctrine of clarity does not indicate that the Scriptures are without passages difficult to understand, that the Bible is easily accessible, or that it is equally accessible to all readers. The doctrine does indicate that the Scriptures may be understood by the average reader and that knowledge of the Scriptures is not limited only to those who have, for example, specialized training.

The Implication of Inspiration: A Text-Based Hermeneutic. The implication of such a doctrine of inspiration is a text-based hermeneutic. David Clark writes, 'If Scripture is God's speech, analogous to human expert testimony, this should influence how theologians interpret the Bible.' For this reason, 'Evangelicals traditionally think of hermeneutics as the study of guidelines that help readers of Scripture remain focused on the biblical text itself.'[42] Scripture is the inspired word of God; all interpretation should consciously, carefully, and consistently proceed from this premise. The significance of this point should not be lost on the reader—though evangelicals often hold to a textual frame of reference in *theory*, they are not always consistent with this theory in *practice*.[43]

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[42] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), pp. 68-9. Further, it should be noted that our paper assumes the validity of the task of interpretation, and in particular, the validity of seeking authorial intent. Kevin Vanhoozer's defense of the possibility of literary knowledge is commendable. See *Is There a Meaning in the Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 197-452. Vanhoozer proposes the Trinity's self-communication as the paradigm for all true communication, and draws upon Wittgenstein, Searle, Austin, and others to view meaning in terms of communicative action. For him, there is a meaning in the text, and for the interpretively virtuous reader, that meaning can be found.

[43] The opposite problem is also evident in biblical scholarship. For example, there are those who adopt a hermeneutic similar to the one espoused in this

So how might evangelicals better stick to their theory when practicing biblical interpretation? This article will make two suggestions, one negative and the other positive. The first suggestion is that the interpreter's impulse will not be to seek the meaning of the text in extra-textual historical and archaeological reconstructions, but rather in the text itself.[44] The biblical depiction of an event is an historical rendering of that event. Furthermore, it is God's rendering of the event. Like other statements, it includes condensation of the whole, selection, and arrangement. It is not the only way to render an event, and it may not even be the only true way to render the particular event. Take for example the crucifixion. A historian at the scene of the event could chronicle the cross and the people and happenings around it with painstaking detail, while still completely unaware of its meaning. His portrayal could be a true portrayal, but not the depiction that Scripture gives. To the extent that his portrayal was true, it would be a resource for the task of apologetics, but not for interpretation.

John Sailhamer addresses the notion of inspiration in relation to meaning and reference:

> According to the evangelical view of Scripture, the biblical message has been encoded in a text. Insofar as we say that this text is inspired and thus is the locus of God's revelation, then the meaning or content of that revelation is of the nature of the meaning of a text. . . . and thus no amount of delving into

article, yet who would not share our theory of inspiration. Likewise, there are evangelicals who practice a textual hermeneutic similar to what we suggest and who share our doctrine of inspiration, but who would reject our theory of hermeneutics.

[44] Note that the biblical text itself provides contextual information. In John 4 we learn an important fact about Jewish-Samartian relations (John 4:9) that helps the reader to understand the text. In Josh 3:15 we are given an important clue for understanding the text – that the river crossing took place at the time when the waters of the Jordan were high.

With respect to the historical nature of the text, we lament with John Piper the 'significant shift away from the historical particularity of divine revelation among some interpreters'. John Piper, 'The Authority and Meaning of the Christian Canon: A Response to Gerald Sheppard on Canon Criticism', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976), p. 94. While we want to affirm the historical realities related in the text and the authority of Scripture that cannot be disconnected from such historical realities, we nevertheless hope to clarify the *significance* of those historical realities for the task of biblical interpretation.

> the history of Israel as an event apart from the text can take the place of the meaning of the text of Scripture.[45]

Jeffrey Keegan makes the same point when he writes, 'All attempts to interpret Scripture by reconstructing the events . . . do not have the divine authorization of being "inspired." The biblical texts already have employed a "principle of interpretation" in their accounts of past events.'[46]

The second implication is the flipside, and the positive complement, of the first. Now that the interpreter has taken his eyes off of extra-textual information, he will focus his exegesis on the text[47]. He will 'follow the linguistic and genre conventions of the text, the communication and textual strategy of the text, which guide the reader to the meaning which has been embodied in the text'.[48] Indeed, the events are already interpreted by Scripture. Geerhardus Vos, in *Biblical Theology*, writes, 'Act-revelations are never entirely left to speak for themselves; they are preceded and followed by word-revelation.'[49] The writers of Scripture have already interpreted the events, condensing, selecting, and arranging their accounts to convey the meaning intended by the divine Author.

In sum, we hope to (re)condition a particular reflex among evangelical interpreters. That is, we urge an impulse among evangelical exegetes to focus on inter-textual and intra-textual matters in a canonical framework as constitutive of a more consistently evangelical hermeneutic. In this way the interpreter's reflex will be to look within the canonical Scriptures to answer questions about the text and to find meaning.[50] We are not prepared to suggest that there is no value to extra-textual matters, though we believe the value of extra-textual sources often to be apologetic rather than interpretive. We submit that such an inter/intra-textual reflex is most consistent with the evangelical doctrine of inspiration, and its corollaries, the doctrines of sufficiency and clarity.

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45 John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 57.

46 Jeffrey P. Keegan, 'The Locus of Revelation', p. 310.

47 We assume here a view of confluence that properly situates the divine Author in relation to the human author.

48 Keegan, 'The Locus of Revelation', p. 311.

49 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 7.

50 In some ways, we might characterize the problem about which we urge consideration as a move toward preferring the 'analogy of history' over the analogy of Scripture. We of course, prefer the priority of the analogy of Scripture.

EVANGELICAL CONFLATION OF MEANING AND REFERENCE

Theologians may (unconsciously or consciously) perpetuate the error of confusing meaning and reference. Johannes Cocceius is case-in-point. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Cocceius departed from mainstream orthodox interpretation by understanding biblical history as a temporal sequence rather than as a finished portrait provided by Scripture.[51] About Cocceius' interpretation, Sailhamer writes: 'Coccejus understood the history portrayed in the Bible as itself an actual flow of events, changing with time, and leading to a definite conclusion. Biblical history as such was no longer like a Rembrandt painting that could be contemplated in its totality.'[52]

J. Chr. K. von Hofmann is a nineteenth-century example of an evangelical who conflates meaning and reference. Sailhamer provides a discussion of Hofmann's salvation-history approach,[53] which included the thoroughly evangelical idea of Scriptural inspiration. Hoffman, however, expanded the bounds of inspiration to include events. Hofmann writes, 'Traditionally the notion of inspiration is taken to refer only to that word of the divine Spirit through which the books of the Holy Scripture came into being. Why, however, has a word with such a diverse meaning been so arbitrarily limited?'[54] Thus Hoffman has exceeded biblical bounds in his definition of inspiration.

Evidently, Hoffman's ideas have filtered down to contemporary evangelical theologians. While holding to a textual hermeneutic in theory, they have often strayed from it in practice. Milton Terry is an example.[55] In *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Terry asserts that in order to understand a text (in its authorial intention), an interpreter must be able to discern the author's historical context, surroundings, and even his emotions. He writes, 'We are not only to grasp the grammatical import of words and sentences, but also to feel the force and bearing of the historical circumstances which may in any way have affected the writer .... The individu-

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51 Frei's discussion of Cocceius can be found in numerous pages throughout *The Eclipse*, but primarily between pp. 40-50.

52 John Sailhamer, 'Johann August Ernesti: The Role of History in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001), 200.

53 Sailhamer, *Introduction*, pp. 61ff.

54 J. Chr. K. von Hofmann, *Weissagung und Erfullung im alten und im neuen Testamente* (Nordlinger: C.H. Beck Buchhandlung, 1841), p. 28. The quote here is taken from Sailhamer, *Introduction*, pp. 61-2, and utilizes Sailhamer's translation.

55 Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999). I owe this example to John Sailhamer, 'Johann August Ernesti', 203-4.

ality of the writer, his local surroundings, his wants and desires, his relation to those for whom he wrote, his nationality and theirs, the character of the times when he wrote—all these matters are of the first importance to a thorough interpretation of the several books of Scripture.'[56] Likewise Meredith Kline, in his *Structure of Biblical Authority*, speaks of the inability to 'recover the meaning of the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism' until a sufficient historical study of the ancient treaty form had been undertaken.[57] For Kline, proper biblical interpretation is dependent on 'sufficient historical study'. The text, for him, is not sufficient.

Yet another example of text-event conflation is J. Barton Payne, editor of *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*.[58] In the preface, he states that the prominent developments in this collection of essays are 'the results, both literary and historical, of current Near Eastern archaeology, with stress falling upon those primary source-documents that illumine the ancient milieu as it actually was'.[59] Interestingly, the essays to which this statement refers are primarily focused on biblical texts and theology. Only one section is devoted to historiography. Clearly, Payne believes that the ancient milieu 'as it actually was' (reconstructed by extra-textual historical evidence) is important for textual interpretation. But how does this mesh with his statement in the same paragraph: 'that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the autographs" is as old as Christianity itself'? For Payne, both Scripture and reconstructed history are loci for meaning.

The aforementioned examples of evangelical interpreters demonstrate the need to clarify the locus of meaning. For the task of apologetics, the choice of textual interpretation over event reconstruction is a natural extension of a belief in an inspired text. Evangelicals are given no reason to believe that events are inspired and given for doctrine and reproof; Scripture affirms that Scripture is inspired for doctrine and reproof. Undoubtably, events are generative of meaning in various ways. But Scripture provides a divine interpretation of certain events, to the end that the reader may understand about various events what God intends. Access to divine revelation is through the text, and through the text alone.

Certainly, we acknowledge that God revealed himself in events in the past. Therefore, history does have a place in the Christian scholar's task.

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56 Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 231.

57 Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 7.

58 J. Barton Payne, ed., *New Perspectives on the Old Testament* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970).

59 Ibid., p. vii.

It helps us to understand *about* the text. History is capable of telling us about the author and his purpose for writing, the date of writing, and the lexical meaning of words. It is of great use as an apologetic demonstrating the truthfulness and factuality of the events depicted in Scripture.[60] But a reconstructed history of 'things that happened' should not interfere with the integrity of the biblical text. The locus of meaning for a text is found in the author's intent and choice of words.[61]

POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLATION

The Blurring of the Biblical Account. The consequence of conflating meaning and reference is, at best, the blurring of the biblical writer's focus and, at worst, the subversion of the author's intent. When an interpreter looks outside of the text in order to find its meaning he risks losing the sharpness of the textual focus. The additional referential data (historical, archaeological, etc.) is a case of *too much information* (TMI). Perhaps a good analogy is that of a painting. Suppose that a historian visits the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam for his long-awaited opportunity to view Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp.* He had written his dissertation on 17th century Dutch history, focused upon the historical context of this painting, which depicts Doctor Tulp dissecting the left hand and arm of a corpse, surrounded by seven onlookers. In particular he had written about doctors and medical procedures such as the one depicted in Rembrandt's painting. Upon standing in front of the masterpiece for the first time, he recalled that Doctor Tulp was known to have taken his pet dog with him nearly everywhere he went. Impulsively he pulls out his Sharpie and sketches into Rembrandt's canvas a fairly good depiction of what a Dutch mutt possibly would have looked like.

Immediately, he also is aware that there is something odd about this depiction. First, he recalls, The Netherlands had a fixed procedure for dissections, which made it imperative that the corpse be that of an executed criminal. Upon further research, he finds out that the only dissection in Amsterdam in 1632 was on January 31, and that the criminal, Adriaen Adriaensz, was known to have a reddish goatee. With this in mind, the historian pulls out his wife's purse, finds a tube of lipstick in a burnt sienna shade of red, and carefully paints a goatee onto the criminal's face. Immediately he also recalls that because the Dutch medical guild required dis-

[60] In 'The Locus of Revelation', Keegan provides a helpful discussion of the usefulness of history.

[61] Sailhamer, 'Johann August Ernesti', p. 193. Also, see Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 197.

sections to be public, usually there would be many more onlookers than seven. In light of this, he again pulls out his Sharpie and sketches the rough outlines of twelve more onlookers. With these adjustments to the portrait, he now feels satisfied that onlookers can interpret the painting more readily.

Would the curator of the Rijks thank this man and ask him to stick around the museum in order to fix some of the other paintings? More likely he would send a note to this historian's new jail cell, explaining to him that he had ruined Rembrandt's masterpiece. If such a historian would pay attention to the canvas, he would notice that Rembrandt used lighting techniques and the expressions on the faces of the selected onlookers to draw attention to the arm and hand that were being dissected. He was depicting the wonder and awe that the 17th century medical establishment had towards the human hand. Rembrandt's selection, arrangement, and condensation of the whole event focus attention on the hand that is located at the center of the painting. All of the elements of the painting contribute to this end. The addition of a Dutch mutt, a burnt sienna goatee, and a handful of additional onlookers is a case of TMI. It did nothing to improve the painting, or render more clear the author's intent; rather such additions would blur the meaning of Rembrandt's work.

The Subversion of the Biblical Account. In order to demonstrate further the problem of confusion about meaning and referent, we would like to suggest a few examples where we believe an 'intratextual reflex' should be evident, but is not always, in evangelical preaching and commentary. In each of these examples the lack of intratextual reflex leads to misinterpretation of the biblical text. We note that these examples fall into two categories, those where the text provides 'transcultural points of reference' and those where intra-textual referents are minimized or ignored because of undue attention to extra-textual referents.

Texts That Provide Trans-cultural Points of Reference. Psalm 19:5 employs a simile for the breadth of God's general revelation, likening it to a bridegroom leaving his chamber and a strong man running a race. We wonder if the reader must know about the history of Jewish weddings and Jewish athletics at the time of the composition of the Psalm in order to understand the point of the text. Perhaps not. Instead, it appears that the author has employed an analogy to the sun (vv. 4, 6) and similes to a bridegroom and a runner that provide trans-cultural points of reference. The sun is a universal point of reference, and just as it may be seen by all and its heat reaches to all, so does the revelation of God in creation. Similarly, the author employs two common cultural practices, a wedding and a race, to

make a point. At weddings the bridegroom is featured prominently, he is not hidden from the view of those in attendance. Likewise, those who attend a track meet will surely see the 'strong man' who runs the race. The author uses the similes to strengthen the analogy: One cannot help but see the bridegroom at the wedding, and the strong runner at the race, and the sun is just like this, but even more evident to all. The speech and knowledge of God revealed in creation is thus explained to the reader of the psalm. In this case it is general cultural knowledge that is assumed by the author, not specific knowledge about Jewish weddings or races.

Revelation 3:15-16 provides another example of a trans-cultural point of reference, though often it is assumed that one must have specific information about Laodicea and the surrounding environs of the Lycus valley, including the nearby towns of Heiropolis and Colossae, in order to understand this text.[62] If many modern commentators are correct, it is impossible to understand this warning to the church at Laodicea without sufficient background information about the hot springs of Heiropolois, the cool waters of Colossae, and the lukewarm, undrinkable waters of Laodicea. We wonder how such a conclusion about extra-textual background information comports with an evangelical doctrine of inspiration. Further, could it be that the interpretation of the passage is possible apart from such background information due to the trans-cultural point of reference employed by reference to that which is hot, cold, or lukewarm? It is common in various cultures for people to enjoy a cool, refreshing drink, and it is equally common for people to enjoy a hot drink. Less common, though, is an affinity for a tepid tea or a lukewarm latte. Most people in most cultures prefer drinks that are hot or cold. (That there might be an exception to such a cultural preference may demonstrate the point.) In general, readers across cultures will have the means to understand the point of Revelation 3:15-16 apart from travel to modern Turkey or a report from someone who has journeyed there.

Texts That Provide Intra-Textual Points of Reference. Equally problematic are interpretations that minimize intra-textual reference points because of undue attention to extra-textual sources. Take, for example, Philippians 2:5-11, which speaks of Christ Jesus who 'made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant', This bondservant 'humbled himself' and 'therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name

[62] So the comment on Christ spewing the lukewarm church out of his mouth, 'This rather vivid portrayal has long been interpreted against the local background'. Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 125.

which is above every name'. This text relates the humility of Christ who came in flesh as a man. One may find at this point commentators and preachers who embark on a historical reconstruction of the Greek system of slavery in order to explain the meaning of Paul's words. However, this is not necessary; in fact it may even obscure the author's intent.

When Paul refers to the bondservant, he assumes some general conception of servanthood on the part of the reader. It is not this general conception that is in question; rather, the question is: Does Paul have some a-textual historical referent in mind, which he doesn't explain in the text? It would seem not, because Scripture is the kind of text that is available to the ordinary literate human being. If Paul has extra-textual historical referents in mind, then the average Bible reader, untrained in history and archaeology, will be unable to discern properly the point of one of the most important Christological passages in the Bible. More to the point, in a number of such instances, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin also may have been handicapped in that they possessed few of the historical resources we have today.

Perhaps the better way to discern Paul's intent is to look for his meaning within the context of the immediate passage as well as within the broader context of the canon as a whole. When one reads 'taking the form of a servant', one could resource various extra-textual conceptions of servanthood; in every language there is some word that speaks of a servant or a slave. A Greek would think of one thing, an American of another, and a Sri Lankan likely yet another. Maybe, though, Paul wants the reader to understand his comments with a specific canonical point of reference. If one's frame of reference is textual, it would be natural to read Paul's 'servant' in the light of a particular servant, Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

In Isaiah 52:13, we see that God's servant shall be 'high and exalted'. But who is this who is high and exalted? We find the answer in Isaiah 6:1: It is the Lord God, in all of His holiness, who is 'high and exalted'. So the identity of God and of the Suffering Servant are one. He is the one who is exalted and the one who will be exalted.[63] In 52:15, this servant will startle the nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of Him. In 49:7, again it is this Servant redeemer before whom kings and princes will bow down. In 53:12 we find that this Servant emptied Himself as He 'poured out His soul unto death'. For Isaiah, therefore, the Servant is the one who

[63] Lending further support to this connection is John 12:38-41. In this passage, John quotes Isaiah 6 and then says of Jesus, 'These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him'.

is exalted and shall be exalted, and who poured out his soul to death, and before whom kings and princes will bow.[64]

Here, then, is the interpretive context for Paul's Christological hymn. Paul is speaking of the Servant who humbles Himself, pours Himself out, is high and exalted, and will be high and exalted. This clearly is a different type of servanthood than that of the archetypal Greek bondservant whose servanthood was not mixed even with a small measure of exaltedness. The irony, however, is that instead of using a textual framework for interpreting this passage, we too often occupy ourselves with reconstructed histories of Greek slavery and arguments about kenotic Christology.

Another common example of this problem is found in preaching and commentary on Ephesians 6:10ff., specifically with reference to the armor of God. Such is the practice of extra-textual reference to the armor of Roman soldiers that evangelicals now sell 'armor' for use by our children so they can understand this passage better. An examination of Paul's text, however, indicates that he is drawing directly from various chapters of Isaiah (e.g., 11, 52, 59) to remind the believers to 'put on the new self, created after the likeness of God' (Eph. 4:24). Paul is not instructing the believers at Ephesus to metaphorically put on the armor of the Roman soldier, he is instructing them to put on Christ, who is the righteous warrior God who brings the gospel of peace.[65]

CONCLUSION

Herman Gunkel was incisive when he stated, in 1927, that 'The recently experienced phenomenon of Biblical Theology's having been replaced by the history of Israelite religion is to be explained from the fact that the spirit of historical investigation has now taken the place of a traditional doctrine of inspiration.'[66] This essay is a plea for a reversal of that continu-

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[64] We note that Jeremias makes the connection of Philippians 2:5-11 with Isaiah 53. W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (rev. ed.; Studies in Biblical Theology, 20; London: SCM Press, 1952), pp. 97-9.

[65] In our view, a properly intra-textual impulse is demonstrated in Peter O'Brien's commentary on this passage. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 456ff. O'Brien shows the superiority of interpreting the text in light of Isaiah rather than in light of the Roman soldier reference. For further reading, also see Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God: The Divine Warrier from Isaiah to Ephesians* (JSNTSS, 140; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

[66] Hermann Gunkel, 'Biblishche Theologie und biblische Religiongeschicte: I. des AT', in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2d. ed., 1090-91. Quoted

ing trend, with Frei's work offered as a catalyst. His distinction between meaning and reference is helpful, as is his corollary call to reject historical reconstructions of events as sources for interpretation. The locus of meaning is in the text of Scripture, rather than in the events depicted by the text.

By reversing this trend, our practice of biblical interpretation will align with our doctrinal convictions regarding inspiration. 2 Peter 1:19-21 is salient in this respect: 'And we have *something more sure, the prophetic word*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.'[67] In this passage, Peter speaks with confidence about Scripture, describing it as a word 'more sure' than any private interpretation. Dockery and Nelson write, 'In this context Peter makes a striking statement since he compares his own experience at the transfiguration of Jesus with the Scriptures. Peter saw with his own eyes the revelation of God in Christ, yet he knows that other believers will not have such an immediate experience with Christ, so he points them to the Scriptures, which are God's interpretation (not a private interpretation of man as in vv. 20-21) of the matters recorded. Why are these words 'more sure"? This is because, while they are in fact words 'spoken' by men, they are truly words 'from God'.[68] The biblical portrayal of the transformation is a more sure word than Peter's own experience of it. Therefore, although the thesis of this article has been argued on the basis of its *inference* from the doctrine of inspiration, it appears that 2 Peter 1:19-21 is a biblical *injunction* along the same lines.

Furthermore a textual frame of reference for interpretation is consistent with the best of the Great Tradition. Orthodox historian John Behr, in the first volume of his three volume commentary on the formation of Christian theology, argues that the early church developed her theology through an interpretive relationship to the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets. 'If God acts through His Word', Behr writes, 'then that Word needs to be heard, to be read, to be understood—the relationship with God

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in Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), p. 7.

67 ESV, emphasis ours.

68 Dockery and Nelson, pp. 133-4.

is, in a broad sense, literary'.[69] Behr relies in part upon Frances Young's work on the patristic treatment of text and event, and summarizes her thoughts:

> She further points out...that it would be anachronistic to suppose that in antiquity God's revelation was thought of as located in historical events behind the text, events to which, it is claimed, we have access by reconstructing them from the text, treating the text as mere historical documents which provide raw historical data, subject to our own analysis, rather than in the interpreted events as presented in Scripture, where the interpretation is already given through the medium of Scripture.[70]

The thesis of this article, we hope, is neither novel nor niche. It is not a literary theory, or a capitulation to 'postmodern historicism'. Rather, it is an attempt toward *ressourcement*, an encouragement for evangelicals to practice more faithfully what they already know, to recover what was lost in a post-Enlightenment historical-critical context. And for this recovery, Frei's work has proven invaluable. It is not that evangelicals needed Frei's work *per se* to maintain a hermeneutic consistent with the doctrine of inspiration, but that it has been the case that, at least for a few evangelicals he has been the gadfly necessary to help recognize what has been the textual frame of reference for biblical interpretation, invoked by Scripture itself and supported by the Great Tradition.

[69] John Behr, *The Way to Nicea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2001), p. 15.

[70] Behr is summarizing Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 57.