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Contents

How to Do Things with Meaning in Biblical Interpretation

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Introduction

Biblical studies today is a fascinating and multi-layered phenomenon. In the various institutional forms in which it manifests itself, particularly in conferences and publications, it betrays an extraordinary diversity, almost to the point where one can wonder whether there is any common denominator which ties it all together. On one level, of course, the common denominator of biblical studies is the Bible itself. Yet as soon as one puts the interpretative endeavor into motion, or brings the Bible into some hermeneutical context, the resultant diversity appears to overwhelm any attempt to say what biblical studies is. The purpose of this paper is not to insist that there should, after all, be one thing at the heart of biblical study, but neither is to sit back with a sense of resignation and say that since the ship has sailed there is no prospect of constructive ways ahead.

Rather, this paper will argue that meaning is one important focus of attention in biblical interpretation, but only when understood in an appropriately low-key and localized way. For some this thesis may sound obvious in any case, but for those aware of various recent debates in biblical interpretation it is no longer a straightforward claim to make. The path to this thesis must therefore take some time to review what has been at stake in such debates, before building to the constructive point at issue, which will utilize some aspects of the work of J. L. Austin, best known for his theory of speech acts, to explore "how to do things with meaning in biblical interpretation."

I begin therefore with a basic question: what is it that readers do when they come to the Bible in the field of biblical studies, as broadly conceived as possible? This "framing" exercise offers a potentially vast number of ways of describing the core interpretative activities, but at least tries to clarify some key features. In particular: Why will there always be interpretative diversity? How does it relate to the differing conceptions of the role of the text and the reader in interpretation? Where does all this leave questions of meaning? I then suggest that many of the things we do with biblical texts fall within the range of occupying ourselves with

meaning, in one way or another, but that in the light of deep interpretative disarray in the pursuit of meaning, it may be time to recognize that we neither need nor can really obtain a proper theoretical account of meaning. In light of J.L. Austin's lesser known work on meaning, I suggest that the conclusions which follow from this are rather modest, namely that we should address ourselves to questions about particular meanings of particular texts, rather than abstract questions about meaning in general, but that, importantly, these remain comprehensible and constructive questions to ask.

Too much hermeneutical theorizing ventures boldly where angels fear to tread. I am about to do likewise. On the whole biblical interpretation, and biblical hermeneutics in general, is best understood by engaging in it, rather than theorizing about it. But on occasion it may be appropriate to step back and recalibrate the frame, as it were. This is such an exercise. It partly represents a first attempt to explore a wider-ranging thesis which I think is worthy of further consideration than it can be given here: that biblical studies can benefit from a broad range of critical and philosophical perspectives in nuancing the kinds of theoretical conceptualizations it offers of itself, without at the same time thinking that such perspectives can in fact shape and drive the discipline in the first place. Rather, I suggest, they offer conceptual resources for reflecting on the coherence or otherwise of ongoing interpretative activities. The shaping and the driving, meanwhile, are provided by the subject matter of the texts themselves, which may be understood theologically, sociologically, historically, or in a variety of ways. Implicit in that broader thesis, as well as in this particular paper, is the underlying argument that the insights of hermeneutics and critical thinking can be turned to constructive interpretative ends in biblical studies.

All in all, then, the present paper has about it something of an overview and prospect. The longer-term question must be: will it bear fruit? And to judge that, one would, on another occasion, have to progress to the actual matters of theology or sociology or history about which the texts discourse.

(1) Framing the Question

The ax is at the root of the historical-critical tree.

We have known this for a long time without achieving much consensus regarding what to do about it. The voice of Walter Wink's *The Bible in Human Transformation* was the voice of one crying in the wilderness: the historical-critical method is bankrupt; make way for the liberating insights of a psychologically-oriented hermeneutic.[1] It was strangely apt that Wink's should be that voice, since his own published doctoral work was a standard historical-critical analysis of New Testament tradition-history which had concerned the John-the-Baptist narratives, where the ax was at the root and the voice was crying in the wilderness.[2] Every so often,

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1.   See Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

2.   Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (SNTSMS 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

Wink's call has been renewed. Probably the project most in line with his has been Schuyler Brown's Jungian account of "biblical empirics" in the somewhat over-looked little work *Text and Psyche*.[3] This suggestive study is significantly subtitled "Experiencing Scripture Today." Brown, as Wink before him, turns to psychology to try and show how the Bible can transform the human soul, and develops what he calls "biblical empirics" in order to look at "the impact of scripture upon the heart."[4] He suggests that while literary criticism makes some significant advances on "doctrinal" and "historical" paradigms, it is ultimately only a knowledge of psychology which will really allow us to transcend the dichotomy of cognitive and affective approaches to the text.[5]

Meanwhile, trends in biblical interpretation continue to develop in a complex relationship with changes in the broader social and academic contexts within which biblical studies situates itself. Approaches to biblical interpretation in recent decades have claimed to hit socio-cultural bedrock in all manner of strangely familiar idioms: to each their own interpretation; or the liberation of the long-silenced female voice; or only the voice of disinterested political correctness; or the consumerist proposition that only interpretations which sell shall survive; or claims to find the Pauline philosophers' stone in the world of political rhetoric, or in the arena of negotiating ethnic diversity and boundaries; or, in a rather different register, the resurgent fundamentalism of the sure and the certain. This should not be so surprising: what we do with texts is just one of our activities in a world marked by all manner of divergences and disagreements between people. But how should we think of this interpretative diversity, cast adrift as we are on the conflicting currents of apathy and aggressive dispute?

The first point to make is just how difficult it is to articulate the nature of the central activity alluded to above: the interaction between human beings and biblical text(s) which occurs in the various acts of reading and interpreting; of "biblical studies" of all sorts. Consider a simple question, something like:

"What is the point, or goal, or *telos*, of interpreting the Bible?"

No sooner is the question shaped on the page than a thousand modifications and challenges immediately present themselves. After MacIntyre, one finds oneself asking "Whose point? Which goal?"[6] Or according to whose criteria? Or which criteria? Or the criteria of which disciplines or traditions (and thus, also, in the end, of people)? Before too long, one finds oneself then asking "which Bible?,"

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3. Schuyler Brown, *Text and Psyche: Experiencing Scripture Today* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

4. Brown, *Text and Psyche*, 118, cf. 31–57.

5. Brown, *Text and Psyche*, 37. I have elsewhere suggested that speech act theory offers a more nuanced way of achieving what Brown sets out to do here. See my "Speech-Act Theory" in David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant (eds.), *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 75–110, especially 102.

6. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

what we mean by "interpret," and eventually disappearing into what Jeffrey Stout so memorably called "endless methodological foreplay."[7] All the while, increasingly neglected in our surrounding culture, there awaits an extraordinary text, or collection of texts, which runs all the way from "In the beginning . . ." to "Even so, come Lord Jesus," with various color-coded appendices, addenda, additions and redactions; poetry, prose, and prophecy; rhetoric, revelation, reflection, and, at least in the NIV, a hut in a field of melons.[8]

Nevertheless, we live at a time of the slow, noisy collapse of some sort of "modern" consensus about what biblical interpretation was all about, and also at the time of the slow implosion and erosion of (Western) Christendom, and if this is not a time of paradigm change then it is at the very least the changing of the guard of the paradigm. The chains are off, the cell doors are open, but the old ways of assuming how we should read the text remain sitting stubbornly in the centre of the cell. As a result, a short reflection on the nature of the question is justified, after all, or perhaps, before or in the midst of the hermeneutical circle of it all.

How we ask our question will of course say a great deal about us as readers/interpreters. The question in effect presents a framework within which our subsequent scholarly activity will find certain avenues opened up and others foreclosed. The question, in turn, is surely at least in part determined by our own scholarly traditions and predispositions. There is a world of difference between, for example, the concerns of redaction criticism and reception history; of feminism and form criticism. One may be tempted to think that these can be entirely unrelated pursuits. Any account of what is going on between people and biblical texts needs to be big enough to allow all of them space, but doubtless most people would evaluate them differently. Our questions, then, are not innocent: they derive from as well as determine our interpretative agendas. Borrowing the wordplay from Jonathan Culler, I suggest that both directions of interpretative flow can be captured by the word "framing": we frame our questions according to our location, and the questions frame our pursuits.[9] How may frames are there? (Or perhaps: how many frames should there be?)

Figure 1 indicates upwards of 55,000 questions that could be asked.[10] The very construction of some of the columns indicates almost limitless ways in which further questions could be added, but over fifty thousand seems enough to be getting along with for now. At this point what was intended as the posing of *a* question, in all its singular glory, has become a handy chart for generating research programs:

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7. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority. Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147.

8. Isaiah 1:8. Others (NRSV, ESV) remain more influenced by the KJV's "lodge in a garden of cucumbers" as a way of rendering *kimlunah bᵉmiqshah*. Scholarly energy expended on this text reflects another tradition, that of the careful philologist, without whom the others cannot even get started.

9. Cf. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oxford: Blackwell and Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

10. In fact 55,080, a figure arrived at simply by multiplying 6 × 6 × 17 × 9 × 10, being the number of items in each column.

How	should	we	study	the Bible?
Why	might	I/one	read	the New Testament?
When	can	Christians	interpret	the Old Testament?
Where	do	Jews	understand	the Hebrew Bible?
For whom	in the past did	Gentiles	explain	the 66 "books"?
With whom	will	Muslims	live with	the deutero-canonical books?
		agnostics	live in the light of	the Gospel of Thomas, 1
		atheists	evade	Enoch, and other assorted
		humanists	domesticate	texts?
		Marxists		BHS? (or BHQ?)
		women		UBS4/NA27?
		men		the NRSV?
		children		
		individuals		
		scholars		
		all people		
		donkeys[11]		

Figure 1. On Reading the Bible: Variations on a Question

read off one item from each column and apply for funding to study, say, "Why might Marxists domesticate the Gospel of Thomas?" This was an unintended outcome, but perhaps not to be despised in these financially difficult times.

However, if our interests are hermeneutical rather than fiscal, where might such a mapping of an ever-expanding number of ways of asking the question, or "framing the discipline," leave us?

(2) The Conflict of Biblical Interpretations

The first observation might be the inevitability of interpretative disagreement. There is certainly plenty of evidence of the reality of such disagreement. A lot of energy, some of it quite aggressive, is expended on denouncing the handling of the Bible on the part of fellow scholars. David Clines described this as "the new brutality" in biblical scholarship.[12] A prominent exchange in the mid 1990s asked "Whose Bible is it Anyway?" Did it belong, in some sense, to the academy, apparently thought to include nothing but disinterested pursuers of truth with no ideological blood running in their veins, or did it belong to the church, somewhat optimistically envisaged as a collection of people concerned, like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, to "examine the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so." The stakes were high: social location, at least arguably, reshaped entirely the appropriate interpretative questions to ask.[13] Although the precise shape of such

11.   As, for example, in Jonathan Magonet's delightful "How a Donkey Reads the Bible—On Interpretation," in his *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* (new edition, London: SCM, 2004), 66–79.

12.   David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties. The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 205; Gender, Culture, Theory 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 93, n. 28.

13.   See Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (JSOTS 204; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 17–55, responding in part to Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World. Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), who then replied with "Bible, Theology and the University: A Response to Philip Davies," *JSOT* 71, (1996): 3–16.

arguments changes, there remains considerable disciplinary introspection regarding the nature and purpose of biblical studies, of which the most pronounced example in recent years is perhaps Hector Avalos' enthusiastic *The End of Biblical Studies*.[14] The result is that there also persists a high level of often quite aggressive rhetoric denouncing other people's interpretations and agendas.[15]

It would I think be unduly optimistic to suggest that all this is simply a result of crossed wires about what question is being asked. Nevertheless, Nicholas Lash reminds us of John Henry Newman's wonderful observation: "Half the controversies in the world are verbal ones; and could they be brought to a plain issue, they would be brought to a prompt termination."[16] So it is certainly worth considering whether the catch-all term "interpretation," or even its erstwhile custom-made disciplinary equivalent "exegesis," is really a clear enough term to help us to know what we are disagreeing about.

Interestingly, few of the participants in recent debates concerning biblical hermeneutics have, so far as I have observed, turned to the work of Paul Ricoeur as a way of negotiating the question of interpretative conflict, an omission all the more surprising given that precisely this question dominates so much of his early and middle-period work on narrative and interpretation, and that his first major collection of hermeneutical essays was entitled *The Conflict of Interpretations*.[17] His *Interpretation Theory* offers an uncharacteristically straightforward account of his open-ended approach to letting texts set their own agendas.[18] One of the key distinctions he makes, between understanding and explanation as two components of the hermeneutical task, seems to offer a fairly clear indication of why authors and readers are both so active in the process of working with texts. Ricoeur urges that interpretation (of written texts) is the dialectic of both understanding and explanation, in a way we might map as follows (see Figure 2). Here are at least two different things which reading might be about, operating within a hermeneutical framework which allows for fixity and fluidity: readers "understand" texts as communicative actions, while remaining engaged in a practice of reading freestanding words on a page which attain to a "surplus" of meaning in comparison to

14. Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

15. The rhetoric deserves a study of its own. For wider-ranging reflections see some of the comments of J. David Hester Amador, *Academic Constraints in Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction to a Rhetoric of Power* (JSNTS 174; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

16. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), vii, citing Newman's University Sermons. A somewhat similar perspective underlies the philosophical work of J.L. Austin, to whom the present paper is much indebted in various ways. Cf. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), which "dissolved" much philosophical talk of "sense data" and so forth by clearly defining terms (*Sense*, 5).

17. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

18. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
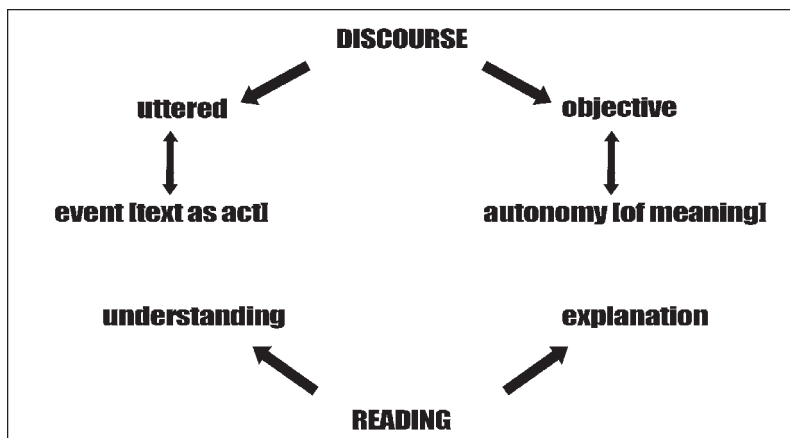
Figure 2. Ricoeur's Analysis of the Two "Polarities" of Interpretation

their original communicative function. In this elegant formulation, somewhere between "the right meaning" and "the reader's choice" lies the practice of interpretative wisdom:

> If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. The text presents a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement lies beyond our immediate reach.[20]

What happens when instead one tries to imagine that all interpretative activity is of one sort? In my judgment, words like "interpretation" and even "exegesis" become intolerably over-burdened, and then in response some scholars launch rearguard actions attempting to demarcate what can and cannot count as responsible examples of interpretative or exegetical practice.

It would be all to the good to agree, then, that exegesis is an essentially contested concept, although this is not, to labor the point, to say that "anything goes" under the headline of "exegesis." Rather than having a definition, we end up with a range of "working definitions," gathered together in a Wittgensteinian family resemblance. One could do worse that consult the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* to see what passes as the "industry standard." Its definition of exegesis is "The process of careful, analytical study of biblical passages undertaken in order to produce useful interpretations of those passages."[21] Readers might note a certain studied

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19. Drawn from Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 71–88.
20. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 79.
21. Douglas Stuart, "Exegesis," in *ABD* 2:682–88, here 682.

ambiguity even here: the "useful interpretations" are not, apparently, part of the careful analytical study, but are built upon them. However, these same readers—alert perhaps to the need to look to context—might note too that this is an offering from Douglas Stuart, whose much-used "handbook" of biblical interpretation, co-authored with Gordon Fee, explicitly divided (and thereby conquered) hermeneutics into two parts: exegesis and application.[22] Maybe Stuart's definition of exegesis is in a certain sense already engineered to feed into a two-step vision of hermeneutics, which would rather foreclose on the very topic at issue, the nature of the interpretative task in the first place.

Most have preferred to take the route of suggesting that what Gadamer had joined together no interpreter should separate: application is to be understood as a part of interpretation, not a separable add-on, and exegesis, therefore, while indeed careful and analytical, cannot be divorced from the broader discussion about what counts as interpretation and why.[23] While readers like Stuart lament the blurring of exegesis into the wider interpretative task, others urge instead that biblical exegesis is too often separated out from these broader interpretative questions in ways which are socially and politically undesirable, such as Temba Mafico's analysis of "Biblical Exegesis and its Shortcomings."[24] Oddly, although they expound the nature of the problem with exegesis in entirely contrary ways, both Stuart and Mafico are fully committed to a more or less common task: "elucidating scripture in a way that highlights its theological and didactic message."[25] Where they disagree is on what exegesis has to be in order to make that task work, because for the one the task of interpretative elucidation is a matter of drawing out what the text first offers of itself, while for the other it is a matter of unmasking the ideology coded in the text so that it would be freed to speak today.

Perhaps one may ask whether all that much is secured, then, by defining some particular part of interpretation as exegesis? What seems more important is how one characterizes the overall interpretative task. The point, however, is precisely that: that we can have that broader discussion about interpretation without having an agreed definition of exegesis.

I want to suggest that something similar holds for "meaning." It is not that "anything goes" with respect to meaning, but neither is it the case that we have to

22. Cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its worth* (3rd ed; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

23. Most famously in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed., London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), especially 308. His full discussion concludes with "Application does not mean first understanding a given universal in itself and then afterward applying it to a concrete case. It is the very understanding of the universal—the text—itself." (341) This is part of his argument that application forms a part of the *historically effective consciousness* (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstein*) whereby tradition and interpretation interact continually through time.

24. Temba L.J. Mafico, "Biblical Exegesis and Its Shortcomings in Theological Education," in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 255–71. The article combines a Kierkegaardian critique of irrelevance with an engaged study of Genesis 2–3 and questions of equality.

25. Mafico, "Biblical Exegesis," 256.

be able to define what meaning is in order to make progress with discussing what texts mean. A good deal is obscured in this area by over-confident theoretical discussions on an abstract hermeneutical level. I shall risk adding to them in the hope that a more modest conclusion about meaning will emerge at the end, and prove to be helpful.

(3) The Meanings of Biblical Texts: An Immodest Proposal

The immodest proposal about meanings and biblical texts is that the latter have the former. The modest proposal, on the other hand, was that biblical texts do not have meanings. This has usually been presented with a scattering of scare quotes, e.g., that texts do not "have" meanings, or that texts do not have "meanings." There is a serious point here to which I wish to do justice, but there is an equally serious confusion which requires patient probing. This is not the moment to pursue such general questions about meaning as whether biblical texts have meanings in the same way that all-purpose generic texts do. They by and large do not, despite some formal similarities, because of the way that such texts are sprung into a kind of canonical tension by their setting in the (theologically constructed) Old or New Testaments. Furthermore, not all meanings of biblical texts are equal, or of the same sort. But to get to the matter at hand, we shall need to be more specific.

Modest proposals have been doing quite well for themselves in hermeneutical theory. The original "Modest Proposal," to stand back for a moment, was Jonathan Swift's: "For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being A Burden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public." The proposal was simply that the Irish should eat their own children. That was the way to sort out poverty in 1729. Key to the argument was that it was presented dead-pan, with a concerned sincerity to be seen to be arguing on behalf of all those afflicted by over-population and under-nourishment.

We shall focus on one particular modest proposal which has held considerable sway in biblical hermeneutics. It is the claim that texts do not have meanings, and then, *a fortiori*, biblical texts do not have meanings, and thus, one way or another, what matters/counts/wins is that readers do things to texts and should, variously, do something interesting, or edifying, or at least publishable, or at best should do unto texts as they would have done unto themselves.[26]

What Is the Meaning of a Text?

In a short but seminal article in 1982, Jeffrey Stout asked precisely this question: "What is the Meaning of a Text?"[27] The question, he said, does not deserve an answer. Rather, the word "meaning" serves as a kind of place-holder for whatever it is we are really interested in: perhaps we are discussing authorial intention, or

26. This 1-sentence formulation of the modest proposal runs together ideas drawn from a wide variety of authors, some of whom are cited more specifically in what follows.

27. In *New Literary History* 14 (1982), 1–12. Further references to quotations are given in the text.

contextual significance, for example (3). The path best taken is to "eliminate" the troublesome term "meaning" and then get on with whatever is the substantive matter at hand. Then, "with a specific end in view, we could produce a fine-grained explication carefully crafted to achieve that end" (4). The end is chosen elsewhere, and "good commentary is whatever serves our interests and purposes" (6). This is not a worryingly subjective vision of the situation, because these interests and purposes are not "themselves beyond the pale of rational appraisal and critical revision" (8). What we have, then, is that "different interests quite naturally issue in different readings of texts" (7), and can for the most part "be judged according to relatively determinate intersubjective criteria" (8).

Stout's article has the inestimable merit of compressing a large theoretical discussion into coherent and brief compass. It acknowledges its affinity to some of the pragmatism of Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty, and draws its key idea of "explication as elimination" (of the term "meaning" in this case) from W. V. O. Quine. In arguing that his view entails doing without "a hermeneutical *method,*" (7) Stout encapsulates one of Gadamer's basic points about hermeneutics, that the truth of the text demands the subjugation of any interpretative method to the consideration of the text itself.[28] Finally, his appeal to intersubjective criteria for the evaluation of competing views foreshadows his defense of just such an approach to the language of ethics in his own later work, where considerable flesh is put on this bare proposal, thus also demanding that any critic of this view be cautious about suggesting that the proposal simply would not work in practice.[29]

Biblical scholars will be familiar with the fall-out from this article. Stephen Fowl offered a forthrightly titled appropriation of it as "The Ethics of Interpretation or What's Left Over After the Elimination of Meaning."[30] It is a strength of this account, noted by Adam, that it offers a generous way of accounting for interpretative disagreement which is not predicated on blindness, stubbornness or simple error,[31] albeit that it would not be hard to offer examples of all those characteristics in various interpretations.

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28. In addition to *Truth and Method*, which expounds his point at length, a useful brief articulation of it with respect to written texts is found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Truth of the Word," in Lawrence K. Schmidt (ed.), *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and* Phronesis *in Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 135–55.

29. See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel. The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988).

30. Stephen E. Fowl, "The Ethics of Interpretation, or What's Left Over after the Elimination of Meaning," in David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (JSOTS 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 379–98, taken up and developed further in his subsequent *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

31. See A. K. M. Adam, "Integral and Differential Hermeneutics," in his *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 81–103, especially 93–95 on "respectful dissent." This is in a book of collected essays in which Adam explores a range of ways of developing something like Fowl's account under the rubric of "faithful interpretation."

Kevin Vanhoozer developed a lengthy apologia for treating the various components identified by Stout as components of the over-arching communicative act between author and reader (via text), answering the title question of his *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* with a resounding "Yes!"[32] Partly in response to Vanhoozer, Fowl has clarified precisely what it is he thinks is the result of Stout's argument:

> Let me state categorically that I am not opposed to people using the word "meaning" in either general conversation or scholarly debate as long as they use it in its everyday, undetermined sense. What this sense of "meaning" cannot do, however, is resolve an interpretive dispute where the parties involved disagree about the nature of their interpretive tasks.[33]

Vanhoozer, in turn, perhaps recognizing that his own book title and generally positive answer to it might have led to his own position being misrepresented as a claim that definite meaning inheres straightforwardly in all texts and the interpreter's task is simply to spot it correctly, offered a lengthy and subtle clarifying essay. Here he made clear that (a) the meaning he had in mind could be a multiple and indeed on occasion elusive one, (b) that it was best understood in speech-act terms by way of the content of the illocutionary acts borne by the text, and (c) that more or less the whole discussion could be had without recourse to the term "meaning" in any case since what was at stake was the content, or subject-matter, of the discourse.[34] The gradual nuancing of the positions taken by Fowl and Vanhoozer is evidence that it is easy to let theoretical statements run away with what must be the case, only to have to seek ways of clarifying how texts do in fact work on closer inspection. The whole area mapped out by these various contributions has been ably reviewed by Christopher Spinks in his detailed study of the two thinkers.[35]

Less explicitly indebted to Stout, but nevertheless in the same boat, is David Clines' suggestion that interpreters are in the business of "customized" or "bespoke interpretation."[36] This is effectively a hermeneutic for consumers of texts and

32. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Note his own discussion of Stout's article on 102–3.

33. Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons. Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 71–87, here 79.

34. See his "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant," in his *First Theology. God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2000), 159–203. This is even more evident in his extraordinary essay, arguably one of the finest theological articulations of the scope and limitations of hermeneutical theory in theological perspective, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," *IJST* 7 (2005): 5–37.

35. D. Christopher Spinks, *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning. Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007). I am less persuaded than Spinks that the matter at hand is a "crisis."

36. David J. A. Clines, "Possibilities and Priorities of Biblical Interpretation in an International Perspective," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 67–87: see 78–82, especially 80. See also the article cited in the next note.

interpretations (although probably there is little if any difference between these, in what Clines goes on to describe). Thus "the bespoke interpreter has a professional skill in tailoring interpretations to the needs of the various communities who are in the market for interpretations," and on the question of criteria for evaluating these, Clines offers the rather vague sense of being interested in "identifying shoddy interpretations that are badly stitched together and have no durability, and . . . giving my energies to producing attractive interpretations that represent good value for money."[37] Clines' own interpretations are often attractive, though one may wonder quite how much criteria-sifting work this one word of weighing may have in it. He uses "attractive" not in the sense of *aesthetic*, but in the sense of purchasable . . . and this seems a somewhat thin tool for ethical discernment in the late-capitalist world of today.

Clines even hands us a modest-proposal quote, scare-quotes and all, deferentially framed as "we are recognizing . . ." Here it is:

> Nowadays we are recognizing that texts not only do not have determinate meanings, they do not "have" meanings at all. More and more, we are coming to appreciate the role of the reader, or the hearer, in the making of meaning, and recognizing that, without a reader or a hearer, there is not a lot of "meaning" to any text.[38]

This particular version of the "modest proposal" about meaning is clearly comparable to those versions more directly dependent on Stout's essay.

Three brief observations at this point before we turn to J. L. Austin's work as a way of responding. First, in my judgment, the modest proposal has had considerable influence. Even where not actually adopted, it has led many to feel that talking of "meaning" is somehow inherently problematic and requires justification. Secondly, on occasion, the justification offered has sometimes taken the form of simply asserting that texts do have meanings: that it must be so, and we must insist upon it. Such flat-footed responses do not, it seems to me, feel the force of Stout's argument. Thirdly, some attempts to mount a counter-proposal have taken the form of trying to outflank the modest proposal on a conceptual level. Thus George Caird, in his engaging book on *Language and Imagery in the Bible*, talks of "meaning^R" (referent), "meaning^S" (sense), and "meaning^I" (intention), in an attempt to clarify some ambiguities.[39] A similar parceling out of aspects of meaning, though applied more broadly to discourse, occupies the discussion of Cotterell

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37.   Clines, "Possibilities and Priorities," 80. In a reuse of this same idea ("A World Established on Water (Psalm 24). Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation," in his *Interested Parties*, 172–86, the word "identifying" becomes "eradicating" (181), which seems both odd and unfortunate.

38.   Clines, "World Established on Water," 179.

39.   G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 37–61 on "The Meaning of Meaning," especially 37–40. His overall account is helpfully influenced by Austin's emphasis on performative language, cf. 7–36 in general and 21–22 in particular.

and Turner.[40] A heavyweight philosophical account of the importance of meaning is offered by Jorge Gracia, who argues that interpretations of texts can be divided into two main types: "meaning interpretations" which are oriented fundamentally toward the intended meaning of the text as originally produced; and "relational interpretations," which use the text to generate some communicative act in relation to a particular interpretative agenda.[41] For Gracia, the goal is to interpret what the revealer (i.e., God) intended to be understood. One oddity of Gracia's book is that he never gets as far as actually saying anything about what God *does* mean through any text. It is an attempt to outflank objections entirely on a conceptual level. This unwillingness to engage specific examples is, to my mind, completely the wrong path to take.

J. L. Austin and "The Meaning of a Word"

The most helpful philosophically-oriented account, scarcely if ever referred to, is J. L. Austin's "The Meaning of a Word?"[42] This is a masterpiece of condensed exposition, approaching a familiar philosophical conundrum with his typical conviction that we are simply not clear enough about what we are talking about. In outline, his main argument is as follows.

People ponder meaningful questions such as "What is the meaning of the word 'cat' or 'mat'?" and can thereby make some progress toward analyzing the truth or falsity of an utterance such as "The cat sat on the mat." But this leads them, all unwary, to suppose that one might generalize such considerations and ask not "what is the meaning of *this or that particular word*," but of any word in general. Hence one asks: "What is the meaning of a word?" But, suggests Austin, this is a question with no real referent at all. It is a spurious question talking about "nothing in particular." Where the specific question might lead one to wonder what a cat is (an activity which at least makes sense), the general (spurious) question would lead to the oddity of pondering "What is anything?" Austin pursues the point through one more twist in the argument: philosophers fall back from this spuriousness to suppose that there is a class of things which are "meanings of words," about which one can ask.[43] But this only leads to such bizarre practices as saying that the "meaning" of "muggy" is "the idea or concept of mugginess" . . . which makes no

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40. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989), 77–105. Their sophisticated discussion never quite breaks free of following E. D. Hirsch Jr. down the problematic path of separating authorially intended meaning from significance.

41. Jorge J. E. Gracia, *How Can We Know What God Means? The Interpretation of Revelation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

42. J. L. Austin, "The Meaning of a Word," in his *Philosophical Papers* (3rd ed; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 55–75, originally written in 1940 according to the editorial introduction (vi). The only reference to it of which I am aware is Spinks, *Crisis of Meaning*, 84, n. 28, but he does not make much of it.

43. Indeed, alternatively, one could ask about "meanings," replete with scare quotes built in by definition. Austin, "Meaning," 58–59.

meaningful sense. As per his standard performative emphasis, Austin would insist that the real question would have to be "What does *X* mean by saying 'It is muggy today'?"—a question which could be answered helpfully. Austin's rhetorical tour de force takes an interesting turn at this point, as he ruminates on the predilection for philosophers to generalize out to absurdity: "Lesser men, raising this same question and finding no answer, would very likely commit suicide or join the Church."[44] The article goes on to pursue two further aspects of the tendency to classify questions about meaning in such general terms (to do with analytic meanings and other philosophical niceties), but its work is done in its first five bracing pages.

It is clear that this short, early piece finds Austin on his way to developing his fuller account that many significant aspects of language only make sense when understood in terms of how they perform. He went on to write on "performative language," and eventually to develop an understanding of "speech acts" for which he is probably best known, in his famous work *How to Do Things with Words*.[45] Sometimes lost in this broader theory is the elegant early argument about meaning: that in certain low-key and localized ways it remains important to ask about meanings, without thinking that one needs a generalized theory in place. [46]

What then of the biblical scholar? I suggest that Austin's argument can be transposed straightforwardly to the reading of biblical texts. The meaning of any given biblical text can be various (though not limitless) things, including some with theological dimensions. "The meaning of a text," on the other hand, is a conceptually useless phrase, and the lengthy debate about what texts mean has frequently fallen into confusion as a result. By way of contrast, the meaning of "All the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain" (Ezra 10:9b) is not a matter which is conceptually difficult, especially to British scholars familiar with endless discourse about the weather. This relatively straightforward approach to the concept of meaning does not imply that such meaning is itself either straightforward, or mundane, and so forth.

Let us consider an example, one short enough to allow a certain blurring of the distinction between the meaning of a word and a biblical text: the sixth (or occasionally the fifth) commandment: "*lo' tirtsach*"—"do not murder" or "do not kill." In a thorough study of the history of interpretation of this verse, including a review of many 20th century translations, Wilma Bailey charts the drift towards a

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44. Austin, "Meaning," 59.

45. Posthumously edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1975; 1st ed. 1962). For an account of the key aspects of speech-act theory as they relate to biblical studies see my "Speech-Act Theory" (n. 5 above) and more broadly Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark and New York: Continuum, 2001).

46. On another occasion, with philosophical interests to the fore, it would be worth exploring the ways in which Austin's interests do and do not overlap with typically Wittgensteinian ways of understanding meaning as related to use. There is a clear similarity of emphasis here.

view which reads the text as prohibiting murder rather than killing.[47] The reasons which pull interpreters to one or the other interpretation are many and various, and surely not entirely unconnected with their overall theological perspective on killing and its various attempted justifications. But neither are they unrelated to the semantic range of *ratsach* in its various occurrences in the canon, and the contextually-sensitive arguments put forward about how the word is being used in Exodus 20:13 (//Deut 5:17). The complexity in this case, as Bailey points out, is that these arguments pull in conflicting directions. Thus on the one hand, some point to the fact that the death penalty is elsewhere mandated in scripture, and killing in war is clearly understood to derive from the command of Yhwh, to argue that *lo' tirtsach* cannot mean simply "do not kill." The assumption here is that there is sufficient coherence across the various contexts in the canon where the verb is used to point to limitations of its meaning in Exodus 20. On the other hand, others point out that different traditions (and sources) may well have used the same word differently, and that in general the ten commandments regulate basic practices relevant to all of (everyone's) life, not particular subsets of those practices specifically defined in legal terms. This would point towards an understanding of not killing alongside not committing adultery and not stealing as a blanket prohibition of a general human activity. It is not my purpose to adjudicate this argument, which would clearly require the interpreter to weigh up the relative merits of the conflicting arguments brought into play.[48]

The more hermeneutical point is this: this is a perfectly intelligible dispute about the meaning of the verb *ratsach* in Exodus 20:13, in which one of the key factors, though not definitive in any one direction, is what the verb *ratsach* means when people use it. It turns out not to have a univocal meaning, which is part of the difficulty in knowing how best to translate the text. But it does not seem helpful to suggest that the way ahead here is to recast the discussion in terms of interpretive interests and ask why some would interpret it to forbid all killing and others only unlawful killing such as murder. One can have that discussion too, but it is not the same one, and neither is it apparent that it is a more finely tuned discussion than the one about the meanings of *ratsach*.[49]

What are the hermeneutical conclusions? I would like to suggest that there is a strong tendency in biblical studies to make such unexamined claims as "texts do not have meanings—it all depends on how people read them" on the one hand, and "texts do have meanings—and people either read them rightly or wrongly and

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47. Wilma Ann Bailey, *"You Shall Not Kill" or "You Shall Not Murder"? The Assault on a Biblical Text* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005).

48. And ideally the issues raised by cross-comparing uses of *ratsach* with the other main vocabulary markers for acts of killing in the Old Testament, using the roots *mwt*, *qtl*, and *hrg*, each with their different (and perhaps more clearly-defined) nuances.

49. Bailey does probe both discussions. She sets her sights both on arguing that "murder" is the wrong translation in the ten commandments, but that pragmatically the question is which translation will most help people to stop killing each other: Bailey, *You Shall Not Kill*, 19–20, 79–83.

that is of no basic hermeneutical significance for the correct interpretation" on the other. What attention to specific texts suggests, as per Austin's argument about meaning, is that the level of abstraction attained in such generalized formulations is of no help in assessing what the given text is saying. My own view is that Stout's famous article correctly perceives this with respect to one side of the argument: in other words Stout recognizes that it is unhelpfully abstract to say that a text does have a meaning. But Austin's argument helps us to see that it just as unhelpfully abstract to say that a text does not. Rather, we have to keep pressing toward specific texts, and always remember to ask something like "What does 'do not kill' mean?," which is as practical a discussion as could be imagined. As this particular example suggests, it remains true that sometimes the answer to just such a specific question will be "we do not know" or—less gloomily—"there is more than one possible answer" (although this will rarely equate to "there are any number of possible answers" . . . the number in question is more commonly two or three).

Trained by long immersion in quasi-philosophical debate, biblical interpreters may still find themselves wondering what it is they are asking after when they ask "What does 'Do not kill' mean?" But in practice it seems to me that this is to create a problem where none really exists, except that created by the urge to generalize.

In short, one of the things a reader of text X should be asking is "What does X mean?" There is absolutely no reason why the reader in question should not ask all manner of other questions too (referring to our earlier chart of possibilities), but the possibility (and indeed desirability) of such other interpretative pursuits should not intimidate the unwary into feeling the need to use "scare quotes" when talking of meaning, nor drive them to avoid meaning-language altogether. Neither, on the other hand, does it require such a reader to have "a theory or meaning" or even be able to define what meaning is.[50]

But when the reader comes to a text like: "The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God—you shall not do any work" (Exod 20:10), it would seem that one entirely appropriate question to ask is "what does 'work' mean?" Note, finally, that by the time one has arrived at a question of appropriate specificity such as this, there is an implicit "here" attached to the question: "what does work mean . . . *here*?" Which reminds us of Austin's over-riding contention that important questions of meaning are not to be addressed divorced from particular contexts of use.

Matters Arising:
Bringing Meanings and Readings Together

In hermeneutics, as in so many other aspects of biblical enquiry, almost any account of one particular topic inevitably leads on to considerations of other matters, and one must resist the temptation to try to address all the implications of

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50. On the altogether muddled philosophical notion of needing a "theory of meaning" see the strongly argued work of G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Language, Sense and Nonsense. A Critical Investigation into Modern Theories of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

one hermeneutical proposal in short order, since such an attempt would merely over-simplify complex issues. Thus I cannot here consider all the issues which are tied up in an attempt to think wisely about meaning when reading the Bible. My goal was much more limited: to suggest in effect that for all the theoretical musing about meaning which has occupied biblical interpreters in recent decades, we should probably proceed as if not much has changed, and ask non-theorized questions about "what does X mean?" as and when text X requires us so to do. Despite the huge gravitational pull of theory, and hermeneutical theory in particular, I submit that generalizing such ad hoc questions into concerns about "what do texts mean?" (or comparable matters such as "do texts mean what authors intend?" and so forth) does not shed much light on the manifold tasks of reading scripture well.

Along the way we have touched on various further issues which the present discussion has tackled, if at all, in rather blunt and unhelpful terms, such as whether biblical texts mean what they mean in ways comparable with other texts, or how the careful work of philology which underlies almost all biblical interpretation could be characterized if one were to attempt to drop the notion of meaning. Of all the areas which would benefit from further exploration, though, I close with just one.

In his final and still markedly under-rated work of literary theory, C. S. Lewis imagined an "experiment in criticism" in which the usual order of things was reversed. Instead of trying directly to assess the merits of a text, he proposed distinguishing between different, varying types of reading, and then defining a good text as one which sustained certain (good) practices of reading, and a bad text as one which only supported other kinds of reading.[51] Lewis was particularly interested in the power of poetic, literary and mythical texts to remake the reader by way of a reading which could not be equated to such pursuits as reading the newspaper or children's comics. As such, his work lends a largely untapped depth to various notions of literary reading which, in biblical studies at least, have grown considerably more prominent in the intervening fifty years.[52] However, the single point I wish to note here is that at the root of such literary reading was the imaginary figure of Professor Dryasdust. Dryasdust was the expert on details—and in particular precisely the kinds of details which concerns with meaning might unlock on a suitably case-by-case basis. He is seen as the most valuable of all critics:

> At the top comes Dryasdust. Obviously I have owed, and must continue to owe, far more to editors, textual critics, commentators, and lexicographers than to anyone else. Find out what the author actually wrote and what the hard words meant and what the allusions were to, and you have

51. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).
52. The only piece I know which makes sustained use of this book in biblical studies is the fine and thought-provoking article of Stephen I. Wright, "An Experiment in Biblical Criticism: Aesthetic Encounter in Reading and Preaching Scripture," in Craig Bartholomew, *et al*. (eds.), *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (SHS1 ; Grand Rapids, Zondervan and Carlisle : Paternoster, 2000), 240–67.

done far more for me than a hundred new interpretations or assessments could ever do.[53]

Arguably the critical hierarchy was the way it was for Lewis because he was more than capable of working towards his own imaginative interpretations once fuelled by sufficient grasp of the details of the text before him, and clearly this is not a gift shared by all readers. However, we would be right to conclude that paying due attention to meanings is not to be understood as an *alternative* to focusing on read-ings in all their conceptual and imaginative literary diversity. Rather, the very heart of letting attention dwell on reading in the hermeneutical process is an appropri-ate acknowledgment of the importance of working well with meaning. And if the account offered here has any merit, then we shall only be able to work well with meaning once we are engaged in the practices of reading particular biblical texts. Or, to cast one eye back over long centuries of just such reading, we shall only be able to *recover* the ability to work well with meaning when we refocus our attention on the reading of particular texts.

Theologically speaking, it matters relatively little in the end whether one can offer a correct theoretical account of these matters. But it matters a great deal what *lo' tirtsach* means, and myriad other texts of Holy Scripture.

53. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 121.