

Hermeneutics Begins at Home: On Retrieving the Reader in Biblical Interpretation

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On April 15, 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission completed *L'interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église*. On April 23, the document was presented to Pope John Paul II and subsequently published, along with the Holy Father's allocution.¹ According to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's preface, "the Pontifical Biblical Commission took as its task an attempt to take the bearings of Catholic exegesis in the present situation one hundred years after *Providentissimus Deus* and fifty years after *Divino afflante Spiritu*."² The document treats the state of contemporary biblical interpretation under four headings: "Methods and Approaches for Interpretation," "Hermeneutical Questions," "Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation," and "Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church." In sundry ways, the document is a welcome respite for those engaged in the exegetical endeavor. The last hundred years, particularly the last fifty, have seen an unprecedented emphasis on biblical interpretation in the life of the Church as well as an unparalleled explosion of interpretive theories in the academy. In this essay, we take advantage of the opportunity to pause and reflect by turning our attention to the principal players in biblical interpretation: the reader and the text, the interpreter and the object of his interpretation. In speaking of the dynamics of biblical interpretation, the Commission notes "the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible."³ That "lived affinity" is our point of departure.

The biblical text, *qua* text, has received inscrutable methodological scrutiny. Indeed, a hallmark of the Commission's document is its praise for the historical-critical method in biblical

¹ Commission Biblique Pontificale, *L'interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). Simultaneously, the Vatican Press published the document in English as *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary*, Subsidia Biblica, vol. 18 [Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995]) for an English translation and commentary. Citations of the document in this essay are taken from the readily available Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993).

² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 89.

interpretation. The Commission recognizes the necessity of the historical-critical method in the examination of biblical texts and refers to it as “indispensable.”⁴ Yet, the Commission also notes that something is lacking. Diachronic analyses have led to significant advances in our understanding of the literal meaning and historical circumstances of biblical texts. However, solitary reliance on the historical-critical method for the exegesis of biblical texts has proven itself wanting. “No scientific method for the study of the Bible is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness. For all its overall validity, the historical-critical method cannot claim to be totally sufficient in this respect.”⁵ That certain applications of the historical-critical method are prone to an historicism replete with *a priori* principles contrary to right reason and that others tend toward historical positivism is no surprise. Although such *a priori* principles mitigate the *tabula rasa* stance the classical historical-critical method claims for itself and may be seen as abuses thereof, the tendency toward historical positivism is an occupational hazard. Frustration with the natural limits of the historical-critical method and the diachronic penchant for dissecting wholes into pugnacious parts has been allayed by the increased appeal to synchronic methods of investigation. By stressing the whole over the parts, the vigor of synchronic analyses lies in their proclivity to deal with biblical texts in their final forms, i.e., to examine texts as wholes with the understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The advances of synchronic analyses notwithstanding, it would seem that their goal of integral insight is forestalled at the methodological crossroads. Synchronics meets diachronics, but no one, at least on a methodological level, can put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

Whether diachronic or synchronic, no method has emerged to offer that which the interpreter of biblical texts seeks—*meaning*. Such a dearth in meaning highlights the intensity of the larger questions that loom before us: Is the long quest for a methodology for meaning meaningless in itself? Is the raging rationalism within and without the biblical academy perforce a connotation of meaninglessness in the biblical texts themselves akin to the hopelessness of postmodernism? No. In fact, the questions themselves are ill-formed because of an elementary misunderstanding of the limits of method and the limitlessness of meaning. Methods are relative to objects investigated, meaning is relative to subjects who investigate. The application of scientific methods of investigation may serve man in his quest for meaning without being identified as the appropriation thereof. In terms of texts, and biblical texts in particular, it is

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

hermeneutics that bridges the impasse between method and meaning. The Commission recognizes the contribution made by hermeneutical investigations of the Bible and even goes so far as to say that “contemporary hermeneutics is a healthy reaction to historical positivism and to the temptation to apply to the study of the Bible the purely objective criteria used in the natural sciences.”⁶ However, the Commission is careful to avoid endorsing any particular theory of hermeneutics. Instead, after a very brief introduction to the contemporary philosophers of hermeneutics,⁷ the Commission poses a question: “Which hermeneutical theory best enables a proper grasp of the profound reality of which Scripture speaks and its meaningful expression for people today?”⁸ The question remains open to us.

Now, if we say that the principal players in biblical interpretation are the interpreter and the Bible, we have already made two significant hermeneutical claims worthy of consideration. First, we claim that we are capable of yielding meaning from the Bible. Second, we claim a unique status for that meaning because the Bible is God’s Word. Whence such claims? The former is a rational claim. By definition, a text is intelligible and, therefore, is potentially meaningful to a reader. The latter is a matter of faith, a truth revealed and accepted outside of the Bible *per se*. Such a claim does not ground the fact that the Bible of itself yields meaning, for all texts have the potential of yielding meaning. Such a claim does ground the (divine) nature of the meaning rendered by the Bible. Such a claim is made by the Church, since “the task of giving an authentic interpretation to the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone.”⁹ When it comes to the Bible, hermeneutics begins at home.

A quest for meaning in the Bible brings us immediately to St. Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum*. For the interpreter of the Bible does not read alone. He reads within the interpretive community that is the Church. The pursuit of meaning in Sacred Scripture is a theological enterprise, for the interpretation of Sacred Scripture and the verification of that interpretation is entrusted to the Church. Given their nature as written texts, the interpreter rightly approaches biblical texts with all the diachronic and synchronic methods available to him, the indispensable

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 76–78.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ *Dei Verbum*, no. 10.

tools for the reading of all texts, sacred or profane.¹⁰ However, the interpretation of texts—the quest for the meaning of the texts—goes before and beyond methodology. The challenge of interpretation is formidable as may be seen in the many contemporary philosophies of hermeneutics, each of which demonstrates the elusiveness of meaning in texts. Sacred Scripture, with God as its Author, lends its own particular and peculiar challenge to the interpreter. Such a challenge can hardly be confined to a search for the literal sense of a given biblical text. The challenge is the search for the *meaning* of the literal sense, i.e., the spiritual sense. “As a general rule, we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the *meaning* expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the *context* of the paschal mystery of Christ and the new life which flows from it. *This context truly exists.*”¹¹ That there is a distinction between the literal sense of a given passage and the meaning thereof, or the spiritual sense, is nothing new. Such a distinction was well known to the Fathers, delineated by John Cassian, and often summed up later by the medieval couplet attributed to Augustine of Denmark:

Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria;
moralis quid agas; quo tendas anagogia.¹²

To be sure, the literal sense is absolutely fundamental in order to ascertain meaning.¹³ Yet, the assertion of a biblical text’s literal sense in language, history, and culture is a far cry from its meaning in the life of the faithful. Contemporary hermeneutical theories are invaluable in that they illumine the fact that such is true of ancient sacred texts not only because they are ancient, not only because they are sacred, but because they are texts. In other words, the apparent rift in contemporary biblical exegesis between method and meaning is neither a failure of the biblical texts’ abilities to disclose meaning nor an interpretative problem proper to the biblical theologian;

¹⁰ For examples of the critical methods in vogue among exegetes, see Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

¹¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 85 (italics added).

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 81–86; Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 118–19; and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), §§115–19.

¹³ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, art. 10, ad 1; and *idem*, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, VII, q. 16, art. 14.

it is a failure in the dependence upon methodologies, whose pursuance is but a step in interpretation and whose conclusions have been lionized due to ignorance of or extrapolation from their proper interpretive contexts, a failure that extends far afield the faithful interpreter in his *fides quaerens intellectum*. Yet, it is only under the aegis of faith seeking understanding that we may properly interpret the Bible.

Perhaps, it would prove fortuitous for us to consider the eye of the beholder rather than the beauty of the biblical text. Hermeneutical investigation pivots on the relationship of reader and text. In our quest for understanding the ground of the biblical hermeneutical enterprise, we pivot our inquiry on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical insights of "suspicion and retrieval" and "distantiation." We proceed in three stages. First, we glance rearward so as to trace the development of contemporary hermeneutics from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Hans-Georg Gadamer, to those who set the stage for Paul Ricoeur. Second, we introduce Ricoeur, who identifies the "masters of suspicion," and delineate his hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval as a general theory. Finally, we look forward and explain how suspicion and retrieval narrow the distance between readers and texts so as to prove useful in retrieving the role of the reader in biblical interpretation.

Arts and Crafts

To speak of "hermeneutics" is to open Pandora's box. The word has its roots in the Greek verb *hermēneuein* (to interpret) and its noun *hermēneia* (interpretation). It has been used for centuries to mean one aspect or another of interpretation, translation, and explanation from Aristotle's treatise *De interpretatione* (*Peri hermēneias*) to the postmodern philosophical treatises of our own day. In this essay, we use "hermeneutics" in its general and contemporary sense: "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation and explanation."¹⁴ We begin *in medias res* with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834).

Hermeneutics or interpretation is hardly novel—it has been practiced since the dawn of

¹⁴ Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*, s.v., "hermeneutics." For an assessment of the word "hermeneutics" in contemporary philosophy and literary theory, see Richard E. Palmer, "Six Modern Definitions of Hermeneutics" (chap. 3), in *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 33–45; and Joel Weinsheimer, "Hermeneutics," in *Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 115–36.

literature. We find hermeneutics in Aristotle's *Organon*,¹⁵ in the various reappropriations of meaning in the Old Testament (e.g., Daniel 9:24–27 and Jeremiah 25:11–12), in Philo and rabbinic Judaism,¹⁶ in the schools of Antioch and Alexandria,¹⁷ in St. Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*,¹⁸ throughout the Middle Ages,¹⁹ and in modernity.²⁰ Heretofore, with the exception of the Ancients, almost all discussion of hermeneutics had to do specifically with *biblical* hermeneutics, i.e., with the ways in which we interpret the meaning of the Bible. Schleiermacher looms large on the hermeneutical horizon because he marks the beginning of contemporary hermeneutics, wherewith a modulation on methodology in interpretation comes to the fore. It was through Schleiermacher that the Cartesian malaise manifested itself in hermeneutics and biblical interpretation. Until Schleiermacher, hermeneutics had largely been concerned with the interpretation of the Bible, hence with theology. Schleiermacher changed that by doing two things: first, he separated hermeneutics from theology; and, second, he advanced a new universal hermeneutical theory.

As a Reformed theologian, preacher, and pastor, Schleiermacher experienced the difficulty of interpreting the Bible. In his struggle to interpret biblical texts, Schleiermacher lamented the lack of any specific hermeneutical theory, of any method of interpretation. Schleiermacher presumed that any attempt to form a hermeneutical theory appropriate for the interpretation of the Bible could be made only after casting a general theory of textual interpretation, i.e., a theory that would be appropriate to biblical texts should unquestionably be a subspecies of a hermeneutical theory for the understanding of all texts. Schleiermacher saw that biblical hermeneutics is naturally contingent upon general hermeneutics, since biblical texts are, indeed, texts and share the proper characteristics thereof. Thus, he set out to form a general theory of

¹⁵ See Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

¹⁶ See, e.g., respectively, Thomas H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983); and James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 11–106.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Henri de Lubac, *L'Écriture dans la tradition* (Paris: Aubier, 1967); and Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 1–91.

¹⁸ See St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–60).

²⁰ See Grant, *Short History*, 92–167.

hermeneutics.²¹

Schleiermacher aimed “to frame a general hermeneutics as the art of understanding.”²² He set out to discover how utterances—spoken or written—are understood. “Schleiermacher proposed that understanding should be considered as an *art*.”²³ He saw all understanding as somehow referential. That is, we understand something only in relation to something we already know, and things we already know form themselves into wholes which help us to understand the things better. Schleiermacher conceived of a dialogue between the author and reader of a text that can only be achieved on the basis of a shared language and grammar. Interpretation is the moment of understanding not just what the text says but what the author is saying. This is not accomplished by one static reading; it is an ongoing continued interaction and search for authorial meaning. Thus, the reader is in a circle of meaning—the now famous “hermeneutical circle”—which he sees and enters by means of an intuition, a certain psychological preknowledge that exists on the part of the reader because he is encountering the meaning proffered by another human being. Schleiermacher set out to formulate a method to discern the circular nature of human understanding so that we might interpret texts in terms of authors rather than merely the contexts that produce them. Referred to variously as the “father of modern hermeneutics” and the “father of modern Protestant theology,” Schleiermacher’s thought pushed hermeneutics beyond an encounter of reader and text to an encounter of reader and author. The generality of his approach is founded on accentuating the significance of the aesthetic interaction of reader and author over the type of text that stands between them. During his own lifetime his philosophical work was not well-received, but long after his death it is reckoned a major breakthrough in the understanding of understanding.

Such a reckoning of Schleiermacher’s thought may be attributed to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). In many ways Dilthey is Schleiermacher’s Boswell. Dilthey, working with Schleiermacher’s insights, sought to form a reasoned philosophical basis for the humanities. It

²¹ Schleiermacher formed many of his initial ideas more or less in dialogue with two of his contemporaries, viz., Friedrich Ast (*Grundlinien der Grammatik: Hermeneutik und Kritik* [Landshut: Thomann, 1808] and *Grundriss der Philologie* [Landshut: Krüll, 1808]); and Friedrich August Wolf (“Darstellung der Altertumswissenschaft nach Begriff, Umfang, Zweck und Wert” in F. A. Wolf and P. Buttmann, eds., *Museum der Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 1 [Berlin: Reimer, 1807] and *Vorlesung über die Enzyklopadie der Altertumswissenschaft*, Vorlesung über die Altertumswissenschaft, vol. 1 [Leipzig: Lehnhold, 1831]). See Palmer, “Two Forerunners of Schleiermacher” (chap. 6), in *Hermeneutics*, 75–83.

²² Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 84.

²³ Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM, 1991), 45 (italics original).

was Dilthey who expanded Schleiermacher's notion of understanding as referential, reconstructive, and circular. Dilthey believed that the humanities were languishing in the academy, "not only as the result of the expansive course of the natural sciences, but also as the result of the lack of a critical foundational theory on the part of the humanities themselves."²⁴ As the natural sciences had a method of investigation to validate conclusions, so should the human sciences (as he referred to them) have a method of validation. Dilthey set out to form a foundational theory according to scientific principles, one that would be "objectively valid," i.e., one that would be generally applicable to the humanities. Dilthey did not distinguish the ends of the natural sciences and the human sciences as two different kinds of knowledge. Instead, he claimed that the difference between the natural sciences and the human sciences was not that of a particular kind of "knowing," but that of a difference in *content*.²⁵ The basis of the natural sciences was explanation, but the basis of the human sciences was *understanding*.

The Romanticism of Schleiermacher was thus transmuted by Dilthey into a bid to ground all philosophical discourse on the basis of understanding utilizing the "hermeneutical circle." But Dilthey was stonewalled by history. He wrestled with the problem of history, "of temporality, i.e., the problem that no phenomenon and no approach to it can be seriously studied without an awareness of the historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] of human life and consciousness."²⁶ In other words: "What man is, only history can tell him."²⁷ Thus, on the basis of experience, expression, and understanding,²⁸ Dilthey set out to ground the human sciences on the basis of a scientific method of hermeneutics, a method that essentially became an interpretation of history. Whilst an explanation of Dilthey's interpretation of history and historicity is beyond the pale here, we note that Dilthey broadened the hermeneutical inquiry beyond the relation of author and reader to man's own self-understanding.

Both Schleiermacher, who attempted to develop a hermeneutical philosophy to ground his theological inquiries, and Dilthey, who attempted to develop a scientific method of hermeneutical philosophy to assure objective validity for the claims of the humanities, may be

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ See Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 105.

²⁶ Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 53.

²⁷ Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 116 n. 37.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 106–15 for Dilthey's definitions of these terms.

seen—generally speaking—as logical successors to René Descartes and Immanuel Kant in that they sought methods to direct their understanding of understanding. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) represents a radical variation on the theme in modern philosophy when he calls into question the very nature of understanding and the entire Western metaphysical tradition. Heidegger is first and foremost an ontologist who, in the introduction to his *Sein und Zeit*, questions the very nature of being.²⁹

For Heidegger, hermeneutics is the interpretation of the being of *Dasein* (being-there).³⁰ “In effect, hermeneutics becomes an ontology of understanding and interpretation,”³¹ and understanding is totally redefined. For Heidegger nothing is purely self-evident. Man finds himself totally submerged in being-there, in a relational context with the world. This is necessarily prior to any notion of “objectivity” and, indeed, even prior to “subjectivity.” Such conceptions are only found in man’s relation to his world. There is no such thing as presuppositionless interpretation. Everything is discovered by man as being discloses itself in relation to all that surrounds him. “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.”³² As regards the interpretation of texts, then, no one can approach a text without certain presuppositions. Each person has different presuppositions, therefore there is no such thing as utterly “objective” interpretation. Our interpretation, our understanding, must be “a repetition and retrieval of the original event of disclosure. It tries to get beneath the accumulated crust of misinterpretation ... and take a stand in the center of what is said and unsaid.”³³

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927); translated into English as *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962). Whilst it is difficult to understand Heidegger’s hermeneutics without considering the philosophy (phenomenology) of his teacher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Heidegger’s own phenomenology and existentialism, we leave these matters at rest. Thus, we consider, albeit briefly, only Heidegger’s contribution to hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur provides his own understanding of Husserl’s phenomenology in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 61–62. For an elucidation of Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, see Theodore Kisiel, “Towards the Topology of *Dasein*,” in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), 95–105.

³¹ Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 130.

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 191–92.

³³ Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 147.

It is by no means Heidegger's intention to suggest that we cannot arrive at a valid interpretation, that the original event of disclosure is closed to us, or that the hermeneutical circle is iniquitous. "In the [hermeneutical] circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing."³⁴ It is with presuppositions, and only with presuppositions, that we are able to enter any hermeneutical circle. Presuppositionless entrance into the hermeneutical circle is simply an impossibility because of the very nature of *Dasein* and understanding. However, presuppositions must be malleable. Our "constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves."³⁵ In encountering a text, we cannot help but approach it with presuppositions, for they are the necessary means for the encounter; yet, those same presuppositions must be open to the reality of the text, for it is by means of the text that they are fiduciary. With Heidegger, the focus of understanding has been shifted from the method(s) of understanding to the very (existential) nature of understanding itself. The impact of Heidegger's thought on philosophy, philosophical hermeneutics, and biblical hermeneutics was, to say the least, transformative.³⁶

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–), in the tradition of Heidegger's phenomenology, presented a new philosophical hermeneutics based on his own ontology of language in *Wahrheit und*

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, among others, sought to utilize Heidegger's hermeneutical principles, especially in his "demythologizing" of the New Testament. Attention to Bultmann's demythologizing takes us far from our focus here. Let it suffice to say that Bultmann, a friend and admirer of Heidegger, brought hermeneutics back into theology through his interpretation of the Bible. Bultmann tried to uncover the primitive *kerygma* beneath the text. Karl Barth, Bultmann's friend and colleague, rejected Bultmann's efforts as disruptive of the theological enterprise. Barth claimed that faith was the prerequisite to proper reading of the Bible, that God was not a subject of human understanding but that humans were perpetually subjects of God's will who properly respond to God in obedience and subordination. Out of the Barth-Bultmann debate arose what has come to be called the "New Hermeneutic." For the Barth-Bultmann debate and the New Hermeneutic, see, e.g., Jeanron, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 120–58; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 205–95; Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); and James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic*, *New Foundations in Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). In that debate, Paul Ricoeur lands closer to Barth than to Bultmann; see Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," trans. Peter McCormick, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existentialist Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 381–401.

Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik.³⁷ The radical shift which comes about in hermeneutical thinking with Gadamer is the rejection of methodology. The title of Gadamer's work is somewhat ironic in that he does not consider method the way to truth. Adopting a basically Heideggerian perspective, Gadamer goes far beyond Heidegger in bringing hermeneutics "to a fully developed exposition of the implications of Heideggerian ontology for aesthetics and text interpretation."³⁸ Gadamer does not seek a methodology of understanding, rather he locates understanding within the fusion of two horizons, viz., that of the reader and that of the text. "Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of process, a method."³⁹

According to Gadamer, it is not possible to approach a text without some pre-understandings or prejudgments. Every interpreter approaches a text with at least some questions in mind and the belief that the text has some potential to expose meaning and, therewith, to form or reform the interpreter's previous understanding, informed by the text in some preliminary way, which Gadamer refers to as "effective-historical consciousness."⁴⁰ Thus, the horizons are constantly being altered as the reader interacts with and is drawn into the text. "The text brings an object into language [the middle ground of understanding], but the fact that it achieves this is ultimately the work of the interpreter. Both have a share in it."⁴¹ Gadamer likens the discovery of ontology, especially in art as opposed to texts, to a game, to an interaction he refers to as "play." He regrets the historical alienation of the object (a work of art or a text) from the interpreter and sees the effort of the interpreter to (re)discover meaning in a constant interaction between himself and his object in their fusing of horizons.⁴² The meeting ground for this playful interaction in the case of texts is, of course, words. Hence, the importance of language in

³⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965); translated into English as *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975).

³⁸ Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 166.

³⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁴² See *ibid.*, 91–119 and Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 310–14.

Gadamer's thought. With Gadamer, hermeneutics thus takes on the qualities of a philosophical system in that his rendition of the "hermeneutical circle" is concerned with the entire phenomenon of human understanding, not just a particular method of interpretation.⁴³ Many problems arise, for Gadamer does not give us adequate criteria to determine what is a "true" or "false" interpretation (or whether or not there might be one at all) as we seek to craft the rules of the game. In describing the hermeneutical process in terms of a game, Gadamer has left us without the two things most hoped for from the title of his *magnum opus*: truth and method.⁴⁴

Lost and Found

In many ways, Paul Ricoeur (1913–) picks up where Gadamer leaves off—with truth and method. As we have seen, the progression of thought from Schleiermacher, inaugurator of the contemporary hermeneutical enterprise, to Ricoeur, its most famous practitioner, is considerable. Schleiermacher had sought to delineate a methodology of understanding, or a "hermeneutics," through which we would be able to understand more deeply a given text. Schleiermacher's initial theme was played upon in one way or another until Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which called understanding itself into question and dispensed with methodology altogether. With Ricoeur, hermeneutics becomes something extravagantly different. Whilst Schleiermacher and his successors' futile quest for methodology ultimately led to Gadamer's rejection thereof, Ricoeur hies beyond methodology, beyond understanding to consciousness, and strives for a hermeneutics that "ultimately claims to set itself up as a critique of critique, or meta-critique."⁴⁵

⁴³ For more on this, see the collection of essays in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁴⁴ Gadamer's conclusions, culled from his radical reading and accepting of Heideggerian theory, were somewhat anticipated and rejected by the philosopher Emilio Betti. Betti, though an Italian, stands in the German idealist tradition. Betti realized the threat of Heidegger's thought to traditional notions of valid interpretation and sought to augment Heidegger's thought in such wise as to form a system (i.e., a method) to insure criteria for validity in all interpretation. See Emilio Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione*, 2 vols. (Milan: Giuffrè, 1955); translated into German by Betti himself as *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967). So too, Gadamer's claim to universality in understanding and his lack of accounting for misunderstanding were assailed by many of his contemporaries. For a detailed critique and additional literature, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Texts and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 22–37.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53.

Ricoeur's "meta-critique" is varied and voluminous and, surely, interdisciplinary.⁴⁶ Hence, Ricoeur's entrance into the field traditionally labeled "hermeneutics" is a second step in his overall philosophical effort to ground understanding in terms of consciousness. Before and beyond hermeneutics, Ricoeur ruminates upon the reader.

Unlike Gadamer, whose somewhat roseate approach took understanding for granted in terms of the good-will of the interpreter, Ricoeur mimics Cartesian doubt in *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud*.⁴⁷ Ricoeur states: "*I am, I think*; to exist, for me, is to think; I exist inasmuch as I think. Since this truth cannot be verified like a fact, nor deduced like a conclusion, it has to posit itself in reflection; its self-positing is reflection; Fichte called this first truth the *thetic judgment*. Such is our philosophical starting point."⁴⁸ For Ricoeur, the positing of existence is at once the positing of thought and reflection. Descartes did not question his own consciousness; rather, he used it as the basis upon which to build his philosophy. Ricoeur, however, questions consciousness by casting a suspicious eye on its reliability. Unlike Gadamer, he does not reject methodology *per se*. In fact, Ricoeur welcomes methodological proposals from various disciplines. "For Ricoeur, hermeneutics properly remains a metacritical discipline, which embodies both the unmasking function of explanation and the creative function of understanding."⁴⁹

Reflection upon consciousness is the nexus of Ricoeur's inquiry. And consciousness is suspect. As Ricoeur asserts: "Over against interpretation as restoration of meaning we shall oppose interpretation according to what I collectively call the school of suspicion.... Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and

⁴⁶ In this essay, we assess only Ricoeur's "suspicion and retrieval," a foundational aspect, though merely a fraction, of his vast contribution to contemporary thought. The breadth and volume of Ricoeur's work (mostly found in essays and articles rather than books), the reactions thereto, and Ricoeur's responses to his critics are appreciated by a perusal of the two hundred page bibliography compiled by Ricoeur himself and Frans D. Vansina, "Bibliography of Paul Ricoeur: A Primary and Secondary Systematic Bibliography," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 22 (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 1995), 605–815. Bibliographies suited to this essay are found in Loretta Dornisch, "Symbolic Systems and the Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction to the Work of Paul Ricoeur," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 1–21; idem, "Paul Ricoeur and Biblical Interpretation: A Selected Bibliography (II)," *Semeia* 19 (1981): 23–29; and Francois H. Lapointe, "Paul Ricoeur and His Critics: A Bibliographical Essay," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Charles E. Regan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979), 164–77.

⁴⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965); translated into English as *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 43 (italics original).

⁴⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 344.

Freud.”⁵⁰ It is these three “masters of suspicion,” according to Ricoeur, who call consciousness into question. “If we go back to the intention they had in common, we find it in the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness.”⁵¹ Descartes did not oppugn consciousness as a means of disclosure, Ricoeur does. He claims that we must now doubt consciousness’ credibility: “What is essential is that all three create with the means at hand, with and against the prejudices of their times, a mediate *science* of meaning, irreducible to the immediate *consciousness* of meaning. What all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their ‘conscious’ methods of deciphering coincide with the unconscious *work* of ciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism. *Guile will be met by double guile.*”⁵²

Thus, these three masters of suspicion may be seen as “destroyers,” but they are not to be seen as three “masters of skepticism.”⁵³ On the contrary, “they clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting.”⁵⁴ That is, the “masters” do not destroy consciousness, only our previous understanding thereof. By pointing out the various and possible limitations of the consciousness of both a text’s author and a text’s interpreter, they have given the interpreter further understanding of both the author and himself. Such understanding advances hermeneutics to a new stratum by providing an expansive depth to interpretation. “Suspicion,” then, is not pejorative but descriptive. According to Ricoeur, the “suspicious interpreter” does not look at a given text as a vehicle of hidden meaning to be decoded, but as a vehicle of meaning which is ostensible to the interpreter because of his understanding of consciousness.

Moreover, Ricoeur roundly rejects the notion of previous hermeneutical theories which holds that meaning lies hidden in texts. To the contrary, Ricoeur maintains that meaning stands before the interpreter. “The sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation

⁵⁰ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32. On hermeneutics as restoration of meaning—not to be confused with “retrieval”—see pp. 28–32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 34 (*italics original*).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

of discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation.”⁵⁵ In so stating, Ricoeur is not implying that the author and his situation have nothing to do with understanding, but that the fissure—historical distance or “distantiation” as Ricoeur calls it—can be bridged. “The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading. The text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer. It thereby replaces the relation of dialogue, which directly connects the voice of one to the hearing of the other.”⁵⁶ Once a text has been formulated, it is “emancipated” from its original oral context as well as from “the situation, the surroundings, and the circumstantial milieu of discourse.”⁵⁷ Once it has entered its final (written) form, the text takes on a life and meaning of its own from which the original author is absent. Such distantiation is neither adverse nor artificial. Instead, it facilitates escape from the intentional fallacy of Romantic hermeneutics. The task of the interpreter is not to interpret the writer but the text before him.⁵⁸ “This semantic autonomy of the text has an immediate hermeneutical implication. Distantiation is not the product of methodology, something superimposed and parasitic. Rather, it belongs to the genuine constitution of the text as writing.”⁵⁹ Thus, the opprobrious and omnipresent opinion that meaning is mostly lost in text and only partially found is unfounded. The nature of texts is to impart meaning, not to impede it.

Likewise, Ricoeur is anxious to make a clear separation between semantics and hermeneutics. Semantics is the study of words, sentences, and their interrelation; hermeneutics aims at elucidating the meaning of a text. In the hermeneutical endeavor, semantics plays a significant yet subservient role in the overall enterprise. Semantics illumines the metaphors, symbols, and their relationship within a given text to clarify what the text says.⁶⁰ However,

⁵⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87.

⁵⁶ Ricoeur, “What is a Text?” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁸ See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 29–30.

⁵⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 5 (1975): 18–19.

⁶⁰ See *La métaphore vive*, L’ordre philosophique (Paris: Seuil, 1975); translated into English as *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robery Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (1978; rpt. London: Routledge, 1994).

because the text was written in space and time by a human author, Ricoeur shuns the fallacy of the absolute text. Elimination of the historical reality of a human creator (author) would reduce the text to an illusory artificiality.⁶¹ Ricoeur claims that history may enlighten the interpreter as to “explaining” things *about* the text, just as semantics (in its fullest sense) may enlighten the interpreter as to seeing codification of meaning *within* the text, but that is not the same as “understanding” the text.⁶²

Interpretation, then, for Ricoeur is a narrowing of the distance between a text and a reading, akin to Gadamer’s fusion of horizons. A hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval is a means (or a part of interpretation) by which the interpreter is aware of his own limitations as he approaches a text, cognizant of a text’s capacity to reveal meaning, and willing to be changed, enlightened, and moved by the meaning disclosed to him, i.e., to retrieve meaning that was previously unclear because of an unconscious prejudice overcome by suspicion of consciousness and retrieval of understanding. In the interpretation of a text, the reader must take one step back and do, if you will, an “examination of consciousness.” Ricoeur is correct in noting that the consciousness of the (human) biblical author as well as the consciousness of the interpreter must be examined in light of our current understanding of consciousness. The “masters of suspicion” shed light on how the meaning of the text may be more fully understood by anticipating the common themes of “ciphering” brought to light by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. With the “masters” in mind, the interpreter might examine his own prejudices and presuppositions by their criteria (and other criteria). In such examinations, the interpreter is not seeking to superimpose the theories of the “masters” on the texts or on himself; but in Gadamer’s terminology to fuse horizons on common ground or, in Ricoeur’s terminology, to narrow the distantiation. That is, suspicion used in this fashion is not suspicion of the veracity of the text’s or the interpreter’s good-will toward acceptance of what the text says to him, but cognizance of the processes of the human consciousness (incorporating Heidegger’s theories of the existential nature of consciousness) which are as integral to understanding as might be historical circumstances, cultural dispositions, and the like. Retrieval is the fruit of suspicion, the sharpening of the interpreter’s awareness. In suspecting, the interpreter is concomitantly retrieving.

⁶¹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30.

⁶² See Paul Ricoeur, “The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutical Problem and as Semantic Problem,” trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 62–78.

What does Ricoeur mean when he states that “guile will be met by double guile”? He uses “guile” not in a pejorative sense, but in an illustrative one. Presuppositions, conscious or unconscious, are not held or used to deceive but to divulge. Unconscious presuppositions that might have been present in an author’s mind are crucial towards deciphering his text in order to let meaning show forth clearly. The “double guile” is just that, viz., recognition of unconscious psychisms and other factors which are not part of an effort to conceal but part of an effort on the part of the author to reveal. As Ricoeur points out, suspicion in this sense is not skepticism as to the value or the intention of the author or the interpreter, but realistic, reasoned reflection on the nature of the human psychological condition. Concomitantly, the interpreter of a text might take into consideration Schleiermacher’s idea of interpretation as a poised art and Gadamer’s comparison to interpretation as crafty game. These certainly figure into the interpreter’s examination of himself and of the text that stands before him. In like manner, however, Ricoeur is not asking the interpreter to abandon the hopes proffered by Dilthey. Although the interpreter might not be able to ground the humanities (and in this case, discourse interpretation) in terms of a *purely* scientific method of understanding, he is, in fact, utilizing the scientific method insofar as it is illustrative of man’s own process of thinking and existential reality. “Guile,” then, might be thought of properly as a certain “sharpness of mind,” “wit,” or “cleverness,” on the part of the interpreter.

In other words, to overcome the natural distance between a text and a reading is to recognize by means of suspicion the consciousnesses of author and reader and by means of retrieval to ascertain their influence on a text and a reading of a text. In the reading of a text, the reader must begin with presuppositions à la Heidegger for which he seeks validation. Although mistaken readings always remain a possibility and a modicum of misreading or misunderstanding is always present in any reading because a text and a reading are not identical, validation of a reading is possible insofar as the reader is willing to allow his presuppositions to be dismissed, formed, or actualized by the text.⁶³ Narrowing the distance between a text and a reading is an effort involving the circumstances of the reading as much as it is an effort involving the circumstances of the text. In the hermeneutical circle of textual interpretation, the focus is as much upon the reader as the author, as much upon the reading as the text, as much a matter of the present as of the past.

⁶³ See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75–79.

Hearth and Home

Heretofore, we have touched upon but a small portion of Ricoeur's monumental efforts in the field of human understanding. Discussion of Ricoeur's thought proliferates in the academy, in as many disciplines as he has entered with his "meta-critique," and the biblical academy is no exception.⁶⁴ Our purpose here it is neither to adopt nor to critique Ricoeur's thought or his own understanding of things biblical.⁶⁵ Our purpose is to ask how his insights may aid us in casting our gaze predominantly on the reader rather than the text as we consider the ground and dynamics of biblical interpretation. In raising salient issues about human consciousness and understanding, Ricoeur has given us insight that proves helpful in the Church's ongoing endeavor to interpret Sacred Scripture.⁶⁶ Especially noteworthy is the positive light within which Ricoeur exposes his theory of suspicion and retrieval as well as his accounting of distantiation. In fact, the Commission specifically cites Ricoeur's contribution to hermeneutical theory in terms of distantiation, and it is from that note that we begin:

With regard to the hermeneutical thought of Ricoeur, the principal thing to note is the highlighting of the function of distantiation. This is the necessary prelude to any correct appropriation of a text. A first distancing occurs between the text and its author; it begins its own career of meaning. Another distancing exists between the text and its readers; these have to respect the world of the text in its otherness. Thus the methods of literary and historical analysis are necessary for interpretation. Yet the meaning of a text can be fully grasped only as it is

⁶⁴ Ricoeur's thought has been adopted by many theologians, the most notable being David Tracy (e.g., *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* [New York: Crossroad, 1986]). It has been rejected by many others, e.g. by Brevard S. Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 77), who dismisses Ricoeur's thought because of its apparent disregard for historical fact; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (*Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]). Vanhoozer claims that Ricoeur has understood Bultmann better than Bultmann did, and that Ricoeur's hermeneutics actually push Bultmann's "demythologization" and subjectivity one step back to ultimate subjectivity (see pp. 119–47). In fact, Vanhoozer claims that, according to Ricoeur (and Tracy following therewith): "Face to face with a classic, we have to admit that it is *we* who are being described" (p. 158, italics original).

⁶⁵ Indeed, Ricoeur has written extensively on biblical interpretation. See, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); and André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ So too, James Barr (*Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983], 103) states an opinion shared by many biblicalists: "It seems to me that, if a new direction of interpretation has to be taken up, there is much greater promise in something like structuralism or in the type of hermeneutic analysis offered by Ricoeur."

actualized in the lives of readers who appropriate it.⁶⁷

Ricoeur's exposé of distanciation as a natural condition proper to texts and readers lends confidence to the interpreter of any text. The reader is neither estranged from the text nor from its author. He is merely posed with a vehicle of meaning as true to meaning and as forthright of it as a conversation. He is secure that his presuppositions and those of the author are retrievable so as to elucidate rather than obfuscate. As our brief examination of the history of hermeneutics and the thought of Ricoeur in particular has shown us, the *tabula rasa* reading of texts is neither possible nor desirable. Every reader of a text, no matter what the text, approaches it within a hermeneutical circle of one sort or another. Presuppositions are the *sine qua non* of reading. As Heidegger and Gadamer have shown, the idea that one can approach a text in a purely "objective" scientific fashion is an absurdity. As Ricoeur has shown, the nature of the absurdity may be discovered in examining the consciousness of the interpreter who would claim to approach a text in such a manner. With suspicion and retrieval in mind as a check on consciousness, an interpreter continually performs an "examination of consciousness" in regard to his presuppositions; but he does not deny them, even if they be in flux. Though Ricoeur himself is far more interested in readings than in readers, by putting suspicion on the reader's consciousness he has retrieved the importance of the reader or, at least, the presupposition-filled locus from which the reader reads.

In reading, in the act of interpreting, it is the reader who changes, not the text. Only readers actualize, only readers appropriate. The text remains the same. The adjectives which accrue to texts, such as "contemporary" or "ancient" are relative to readers, not to texts. One day Kafka's *Metamorphosis* will be ancient literature, one day Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was not. Therefore, a hermeneutical theory begins not with texts but with readers. Readers are active, texts are static. Though not necessarily chronologically, readers are formed before texts. Undeniably, there is no reader without text, no text without reader, but only the reader can be informed and transformed by interpretation. The potential for information and transformation presumes some disposition of the reader previous to his initial encounter (or subsequent encounters) with a text. If the reader is the variable and the text is the constant, then the inceptive suspicion in a hermeneutical endeavor inevitably befalls the reader and his reading prior to the text and the author. The double eclipse operative in interpretation between a reading and a text and between a reader and an author is not contemplated to the elimination but to the recognition thereof. The

⁶⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 78.

reader approaches the text with presuppositions for which he seeks validation. His presuppositions are real, though mutable, but not unexamined.

Ricoeur's thought therefore elicits a caution. In order to be examined, presuppositions must be admitted. An examination of the self, of the reader, in terms of an examination of conscience precedes the disclosure of meaning. In other words, the reader has to check his baggage to perform a reading before he can ask the author to check his baggage in terms of a text. Insofar as the reader postures himself in terms of his own presuppositions and in terms of their contingency relative to the text to be read, he either clears or clutters the way to meaning. Meaning can only be appropriated and actualized according to the capacity of the reader to appreciate it. If his supple presuppositions are hardened into stiff prejudices, he will only be able to see that which he already believes or the lack thereof. The text, then, becomes valuable only insofar as it confirms what is already affirmed. The tenacity of such prejudices invalidates the hermeneutical enterprise by relegating interpretation to a negligible narcissism wherein the jaundiced interpreter, *mirabile dictu*, always sees exactly what he seeks. Open and honest reflection about the nature of one's presuppositions and the willingness to examine, expand, or expel them is where the rubber meets the road in textual interpretation. The reader who abjures or anoints his presuppositions is either a fool or a liar. And the biblical interpreter is no exception. He must stake and state his claim in terms of biblical texts.

However, we cannot equate or confuse presuppositions in terms of a text with verities known to be true outside of a given text, outside of the hermeneutical enterprise. To possess the gift of faith and, therefore, to believe that God is the Author of the Bible, albeit through inspired men,⁶⁸ is to stake and state a claim, not in terms of the biblical texts themselves, but in terms of Revelation. It is to stake and state a claim about the nature of the particular texts that constitute the Bible on the basis of an Authority outside of the reader and outside of the Bible. Believers and nonbelievers are not distinguished by differences in presuppositions about the Bible, which might be spoken of as prejudices so that each sees what he believes (or does not believe) in the Bible; rather, the gift of faith makes the believer privy to truths unknown to the nonbeliever. It is precisely because the believer believes, because his approach to the Bible is one of *fides quaerens intellectum*, that biblical interpretation is theological inquiry. Thus, the man of faith can distinguish God's Word from man's. He knows of the substantial difference between St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Biblical interpretation, for the man blessed with faith, is

⁶⁸ *Dei Verbum*, no. 11. Cf. John 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:16; and 2 Peter 1:19–21.

perform *fides quaerens intellectum*. His hermeneutical effort is more than that of the interpreter who seeks to know what a text says. He seeks to know what God says.

But there is more. The prerequisite for actualization is appropriation, and appropriation is only possible from a standpoint of faith. The faithful interpreter of the Bible finds himself in a hermeneutical circle known only by Revelation, a hermeneutical circle whose hearth and home is the Church. By necessity, the *fides quaerens intellectum* reads the Bible in faith and for faith. Such is the prior and proper disposition for approaching God's Word for the faithful. The faithful interpreter, then, finds himself steeped in the Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scripture even before he approaches a given biblical text. He reads the Bible, so that the initial faith and understanding thereof may be expanded, illustrated, deepened. The understanding of the faith is increased, which necessarily leads to a broadening not only of his understanding of Sacred Scripture, but also of Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Magisterium without which he would neither have approached the biblical text nor gleaned meaning therefrom. "What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible."⁶⁹

The faithful interpreter of the Bible naturally finds himself within two hermeneutical circles or two interpretive communities which often overlap. What distinguishes the communities is the knowledge of the essential difference between sacred literature, whose proper interpretive community is the Church, and profane literature, whose proper interpretive community is the literary academy. The difference lies in the fact that within the interpretive community of the Church, the interpreter knows more about a sacred text before his interpretive effort than he might know about a profane text before such effort. In his investigation of the Bible, the faithful interpreter must be mindful of any and all means available to him. As he utilizes the scholarship available to him, he knows that the reading of the Bible shares characteristics with the reading of all texts. Because biblical texts are texts, all the tools of textual interpretation may play a part in his interpretation. Yet, the distinct nature of the biblical texts—inspired and inerrant—allows him a standard by which he interprets the very methods of interpretation and interpretation theory. CIPHERING and DECIPHERING are eased by the fact that "divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁰ Ricoeur's discernment of texts as vehicles of meaning wherein the meaning

⁶⁹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 88.

⁷⁰ *Dei Verbum*, no. 11.

stands before the text and not behind it and his recognition of the naturalness of distantiating, allow comfort in the mind of the faithful interpreter in such wise that he is less inhibited by God's use of the medium of the written word. Realizing that "God speaks through men in human fashion,"⁷¹ the faithful interpreter is bound to pursue every facet of human communication, not just as an end in itself, but as a means toward a deeper awareness of his faith.

Within the interpretive community that is the Church, within the community that is guaranteed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter presupposes that the immutable Word of God speaks to him, says something to him. And in the particular and peculiar effort of biblical interpretation, he realizes that the hermeneutical circle is broadened by the nature of the texts which are to be considered "in the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith."⁷² The faithful interpreter, then, may use suspicion and retrieval as a self-informative criterion whereby he is able to assess historical, sociological, and cultural limitations which may cloud his own understanding and which might be present in the consciousness of the (human) authors he reads. Suspicion yields retrieval in that the interpreter searches not for a hidden meaning, but for a meaning that stands before him, if only he would make the effort to adjust his vision. In our present situation, such a suspicion of consciousness in order to retrieve meaning may be most useful in addressing the reigning prejudices and the historical positivism of our contemporary situation. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have, as Ricoeur points out, paved the way for a realistic suspicion and retrieval of the dominating ideas of yesterday and today. Therein we have a means to recognize and examine our own presuppositions. "To avoid subjectivism, however, one must allow preunderstanding to be deepened and enriched—even to be modified and corrected—by the reality of the [biblical] text."⁷³ The objective of the faithful interpreter is to be changed, enlightened, and moved by the Bible.

The focus on the reader vis-à-vis Ricoeur reminds the faithful interpreter of Sacred Scripture to scrutinize himself and his venue. Biblical interpretation is the natural and necessary activity of the *fides quaerens intellectum*. And the Church is his interpretive community, for hermeneutics begins at home. According to our Holy Father, "In our day, a great effort is

⁷¹ Ibid., no. 12.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 77.

necessary, not only on the part of scholars and preachers, but also those who popularize biblical thought: they should use every means possible—and there are many today—so that the universal significance of the biblical message may be widely acknowledged and its saving efficacy may be seen everywhere.”⁷⁴ Retrieving the reader in biblical interpretation is one means to that end.

⁷⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Address on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*,” in *ibid.*, 24.