

PAPER #12

Some Concluding Matters

To conclude this defense, I want to do three things: (1) make some observations about the nature of the task of biblical interpretation; (2) briefly summarize the findings that I have reached in this series of papers; and (3) issue a final appeal to take the Bible seriously.

Part 1: On My Interpretive Method

As I have examined the various passages that would seem to be relevant to the issue at hand, I have obviously dealt with the text of those passages in a manner that conforms to how I understand the task of interpretation—what methods I believe should be employed, what expectations to have, what attitude one should have when he approaches the text, etc. I have made some comments along the way. But I thought it would be good to become explicitly self-reflective about the process and method that I have used.

To thoroughly explicate everything that I believe about hermeneutics and the interpretive task would be prohibitive. One could write several volumes on his interpretive method and theory. I content myself in these pages with making a few observations that have a bearing on the issue at hand—whether the doctrine of the Trinity is taught by the Bible. (Even these will not exhaust the hermeneutical issues that are relevant to our topic. These observations are simply the ones that have readily occurred to me.)

Again, I will not elaborate on my observations. I will simply state them and leave it to the reader to consider them further. Accordingly, I present my observations in the form of an outline.

Observations about Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretive Task

1. **Given the fact and nature of biblical authority, one should treat no “interpretation” of the Bible as sacrosanct.**
 - 1.1. *One must undertake the task of biblical interpretation with a full appreciation for the sole authority of the biblical text.*
 - 1.1.1. **One must not grant authority to any interpretation or to any interpreter of the biblical text.**

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1.1.1.1. One must not require his exegetical reasoning and conclusions to conform to or remain within the bounds of any creed or doctrinal statement.

1.1.2. **One must judge every interpretation and translation of a text on its own merits, not on the basis of its origin, no matter how venerable its origin might be.**

1.1.2.1. One must not be unwilling to depart from an accepted English translation of a biblical text.

To be conservative with respect to the translation we use when we talk about, think about, and discuss a biblical text (refusing to depart, for example, from some accepted, published English translations) is no more warranted than is being conservative with respect to—and hence unwilling to depart from—the dictates of a creed.

2. Meaning does not reside in language; it resides in the mind of an author.

2.1. *The interpreter is not seeking to know the meaning of words; he is seeking to know the meaning of an author.*

2.1.1. **One does not deduce the meaning of a text from the elements of the language that constitute it; one grasps its meaning by grasping how another mind is using that language.**

2.1.1.1. Interpretation is the art of learning to penetrate the mind of another person; it is the art of understanding the person behind the words he spoke or wrote.

2.2. *Words do not have meanings; they are used by authors to mean something.*

2.2.1. **There are as many different meanings to a word as there are occasions within which that word is used. No two uses are exactly the same. Each use of a word involves a unique meaning.**

2.2.1.1. Accordingly, lexicons cannot and do not (and presumably are not claiming to) give you an exhaustive list of all the possible meanings of a word.

2.2.1.1.1. *If the meaning that some proposed interpretation of a biblical text attributes to a word in that text is not listed as a possible meaning in a lexicon, that fact, in and of itself, is not a valid reason to reject the proposed interpretation. A lexicon's entry is only intended to point, guide, suggest, and direct. It is not intended to dictate what the word can and cannot mean.*

2.2.1.2. A word study of a particular word discovers what a word has been used to mean on various occasions. In a word study, one is not seeking to discover fixed, inviolable boundaries to that word's field of meaning. Rather, one is studying the

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patterns of usage for that word, which is an element within a dynamic, changing reality.

2.2.1.2.1. *Exactly the same thing is true of grammar and syntax. A study of a particular element of grammar or syntax discovers how that element of grammar has been used to contribute to meaning on various occasions. In such a study, one is not seeking to discover fixed, inviolable boundaries to what that element of grammar can and cannot mean. Rather, one is studying the patterns of usage for that element of grammar or syntax, an element that lies within a dynamic, changing reality. Therefore, grammar books cannot tell us what the meaning that is conveyed by some element of grammar "must be." They are, at best, a guide to how the grammar has been and is typically used. Grammatical "rules" are not inviolable laws.*

2.3. *Language users do not choose their words because those words "have to mean" the very thing they want to say. Words do not "have to mean" anything. They mean what they do because the language user invested them with that meaning.*

2.3.1. **Language users do not choose their words in accordance with "rules" that they learn that dictate what language must mean. Language users choose their words in accordance with patterns of usage they are familiar with because they are immersed in a culture of language users.**

2.3.1.1. Because language users do not form their words according to "rules" that they believe they must necessarily follow, it is fallacious to interpret them as if they did.

2.3.1.1.1. *There are no grammatical "rules." There are only typical patterns of usage.*

2.3.1.2. A language user does not deduce how he must use his language in order to convey what he wants to convey. The words of a language don't *mean* anything. It is an author who *means*. The language of a text can only point to what its author *means*.

2.3.1.3. Language users say what they want to say according to what "sounds right" to them. They don't choosing their phrasing according to what is *logically required* in order to convey the meaning they want to convey.

2.4. *There is no one-to-one correspondence between words and meaning: the same sequence of words can have multiple meanings; and the same meaning can be expressed in a number of different ways*

2.4.1. **There are a countless ways to express any given idea in one's native language.**

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- 2.4.1.1. There are countless ways to express the same idea in Koine Greek.
- 2.4.1.2. Therefore, there will countless ways to successfully translate a biblical statement written in Koine Greek into our native language.
- 2.4.2. **One and the same statement could mean a number of significantly different things depending upon the context.**
- 2.5. *The goal in view in the interpretive task is not to discover a plausible way to take the language of the text; the goal is to decide which way of taking the language of the text most likely captures what its author intended.*
- 2.5.1. **If one wants to “defeat” the interpretation of a biblical text that is being used as evidence for a particular theological doctrine, it is not sufficient to respond, “but it doesn’t have to mean that; it could mean this other thing instead.” The issue is not what the text could mean (it could mean countless things). The issue is what the text most likely does mean, as determined by the intent of the author.**
- 2.5.2. **If one wants to offer the interpretation of a biblical text as evidence for a particular theological doctrine, it is not sufficient to argue, “it could mean this, and I choose to interpret it this way.” The issue is not what the text could mean (it could mean countless things). The issue is what the text most likely does mean, as determined by the intent of the author.**
- 2.6. *In order to rightly interpret a biblical text, the interpreter of that text must respect its author.*
- 2.6.1. **The interpreter of the Bible must want to know what the biblical author is trying to say. He must want to understand the author’s mind. That is, he has to respect the author. If the interpreter does not care to grasp the author’s mind, then he will not really seek to grasp it.**
- 2.6.2. **No language can be clear enough to force an interpreter to understand its meaning if the interpreter is not really interested to know the mind of its author. If the interpreter has some other agenda besides an interest in what the author has to say, it will be unlikely that he could rightly understand his language.**
- 2.6.3. **In one’s interpretation of the biblical text, the interpreter must assume that its arguments are coherent, relevant, substantive, and intelligent. He must assume that the biblical texts actually make good and meaningful points in a coherent way.**
- 2.6.3.1. An interpreter must be intelligent in interpreting the text—not in the sense that he must have intelligence, but in the sense that he must apply his intelligence. He

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must not tolerate unintelligent interpretations nor interpretations that would render the meaning unintelligent or unintelligible.

2.6.3.1.1. *The interpreter must never allow the mystique of the Scripture's being divine to induce him to accept unintelligent reasoning with regard to his interpretation of it. He must not accept the reading of a biblical text that, should it be any other text, he would reject as unacceptable.*

2.7. *Language is dynamic; it is constantly changing.*

2.7.1. **Because language does not have meaning, because it is used to mean, the patterns of usage will change as human beings change the way they use language.**

3. **Interpretation is a mysterious act that involves an unrepeatable, original act of problem solving; it is not a methodical procedure whereby one applies rules and gets the necessary result.**

3.1. *Interpretation is not a technique; a computer could never do it.*

3.2. *The goal of interpretation is not to determine what a text "has to mean." The goal of interpretation is to make contact with the mind of the author of that text.*

3.2.1. **An author can use words and syntax in completely novel ways and it is still possible to understand his meaning.**

4. **The goal of biblical interpretation is to grasp as thoroughly as I can the mind of the biblical author insofar as that mind has informed every element of his language usage.**

4.1. *One's interpretation of a text is not complete if it only grasps the main thread of the argument of a text and it fails to grasp the underlying worldview that has informed the vocabulary and phrasing of the text.*

4.1.1. **One must understand more than what the paragraph means in its context. One must go further and seek to understand what is the underlying worldview and underlying perspective of the author. Interpretation seeks to discern this by seeking to understand what underlies each and every turn of phrase the author uses.**

5. **Every attempt to interpret a biblical text must be done with a full appreciation of the various different elements of circularity inherent in the task. No act of interpretation can safely or legitimately ignore the *hermeneutical circles* that exist.**

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5.1. *There are a significant number of levels where one encounters the hermeneutical circle in biblical interpretation.*

5.1.1. **The hermeneutical circle can be defined as such: any situation where one cannot understand X without understanding Y; and, yet, one cannot understand Y without understanding X.**

5.1.1.1. Here are several of the places where the *hermeneutical circle* is in play:

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| X = | Y = |
| Word | Sentence of which it is a part |
| Sentence | Paragraph of which it is a part |
| Paragraph | Larger argument of which it is a part |
| Larger argument | Rhetorical purpose and structure of written work of which it is a part |
| Rhetorical purpose and structure of written work | Worldview of the author |
| Worldview of the author | Shared worldview of all the biblical authors |
| Shared worldview of all the biblical authors | The Truth; the true worldview |
| Word | Language culture from which it comes |
| Sentence | Language culture from which it comes |
| Paragraph | Language and thought culture from which it comes |
| Larger argument | Language and thought culture from which it comes |
| Rhetorical purpose and structure of written work | Language and thought culture from which it comes |
| Worldview of the author | Culture of thought from which it comes |
| Shared worldview of all the biblical authors | Culture of thought from which it comes |
| Worldview of the author | Unique insights of author (including divine revelations) |
| Shared worldview of all the biblical authors | Unique insights of authors (including divine revelations) |

5.2. *Every act of interpretation has the character of a dialectical process.*

5.2.1. **Since one cannot know what the words mean until he knows what the paragraph means (nor the paragraph until he knows what the work means, etc.), one cannot deduce the meaning of a text from lexical data and grammatical (syntactical) data.**

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5.2.1.1. In light of the existence of the hermeneutical circles, what allows the interpreter to grasp the meaning of a text is his engaging in an exegetical dialectic. This dialectic is what keeps the hermeneutical circles from being "vicious" circles—circles from which he can never escape.

5.2.1.1.1. *The interpreter moves back and forth between X and Y, constantly adjusting X to accommodate Y, and Y to accommodate X until, finally—in a sort of heuristic flash—he understands both simultaneously.*

5.2.1.1.2. *X and Y have to be grasped simultaneously. X is not logically prior to Y, but neither is Y logically prior to X. Therefore, one cannot logically move from the understanding of one to the other. X and Y must be grasped simultaneously, or they are not grasped at all.*

5.3. *One cannot assume, with any sort of confidence, that he understands a verse (sentence) of the Bible unless he is confident he basically understands all of the verses in the same context. If I claim to understand one verse, but do not believe I have any idea what the verse just before it means, then I have no basis for confidence that I do, indeed, understand the one verse*

6. Every attempt to interpret a biblical text must be done with a full appreciation of the power and influence of pre-understanding.

6.1. *The Bible interpreter must beware of the existence of EXEGETICAL LEGENDS—not only those that involve cultural background, but also those that involving lexicography.*

These "exegetical legends" are the "urban myths" of the bible study world. To cite some examples, there are many rather grandiose and magnificent things said about the Greek words translated "form" in Philippians 2:6, "image" in Colossians 1:15, "representation" in Hebrews 1:3, and "nature" in Heb. 1:3. An incredible amount of subtle meaning is said to be packed into the Hebrew word translated "one."

Completely fallacious claims are made about the Hebrew word *elohim*. All of the things said, interestingly, confirm Trinitarian doctrine. A very different, but famous exegetical legend is the small gate next to the large gate into Jerusalem called the "eye of the needle." (This gate is widely known by bible teachers; but, according to Kenneth Kitchen, it is not known at all to archaeologists.)

6.1.1. **Many exegetical legends were created because bible teachers were actually "looking" for evidence for a particular doctrine or dogma (like Trinitarianism). They tendentiously evaluated their evidence and arrived at an imaginative, but contrived conclusion. (While it tended to support their dogma; it was not well-founded in fact.) Not surprisingly, therefore, EXEGETICAL LEGENDS tend to cluster around pet dogmas.**

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6.2. *The Bible interpreter must beware of and on guard against the inertia of “stock” interpretations of passages.*

6.2.1. **“Stock” interpretations come to have the same kind of weight—and hence to be just as counter to biblical authority—as creeds.**

6.3. *The Bible interpreter must beware of and on guard against the inertia of “stock” translations of passages.*

6.4. *Every attempt to interpret a biblical text must be done with a full appreciation of how unaware we are of our pre-understanding.*

6.4.1. **We are not—nor can we be—consciously aware of all the different ways that our exegetical imagination is affected by, controlled by, guided by, and confined by our prior assumptions.**

6.4.2. **The bible interpreter must come to keenly understand the difference between finding support for a doctrine in some text because that text can be read successfully through the lenses of that doctrine, and finding support for a doctrine in that text because the doctrine is implied in what the author of that text actually intended.**

6.4.2.1. There is a difference between these two procedures: (a) reading and interpreting a text T in a manner that assumes doctrine D and reads T in a manner that is consistent with doctrine D, and (b) reading and interpreting a text T in order to understand it and then, having successfully understood it, discovering that it confirms doctrine D.

6.4.2.1.1. *When one takes doctrine D for granted, the above distinction becomes difficult to observe in practice.*

6.4.2.1.2. *To follow procedure (b), one must use one’s imagination in order to imagine that doctrine D is not true and to consider whether there are ways to reasonably understand text T that are inconsistent with or unrelated to doctrine D. Having arrived at some options, one needs then to evaluate each of these options, not on the basis of its familiarity, naturalness, or consistency with doctrine D, but on the basis of how likely it is to have been the author’s intent. And that must be judged from the evidence of the text itself.*

John 3:13 is a good example. If one takes the Trinitarian doctrines for granted, one will likely be unaware that he is, in fact, using those doctrines as interpretive lenses through which to read the verse. Accordingly, he is unaware—when he concludes that John 3:13 is evidence for Jesus’ pre-existence—that he has, in fact, engaged in procedure (a) above. To legitimately use 3:13 as evidence for the Trinity, one must—using the power of his imagination—set his doctrinal lenses aside and consider whether the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus can make sense on entirely different assumptions; and, indeed, whether it doesn’t make

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more sense. Only if it does not—that is only if their dialogue makes best sense on Trinitarian assumptions—should John 3:13 be seen as evidence for Jesus’ pre-existence.

7. Discovering truth must be the Bible interpreter’s only agenda.

7.1. *I must not approach a text asking, “So in what way does this text support the doctrines I already hold.” I must approach a text asking, “So what is the author intending to say in this text? And what underlying worldview is shaping his language in this text?”*

7.1.1. **What doctrines a text supports can only be decided AFTER the text has been interpreted. That issue should never be my focus as I am engaged in the task of interpreting it.**

7.2. *A bible interpreter must not go to the Bible looking for justification to believe something that he wants to or something that he feels he must believe.*

7.2.1. **The following is never a valid mindset or sentiment: “text T could plausibly mean X; therefore I am fully ‘within my rights’ to believe that T means X.”**

8. The Biblical interpreter must develop a good character and approach the interpretive task out of the virtues of that character.

8.1. *An interpreter must think “critically” with respect to every dimension of the interpretive task. He must always ask, at every step along the way, whether his reasoning, arguments, and conclusions measure up to the demands of sound rationality.*

8.2. *An interpreter must be fearless in allowing the text to say what it says and imply what it implies. If he is not, he robs the Bible of its authority by inevitably distorting its meaning in what he construes it to say.*

8.3. *An interpreter must be self-less in allowing the text to say what it says and imply what it implies. He must not allow any self-interested agenda **of any sort to** enter into the conclusions he reaches about the meaning of a text. If he is not, he robs the Bible of its authority by distorting what he construes it to say.*

Part 2:

A Concise Summary of My Defense in These Papers

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Let me briefly summarize the findings that we have reached in this series of papers:

- (1) The titles of Jesus—Son, Son of God, Christ—do not describe Jesus as a man with a divine nature in the sense that Trinitarianism proposes.
- (2) Nothing in the gospel accounts of Jesus requires that we understand Jesus as having a divine nature in the sense that Trinitarianism proposes.
- (3) Of all the passages typically cited as evidence that Jesus has a divine nature in the sense that Trinitarianism proposes, none of them clearly and incontrovertibly provide evidence of such a thing.
- (4) Some of the passages typically cited as evidence that Jesus has a divine nature in the sense that Trinitarianism proposes are better and more straightforwardly understood as proposing that Jesus is ontologically a human being who *has the personal identity of God*. Therefore, the Bible provides stronger support for the idea that Jesus is ontologically a human being who has two identities—a human identity and a divine identity—than for the idea that Jesus is an individual person with a single identity possessing two natures—a human nature and a divine nature.
- (5) As paradoxical as it may at first seem, Jesus' having two personal identities is plausible and understandable when we take into account the fact and nature of God's transcendence. In that case, Jesus possesses a created, human identity at the same time that he possesses the identity of the transcendent creator. This is not a contradiction because it is a matter of a personal identity from one order of being (the transcendent realm) being mapped onto the identity of a person existing in an entirely different order of being (the created realm). Jesus can have his own human identity and a divine identity at the same time because—through this mapping—his human identity becomes the "image" of the divine identity. This, in turn, is utterly consistent with the characteristic language the New Testament uses to describe Jesus—namely, as a sort of "image" of the invisible God.
- (6) There is no clear and indisputable evidence that, before the creation of the world, Jesus existed as a separate and distinct person from that of the Father, the transcendent creator God. Neither is there any clear and indisputable evidence that he existed before his incarnation as a man.
- (7) All things considered, there is no clear and incontrovertible evidence that there exists an eternally distinct person from God the Father who incarnated as Jesus.
- (8) There is no clear and incontrovertible evidence that the "Spirit of God" describes a distinct person from God the Father. The Bible is more reasonably understood to be using "Spirit of God" as a metaphorical way of describing the activity of the person of the Father himself.
- (9) Accordingly, there is not clear and incontrovertible evidence that God is anything other than one person and that that is exactly what is meant when the Bible declares that "God is one." Accordingly, there is no clear and incontrovertible evidence that Jesus is

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anything other than the human “image” of the one transcendent God, rather than a second person of a godhead.

(10) Therefore, there is no clear and incontrovertible evidence for the model of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, there is clearer and stronger evidence for the model of a single God imaged by the man Jesus—the model proposed by Transcendent Monotheism.

(11) Since there is reason to question whether the Biblical authors even believed in—let alone instructed us in—Trinitarian doctrine, it makes no sense whatsoever to maintain that the Bible makes belief in the Trinity a prerequisite to salvation.

(12) Indeed, making belief in the doctrine of the Trinity a prerequisite to salvation betrays such a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel itself—the good news that God will grant mercy to anyone who looks to him for mercy—that it constitutes a “false gospel.” As such, the proposal that belief in the doctrine of the Trinity is a prerequisite to salvation must be opposed and repudiated by anyone who wants to defend the truth of the gospel.

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| <p>Part 3: A Final Appeal</p> |
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In the final analysis, my real concern—the concern that drives me to even discuss the subject of the Trinity—boils down to my concern over an absence of real respect for the Bible and what it teaches. It is one thing to wave the banner of biblical authority, in theory. It is another thing to take the teaching of the Bible seriously, in practice. What will I believe—what the Bible actually, in fact, teaches? Or what a religious culture tells me I will and must believe? Am I to believe what I can conclude through my own study that the Bible teaches? Or am I to believe what others tell me the Bible teaches? Should I be free to think for myself about the meaning of the Scriptures and follow my own conscience with respect to what it means to learn from them? Or, should I be coerced and pressured into concluding from my study of the Bible what a religious culture insists I must conclude. This, I think, is a most serious matter. It gets right to the heart of what it even means to say that the Bible is our authority. My contention, obviously, is that we must be free to learn from the Bible itself—without the coercion and social pressure of culture—or we have shifted the locus of authority off of the Bible and placed it onto some human culture or institution instead.

I will not belabor or develop this point. But I will conclude with this extensive quote from Baruch Spinoza, a keen observer of the Christianity of his time. While it is questionable whether Spinoza evidenced anything like biblical faith, his observations concerning what he saw happening around him are worth listening to:

On every side we hear men saying that the Bible is the Word of God, teaching mankind true blessedness, or the path to salvation. But the facts

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are quite at variance with their words, for people in general seem to make no attempt whatsoever to live according to the Bible's teachings. We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority. In no other field do they display less scruple and greater temerity than in the interpretation of Scripture, the mind of the Holy Spirit, and if while so doing they feel any misgivings, their fear is not that they may be mistaken in their understanding of the Holy Spirit and may stray from the path of salvation, but that others may convict them of error, thus annihilating their personal prestige and bringing them into contempt.

Now if men were really sincere in what they profess with regard to Holy Scripture, they would conduct themselves quite differently; they would not be racked by so much quarreling and such bitter feuding, and they would not be gripped by this blind passionate desire to interpret Scripture and to introduce innovations in religion. On the contrary, they would never venture to accept as Scriptural doctrine what was not most clearly taught by Scripture itself. And finally, those sacrilegious persons who have had the hardihood to alter Scripture in several places would have been horrified at the enormity of the crime and would have stayed their impious hands. But ambition and iniquity have reached such a pitch that religion takes the form not so much of obedience to the teachings of the Holy Spirit as of defending what men have invented. Indeed, religion is manifested not in charity but in spreading contention among men and in fostering the bitterest hatred, under the false guise of zeal in God's cause and a burning enthusiasm. To these evils is added superstition, which teaches men to despise reason and Nature, and to admire and venerate only that which is opposed to both. It is therefore not surprising that, to make Scripture appear more wonderful and awe-inspiring, they endeavor to explicate it in such a way that it seems diametrically opposed both to reason and to Nature. So they imagine that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Bible, and they exhaust themselves in unraveling these absurdities while ignoring other things of value. They ascribe to the Holy Spirit whatever their wild fancies have invented, and devote their utmost strength and enthusiasm to defending it. For human nature is so constituted that when men conceive by pure intellect, they defend only by intellect and reason, whereas the beliefs that spring from the emotions are emotionally defended.

(Excerpted from Chapter 18, page 198, of *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (by William Yarchin; Peabody MA.; Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) which

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publishes a selection taken from Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (trans. Samuel Shirley, with introduction by Brad S. Gregory; New York; E.J. Brill, 1989) (Gebhardt ed., 1925).