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Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama

Michael S. Horton
**B. Authorial Discourse Interpretation**

Probably no one has sought to relate speech-act theory to theological hermeneutics as creatively and profoundly as Nicholas Wolterstorff. Just as Hans Frei charged modern biblical hermeneutics with abandoning the *sensus literalis,* which reigned throughout church history, Wolterstorff claims that, at least in academic circles, the practice of reading the Bible in order to discern what God is saying therein (i.e., "divine discourse interpretation") has been similarly eclipsed. From Romantic authorial-intention interpretation to textual-sense interpretation (Ricoeur), all the way to Derrida's deconstructionism, the landscape appears to leave little room for such an approach. For Ricoeur, writing necessarily prohibits access to authorial discourse, since "the verbal meaning of the text no longer coincides with the mental meaning or intention of the text." Absence of the author renders the text itself mute. "The text is like a musical score and the reader like the orchestra conductor who obeys the instructions of the notation," he says. But Wolterstorff insists that authorial *discourse* interpretation (not authorial *intent* interpretation) is the best way of getting at the designative content.

This process begins by discerning the noematic content of the divinely appropriated discourse. If a sentence has only one meaning, "we take the noematic content of the discourse to be the meaning of the sentence, unless we have good reason for doing otherwise." Further, we assume that people are speaking literally, unless we have good reason to suspect otherwise. When sentences have multiple meanings, we set out the possible meanings and ask ourselves, what is the most likely meaning intended by the author? What was he or she wanting to say by uttering or inscribing this? We expect the speaker to tell us the meaning of the sentence, and this is why we usually blame the speaker if he or she speaks in opaque or ambiguous terms. If we have reason to believe that the speaker is not intending a literal meaning, we consider the possibility that he or she is speaking loosely or indirectly. Only in these unusual cases we must attempt to determine authorial intent. In this, he agrees with Gadamer.

Next, we try to discern the illocutionary stance and designative content. "The main clues to illocutionary stance are carried by the moods of our sentences: declarative, interrogative, optative, and so forth. But literary genre also carries clues." By discerning the noematic content and, then, the illocutionary stance and designative content, we are ready for the second hermeneutic: interpreting for the mediated divine discourse.

To discern divine discourse, we must come to the Bible as one book and interpret according to the so-called *analogia fidei* (although Wolterstorff does not use this phrase, it seems appropriate to his conclusion). The interpreter, he says, must come to the Bible with two sets of convictions: the first concerning the meanings of sentences, the second consisting of convictions "as to what God would and wouldn't have intended to say by appropriating this totality of discourse and location." As to this latter set of convictions, Wolterstorff paraphrases Augustine's maxim: "If God's saying that would not conduce to our love of God and neighbor, or if its content is incompatible with Christian doctrine, then it follows that God did not say that."

So how do we know when God is appropriating human discourse? First, we must arrive at the correct *rhetorico-conceptual structure.* Second, we must distinguish the main point from the way of making and developing it (the latter possibly containing error). As an example, he cites Psalm 93:

> The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. (emphasis added)

The main point here is God's steadfastness, but in making the point the human discoursor says something that simply is not true: "As a matter of fact the earth is moved, and we all believe that it is; it rotates on its axis, revolves around the sun, and moves with the solar system as a whole through space." At this point, however, Wolterstorff suggests that we apply the distinction between noematic and designative content in relation to error. "That large elm tree there must be diseased," one says, actually pointing to a sycamore tree. "The point is true enough: the leaves are falling off of it and it is in fact diseased, but it is not an elm tree. Thus, the designative content is true, but the noematic content incorporates a falsehood." Often, when interpreting the Bible for divine discourse, we must realize that that which is predicated of God is the designative content.

Third, we must discern whether the human author spoke literally, while God is speaking metaphorically. While this is infrequent, we see it, for instance, when biblical writers predicate physical parts of God.

Fourth, Wolterstorff says, we need to distinguish between the discourse-generated and discourse-generated discourse, especially of concern in interpreting parables for divine discourse. Fifth, we must distinguish between what God was saying to us and what he is saying to us. So what do we make of his proposal?

As with speech-act theory more generally, Wolterstorff's proposal circumvents many of the problems associated with more traditional (i.e., Romantic) notions of authorial intent. In fact, Wolterstorff even insists on distinguishing his hermeneutics (authorial discourse interpretation) from authorial intent interpretation. He is even more convinced than Gadamer that the meaning of the text is determined by the author and not by the reader. In fact, Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" is not necessary at all in Wolterstorff's account. And Wolterstorff is also more insistent than Gadamer on the point (first raised by Gadamer) that interpretation usually goes well and that psychological divination is a fallback strategy, not the ordinary direction. Is it possible that Ricoeur's notion of the autonomy of the text and its distanciation from any author or *Sitz-im-Leben* originates from the breakdown of this Romantic procedure, but instead of turning against the unreasonably high expectations of knowing the author better than she knew herself, he severs all ties with the author? Regardless, Wolterstorff's approach...
avoids the psycholinguistic version of authorial intent analysis while affirming access to what the speaker or author intended in saying what was said.

But ironically, unlike the traditional understanding of sensus literalis, Wolterstorff's method at this point appears to substitute psychological divination of the divine author's mind, which at least on the surface seems to be precisely what he eloquently refrains in his analysis of Romantic theories of authorial intention. In the model I am proposing, the analogy of scripture is given this role of figuring out what God might and might not have wanted to say, or rather, what God in fact has and has not said. In this way, God interprets God's own discourse, as difficult passages are interpreted in the light of clearer ones. There are no direct routes to the knowledge of God, even through prayer and devotion. Encounters are always mediated, and one will never know what God meant to say and did or did not mean to do, apart from God's own stated intentions. Wolterstorff seems to accept this sort of position elsewhere, but it is at least qualified by these other statements. We will see a couple of examples of this below.

But Wolterstorff's rather straightforward methodology seems in many respects quite appropriate and fruitful for theological hermeneutics. John Searle takes this line for hermeneutics more generally: "Characteristically, when one speaks one means something by what one says; and what one says, the string of sounds that one emits, is characteristically said to have meaning." A hearer "understands what I am saying as soon as he recognizes my intention in uttering what I utter as an intention to say that thing." One does, however, wonder whether speech-act theorists have sufficiently explained how their strategy is equally applicable to written and oral communication. But if all utterances, whether written or oral, can be regarded as species of speech-action (and I agree that they can), then the difficulties arising from written as opposed to oral discourse (such as the absence of the author's commentary, facial expressions, and so forth) actually belong to the category of communicative misfires. In other words, Ricoeur's assumption of the inaccessibility of the author is ironically, like Schleiermacher's psychological divination, based on the exception rather than the rule. The fallback strategy (concluding that one cannot discern the author's intent) becomes the dominant and ordinary strategy.

But meaning is more than intention, as we have already seen. There must be meaningful conventions, so that X counts as Y in context C. Searle holds together "both the intentional and the conventional aspects and especially the relationship between them." We blame people for not being clear in what they are saying, intending, commanding, promising, and so forth. Wolterstorff points out. There are, of course, times when communication misfires, but this is actually not the norm. Therefore, I do not regard disjuncts in the case of a written text as problematic for interpretation in general, but only in exceptional cases—that is, when something goes wrong (ambiguity, deceit, contradiction, etc.).

In relation to theological hermeneutics, then, we come to the Bible as a single canon, a unified book. This already assumes a figural (promise-fulfillment) interpretation. At this point Wolterstorff gets specific in facing interpretive challenges. "What God would and wouldn't have intended" is a difficult business, especially when one has insisted that it is not the author's inner thoughts, but stated intentions, that are accessible. Here, it seems, Wolterstorff does think that one can get behind the stated intentions. Hence, "to interpret God's discourse more reliably, we must come to know God better, in both devotion and reflection."

It is true that not all of scripture is appropriated discourse. Obvious examples would include the speeches of Job's friends or, for that matter, much of Job's speech as well. But wouldn't it be simplistic to conclude that appropriated discourse could only come in the form of divine address? In other words, isn't the psalmist's ascription of mercy, steadfastness, justice, and so forth, to God in praise also appropriated discourse? Of course, this is not to deny that the psalmist is ascribing this praise to God. But surely a deity who prescribed the minutiae of the temple would have an interest in the community getting God's own attributes and works right in their worship. Is this not an instance, then, of appropriated discourse, although they are directly the speeches of the human author? Through the psalmist's saying, "The Lord is good" or "O Lord, our Lord, your ways are past tracing," God is fixing an appropriate reference range for descriptive and doxological utterance.

If one does take this aspect of Wolterstorff's proposal, there does seem to be the possibility of a rival hermeneutic here to Wolterstorff's own main line of argument. Surely recent interpreters as diverse as Tillich, Bultmann, Frei, and Henry would affirm the importance of knowing God in an experiential manner and would, moreover, insist that this was essential to their arrival at widely differing views as to what God would have wanted to say. The author insists:

Appropriation is not license for unbridled play of imagination on the part of interpreters. The human authors of the Bible clearly claimed that God intervenes directly in the course of nature and human affairs; if we choose to depart from that in the course of interpreting for divine discourse, we need good reason for doing so... And let it be added that having good reason to depart is also not license for unbridled play of the imagination. Roughly speaking, we are to stay as close as possible to the mediated discourse, given our convictions as to what the appropriator would have wanted and not wanted to say by appropriating this discourse thus expressed. (emphasis added)

While Wolterstorff's proposal may eschew unbridled imagination, does it relieve the wax-nose anxiety—that is, the fear of shaping the text into whatever we wish? Despite his assurances, the examples he himself uses from the Psalms and 2 Timothy do not seem to ameliorate that anxiety. What are the criteria for determining what God said and what God is saying? This seems to be entirely too subjective, as if we could know the ultimate author better than he knows himself. In fact, it seems at odds with Wolterstorff's own approach and speech-act theory more generally. How could one know what the appropriator of any discourse would want to say, apart from his or her discourse elsewhere? The analogy of scripture is an example of what happens in all ordinary interpretation. If, for instance, Jane is known to stretch the truth a bit now and then, her promise will be received in the light of the other things Jane has said and performed (or not, as the case may be).
Will prayer and devotion license us to determine, on the basis of our assumptions about what God would and would not do, what parts of divine discourse are still normative? Here again, a redemptive-historical hermeneutic would provide another solution, an eschatological-historical, not theoretical-conceptual, solution. For exegetical reasons alone (considered below) we could determine, for instance, that God was telling Israel to drive out the Canaanites, but that God is not telling us today to drive out the Canaanites—or anybody else. Anticipating a point to be made below, the policy of God's people changes, depending on the particular economy of God's kingdom. In this age, God does not enter into covenants with nations, and the church is the world's most ethnically diverse society. This is not an assumption imposed on the text by a priori rules or our own judgments about what is right, but arises in the attempt to interpret scripture in the light of scripture, a dialectical process that gives rise gradually to a biblical-theological and systematic-theological program. Even Israel's former oppressors will be her fellow worshipers in that coming day. "The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians," with "a highway from Egypt to Assyria." On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage." (Isa. 19:20-25).

Wolterstorff refers to Psalm 93 as an example of the noematic content containing falsehood while the designative content does not. Clearly, Wolterstorff observes, we do not today believe the earth to be unmoved. But surely that was also the case for the psalmist. Was the psalmist asserting the immobility of the earth any more than that our thoughts are actually vapors because they are called "but an empty breath" (Ps. 89:44)? Here Wolterstorff seems to have misfired in his act of interpretation, if we adopt his own rules. We are, he says, to expect a literal interpretation except in those cases where it is obvious that this could not have been the author's intended meaning. Here we have just such a case, it seems. The genre is already trope-laden, so why should we expect the psalmist to be arguing for a pre-Copernican cosmology any more than he is arguing for a divine body to wear the majestic robe to which he also refers in the same passage? In fact, if we were to take the psalmist literally here, we would find him in conflict not only with modern cosmology, but with himself. Compare "[the earth] shall never be moved" with the passage we find only nine psalms later:

Long ago you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure, they will wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end, (Ps. 102:25–27, emphasis added)

Is the earth really firm? Shall it never be moved? I think that Wolterstorff's distinction between noematic and designative content, in which error is sometimes attributed to the former but not to the latter, is justified. Nevertheless, the example that he has selected indicates a widely shared tendency to read the Bible more literalistically at certain points than its authors ever intended. The result is, on the more conservative side, some not terribly successful attempts at harmonizing and, on the more liberal side, confirmation of the unreliability of scripture. Is the psalmist hedging his bets against two competing cosmologies in his day, cosmologies of which he could not have even been aware? Could he even have been wrong if these modern categories were not in his reference range? It would seem that a simpler explanation is available. Regardless of what modern science tells us, our experience is in many respects quite analogous to that of the ancient Jew. For instance, we return from a long ocean voyage or airline flight and express relief at being "back on terra firma." This does not betray a naiveté on our part, any more than an astrophysicist should be held in derision by his peers because he announced to his grandchildren that fishing will be good if they arrive at the pond by sunrise.

Different metaphors for different purposes. When, for instance, the psalmist is reaching for analogies to divine immutability, it is normal human experience that is in view, not scientific theories. From the perspective of our daily experience, when we are aware of geological explanation, the earth is relatively stable. Even Californians would appreciate the force of the analogy. But this does not mean that the earth is self-existing. Thus, when the psalmist wishes to make another point—this time with regard to divine sovereignty and eternity—the contrast is between the self-existing endurance of God and the very creation whose firmness served as an analogy for divine steadfastness. If analogies break down on their own at some point, then they are certainly even more fragile when enlisted for making different points than those intended by the author.

Michael Polanyi has gone to great pains to collect examples of this from the history of science. For instance, heliocentrism did not triumph because it meshed with normal experience, for it was contrary to the daily "common sense" observation of people. Science may reveal an account of "the way things really are" in terms of physics and astronomy, but this may not be "the way things really are" for ordinary human experience. That is why Calvin had the foresight to say in his commentary on Genesis 1, "Let him who wishes to study astronomy and the secrets of nature, turn elsewhere." This at a time when these very cosmological theories were being hotly debated. To employ Wolterstorff's own approach, we could say that here the noematic content is divine faithfulness and the illocutionary stance is divine assurance rather than scientific assertions. Thus, what God here, by the way of the psalmist, says of his own character is absolutely true in both its noematic and designative content.

I do not take issue here with the method, but with his application in this instance. And if the psalmist did not intend to pronounce on the rotation of the earth and related matters, Wolterstorff's own method would caution against an
interpretation of his saying something here that was wrong and therefore required us to discard it from the appropriated divine discourse. It is certainly not logically or demonstrably necessary to conclude that the psalmist incorporated "a certain amount of error" to make a point, any more than we would impute error in discourse to the astrophysicist referring to "sunrise." This also recalls Wolterstorff's own advice concerning the discernment of "loose" discourse.

Affirming that the writer's intent here is metaphorical, Wolterstorff nevertheless believes that the attribution of emotions to God is literal. Further, the reference to Babylon the "devastator" as having her "little ones" dashed "against the rock" (Ps. 137) is not only taken by Wolterstorff to be metaphorical, but to have been so interpreted always by the church. In a similar vein, Francis Watson says of this passage,

Christian victims of oppression could never legitimately appropriate this psalm in its entirety, however extreme their sufferings; and its use in Christian liturgical contexts can in no circumstances be justified. Although the psalm as a whole belongs to Christian scripture, it is not permitted to enact its total communicative intention: for all communicative actions embodied in holy scripture are subject to the criteria established by the speech-act that lies at the centre of Christian scripture, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfranchisement and the enactment of the divine Word.

These instances make me anxious about giving oneself such a wide berth for determining what God would and wouldn't have said in scripture. We are not given a clear example of how one might work through these passages in order to be entitled to conclude that God does not have physical parts, but that he does have passions; we have not seen the method applied to the question of the reference, whether literal or metaphorical, in Psalm 137. Where we expect a fruitful demonstration of the method on points that are actually quite contested (especially the last two examples), Wolterstorff and Watson leave us only with assumptions about what God could or couldn't have said. Of course, what God "could" or "couldn't" do (especially in terms of what is loving) differs widely, depending on one's perspective. Wolterstorff himself seems to recognize the liabilities of this move. Many times we say that God could not have said thus and so. "But God did. Our false beliefs prevented us from discerning that God said it; they screened out the divine discourse."

Francis Watson's answer to Psalm 137 is a canon-within-a-canon approach: the scriptures tell us what is central, and that central criterion cancels out things like massacre. But with Wolterstorff's interpretation, there is a potential not only for a canon within a canon, but a canon outside of the canon.

It seems that Wolterstorff's fecund proposal could be enriched by an eschatological, redemptive-historical hermeneutic in which the covenant is placed in prominent view. According to this interpretation, the nation of Israel in the Old Testament is the kingdom of God on earth, an intrusion—if you will, a bit of the consumption in history, typological of the theocracy appearing finally and fully at the end of the age. During these historical moments, God signifies and seals major salvific events by direct intervention. Holy war is just one such convention of this covenant. It is based not on Jewish nationalism, arising from the experience and feeling of the hearers, but on an unrelenting Yahwehism, arising from the speaker and the covenant that this speaker made with their ancestors. Just as God warns the world of the judgment to come, that event is not only anticipated but actually experienced in part by the idolatrous nations that occupy God's land.

One may not find this interpretation attractive or satisfactory for a variety of reasons, particularly if one is presuppositionally committed to the denial of a final reckoning. Nevertheless, if it is the best way of reading this particular text, since it is based on the exegesis of similar passages, then should one's assumptions about what God would and would not have said be held at bay? After all, given this interpretation, there was no more injustice in these holy wars than there will be at the end of history, since the former are regarded as but a foretaste of the greater judgment to come. Nevertheless, redemptive history is not a flat line of chronology, but is more like a topographical map with peaks and valleys. So, for instance, we know that holy wars are wrong today from the redemptive-historical indicators that scripture itself provides. The end of the identification of the kingdom of God with the nation of Israel was signaled by Jesus in a number of ways, as in the "woes," the cursing of the fig tree, and the parables. But it was also indicated by Jesus' very specific reference to allowing the wheat and weeds growing together until the harvest, his rebuke of James and John for wanting to call down judgment on a Samaritan village for rejecting their preaching, and Paul's command, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them" (Rom. 12:14). This phase of redemptive history has its own distinct politi. It is a kingdom of grace, not a kingdom of power, in the present eschatological epoch.

Just as Jesus announced that his kingdom is from another place (John 18:33–38; 6:15), the writer to the Hebrews labors the point that believers dwell in the heavenly city and its temple, while Paul reminds the saints, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Therefore, new covenant believers are to wear "the whole armor of God"—not the gear of an earthly military unit, but that of the gospel, faith, and salvation (Eph. 6:10–17). Without this redemptive-historical hermeneutic, the biblical narrative can easily become a repository for timeless principles. America can become a surrogate Israel, with the blessings and curses of the covenant simply transferred. Driving out the Canaanites is now allegorized for nationalist myths of "manifest destiny" and the like. "Claiming" such promises from the national (Mosaic, in contrast to the strictly Abrahamic) covenant ignores the typological, conditional, and temporary character of the theocracy—the schoolmaster that leads us to Christ. A redemptive-historical hermeneutic forces readers to keep their feet on the ground, with their eyes on the changing applications of the covenant and its sanctions in different periods.

Furthermore, it helps them to understand the justice of divine action in one
context (viz., the identification of an earthly people with the kingdom of God), while affirming its non-normative status for Christians today. This, it seems to me, is far less subjective and far more intratextual than its rivals.

While textual sense and authorial discourse interpretation may provide tremendous methodological insights, they cannot replace the internal strategies of the redemptive-historical drama itself. Eschatology and covenant are not merely important loci within the drama, but are methodological and hermeneutical lenses through which all loci are interpreted. Any account of divine discourse must make sense of this discourse generated by or within this text, and not merely satisfy a general theory.

C. Narrative Hermeneutics: Revival of the Sensus Literalist?

As Hans Frei has carefully reminded us in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, the sensus literalis is hardly an innovation of the Protestant Reformation. This sense may be summarized by several features. First, it describes "the precise or lit enactment of the intention to say what comes to be in the text." Second, it refers to the descriptive fit between *verbum* and *res* sense and reference, signifier and signified, "Sinn" and "Bedeutung," between grammatical/syntactical and conceptual sense, between the narrative sequence and what it renders descriptively. Finally, the sensus literalis is the way the text has generally been used in the community. It is the sense of the text in its sociolinguistic context—liturgical, pedagogical, polemical, and so on.

Even where medieval exegesis allowed multiple layers of interpretation (viz., allegorical, spiritual, moral, analogical, typological, tropological), none was allowed to subvert the literal sense. It was clear in theory, if not always in practice, that the literal sense always had priority, at least with respect to the most essential passages. Although the figurative sense may be involved in the intentionalty of the divine author (viz., in promise and fulfillment as well as typology), the human author follows a largely literal sense.

The hue and cry for relevance in both conservative and liberal churches, as narrative theology argues, betrays a common commitment to Enlightenment autonomy. And in modernity, on both the left and right in theology, the overriding preoccupation with reconstructing the "real" world above, behind or even in front of the text, has corrupted faithful reading. For the latter to be revived, one must approach the scriptures as one narrative, following its own internal cues the way one learning a new language should follow the grammatical and lexical rules of that particular language and not seek out something beyond, behind, or above it, such as a general, universal "language."

Partly influenced by New Criticism, but especially motivated by a concern for the distinctively Christian hermeneutical practice over the centuries, this brand of postliberalism gives more weight to both the author and the text than to the reader.

In these broad strokes, narrative theology represents a critical step forward in recognizing the priority of an "activistic" text over an "activistic" reader. Our own proposal depends on that priority. Over and over again, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles call us to die to self, provoking us by scandalous announcements to see everything in a radically new way. The biblical story does not simply illumine our existence: it throws our whole existence into turmoil. It is not merely answer our questions: it reveals the banality of our questions and gives us new questions that set us on a path to profound discovery. It is not supplemental, but subversive. Thus, the goal is not to relate the Bible to our experience (which is really to say, judge the Bible by our experience), but vice versa. We must set out to make our lives relevant to the biblical story, not the biblical story to our lives. As in Wolterstorff's approach, the priority of the horizon of the text (at least in determining the textual sense) circumvents the "fusion of horizons."

In brief, Frei encourages us to begin to read the Bible once more like Luther and Calvin, a suggestion that is echoed by Brevard Childs and others among the Yale school. But the Achilles heel of narrative theology is the question of reference. So we will develop our analysis of this school more fully by bringing in other conversation partners as we provide our own suggestions on this critical question.

**REFERENCE: SIGNUM AND RES SIGNIFICATA, OR WHERE REDEMPTIVE HISTORY HAPPENS**

Many readers are familiar with the Reformation eucharistic debate. As with previous debates, especially in the Middle Ages, controversy swirled around the connection of the "sign" (signum) and the "thing signified" (res significata). Zwingli, who thought he was simply following Augustine, practically separated *signum* and *res*, the former little more than a representative reminder of what the believer possesses and enjoys quite apart from the sacrament. Luther recollected at the very idea, and Lutheranism ever since has insisted that in the sacred meal Christ is present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. Calvin affirmed Zwingli's quite Augustinian point that the ascended Christ is not physically present on the earth again until the end of the age, and also argued that the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation actually abolished the sign, the thing signified simply taking its place. Nevertheless, Calvin strongly denounced Zwingli's memorialism, taking Luther's side with respect to the affirmation of a real presence of Christ in the sacrament, though not in the elements. Of course, there is a lot more that could be said, but I wanted to highlight only the broad outline for its relevance here.

The real question for us, beyond the eucharistic controversies, is whether the relationship between word-tokens and the world is purely mimetic ("Zwingli"), univocal identity ("Rome"), paradoxical interpenetration ("Luther"), or analogical union ("Calvin"). In our model, this relationship is understood as analogical union: words do not mirror reality, but neither are they to be confused with reality. A God's-eye view is never available to creatures, a point that was made by
centuries of Christian wisdom long before Richard Rorty’s observation. In our estimation, much of historical criticism and fundamentalism fails in the first direction, while much of narrative theology tends to regard the text itself as the real world. In this way, the sign (text) and thing signified (external world, or what Gadamer calls die Sache) become somewhat conflated.

Despite its profound critique and constructive program, narrative theology risks becoming a passing fad unless it can get beyond an idealist conception of the word-world relationship. Furthermore, its reticence to make assertions concerning the fit between text and world, while nevertheless insisting upon divine speech and action in history, makes it easy prey to that critique that Gilkey, Barr, and others so successfully prosecuted against the biblical theology movement. Narrative theologians themselves are aware of this criticism and have attempted to address it directly.83 Michael Goldberg raises the same concerns as a Jewish narrative theologian:

Although Braithwaite contends that “it is not necessary . . . for the asserter of a religious assertion to believe in the truth of the story involved in the assertions,” the Exodus story and the story of Christ carry with them the claim that they are in some basic way essentially true. This truth claim is what partially justifies these stories’ putting a claim in turn on those who hear them, for these stories say, “Live your life according to me. Base your life-policy—your life story—in this story, for insofar as this story is a true one, it offers a credible basis for the adoption of such a policy and story in your life.” Historically, Jews and Christians have adopted certain policies of behavior, certain ways of life, because they have staked their lives on the truth of their respective stories, of their respective stories and no other.83

Again, a redemptive-historical and covenantal hermeneutic, with its eschatological orientation, would reject an antithesis between fact and value, Historic and Geschichte, myth and kerygma. Living “as if” God has acted and spoken in history, and in these ways—that is, treating them as regulative rather than constitutive—leads us back to Kant and to the pendulum of modernity, swinging between various forms of hypertranscendent dualism and hyperimmanent monism. “Salvation history” is not a noumenal history, but a particular (i.e., covenantal) history within world history. As in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, there is a play within a play that represents a compressed version of the larger plot. The entire creation is involved in one covenant—the so-called covenant of creation (foedus naturae) established in the beginning and reestablished in the Noahic covenant. Accordingly, God sustains cultural activity and yet sharply distinguishes cult from culture. The covenant of grace, by contrast, is announced after the fall and develops from Seth and his line, leading to Abraham and the messianic Seed, in whom “all the nations will be blessed.” That covenantal line is persecuted from within and without and narrows progressively until it is reduced to a single individual: Jesus Christ. In his wake, it widens again to become even broader than before, embracing people “from every tribe and language and peo-

ple and nation” (Rev. 5:9). This is but one way of summarizing the plot from the covenantal perspective. But this plot is a mystery that has been revealed, not an eternal truth that has been discovered. The meaning of history—summing up all things in Christ—is, as Moltmann has rightly emphasized in line with the Reformers, hidden under the cross, suffering, and evil. It must be revealed, since it is anything but obvious.

Goldberg is right to suggest that “[f]or both Judaism and Christianity, ordinary, profane time is real, and it is real precisely because it—rather than some other ‘Great Time’ which transcends it—is the locus (and focus) of redemption and meaning.”84 Goldberg also registers concern that a narrative approach which eschews some sort of correspondence to the world and its history will only lead to “the rather dismal prospect of saying to one another (of shout at one another?), ‘I’ve got my story; you’ve got yours. That’s all there is to it!’ If a narrative theology cannot adequately address this kind of problem, then whatever suspicion there may be surrounding the legitimacy of the use of narrative for theology will have been well-founded.85

We would concur with narrative theology in its insistence that the biblical narrative itself master our interpretation. But we must also deny the charge that by raising questions of correspondence we are attempting to subvert the text by making an “extratextual” reality normative. In the first place, we should abandon the term “extratextual” when speaking of the ultimate referent. When the Gospel state the reality “in the time of King Herod,” when “a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered,” a census that was taken “while Quirinius was governor of Syria,” the reference to world history is the narrative’s reference.

This does not have to license reduction of the diverse biblical material to historical description any more than to propositional assertions (or, for that matter, to narrative). In contrast to Bultmann, we would insist that the referent of a religious assertion to believe in the truth of the story of Christ-is, as Moltmann has rightly emphasized in line with the biblical theology movement, God’s word-world relationship. Furthermore, the sign (text) and thing signified (external world, or what Gadamer calls die Sache) become somewhat conflated.

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simply accommodating the text to fallen realities or using the text to "absorb" these realities, the life that one actually lives in the world (and not in the text) may be kept separate, leading to a sort of hermeneutical schizophrenia. Church history does not seem to support the notion that the biblical text always absorbs and transforms alien systems of thought. This failure is due not to any weakness in the text, but to the fact that the text never does anything purely as text, an *ex opere operato* view of textuality. It is interpretation that is or is not successful in individuals' and communities' being transformed rather than conformed to this age. Structuralist theory must be subjected to the hermeneutical critique, at least in its application to theology.

The question of reference can be postponed only so long. At some point, one must face the matter squarely: To what does the biblical text refer? Do we treat this narrative as world-projection and revelation of possibilities? As mythological or symbolic indicators of limit situations? As correspondence with living history? We would at least agree with Ricoeur's definition of these terms: "Discourse consists of the fact that someone says something to someone about something. 'About something' is the inalienable referential function of discourse." While we cannot reduce divine discourse to propositional content and historical reference, we surely cannot abstract interpretation from these, since they are so obviously present in the text itself.

On this last point, Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Wolterstorff are in agreement. God, Ricoeur maintains, is the ultimate referent of the biblical text. "God is in some manner implied by the 'issue' of these texts, by the world—the biblical world—that these texts unfold." But Ricoeur overemphasizes the difference between oral and written speech, arguing that in writing "there is no longer a common situation between writer and the reader." But Christians have commonly maintained that the common situation is created by (a) the human condition; (b) the divine response, historically enacted; (c) the community created and preserved by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Word and the koinonia of sacramental union. Furthermore, the current eschatological aeon is contemporary with the early church; namely, "these last days." Eschewing the romantic effort at getting behind the text to gain access to the author's psyche or ostensibly transporting oneself to the original *Sitz-im-Leben*, Ricoeur nevertheless leaves us wondering what is left to be interpreted.

My response is that to interpret is to explicate the sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text. Here we join Heidegger's suggestion about the meaning of *Verschaffen*. . . I want to take this idea of the "projection of our ownmost possibilities" from his analysis of understanding and apply it to the theory of the text. In effect, what is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities. This is what I call the world of the text, the world probably belonging to this unique text.

But this response betrays an abiding commitment to modernity's inflated individualism and autonomous subjectivity. Although elsewhere Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of fidelity to the scriptures' own message, the subject still reigns, though no longer disembodied. The text merely occasions *Dissein*, the clearing wherein "I might project my ownmost possibilities." This aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutic is liable to the same devastating criticisms that have been leveled against Bultmann's project: More seriously, it falls prey, along with Bultmann's theory, to Feuerbach's critique of theology as in truth anthropology; projection, not interpretation. Furthermore, it is at this point inimical to any model in which the goal of interpretation is to discern what God said, rather than simply indwelling a proposed world in which one may construct or project new possibilities. Revelation must be a content and not merely a clearing.

Despite Ricoeur's illuminating contrasts between biblical/Hebraic word-centered and pagan vision-centered approaches, one wonders if the "world-projection" in front of the text moves too far toward the latter. At the very least, its analogies are taken from the world of vision, with metaphors such as "displayed," "projected," "unfolded." Locating a middle ground between the extremes of positivism and deconstructionism, Ricoeur wants to retain some form of "revelation." All of this evokes the hermeneutics and aesthetics of Romanticism, but Ricoeur distances himself from modernism. In fact, he distances himself from Gadamer's model of conversation, as a far too benign analogy that can easily mask oppressive moves. Is it not possible that narrative theology could also be as easily liable to such distortions? At this point its greatest strength is also its weakness: Its suspicion of extratextual factors makes the narrative something like an airtight compartment or encased noumenon floating in its own semiotic fluid, disconnected from the ordinary "extratextual" world of power structures. One cannot dismiss the infamous *Sitz-im-Leben* after all.

But one must ask the question that the postliberal himself or herself seems loathe to raise: If the text is judged unreliable in terms of its factual integrity, of what use are the history-like narratives? "If Christ is not raised, then we are still in our sins." We must beware, therefore, of the repeated warnings against being drawn away from narrative hermeneutics because of ostensibly irrelevant questions of historical reference. Only if we are still under the spell of positivistic science and historicist hermeneutics will questions of historical reference be viewed as a threat to faithful interpretation. In fact, the postliberal's alternative is not neutrality or a temporary suspension in judgment on such matters. While they do believe in the historical facticity of the resurrection, for instance, postliberals like Frei and Lindbeck guarantee no safe passage from the contemporary reader to that fact via the text. This is the Gordian knot that must be cut, the Kantian legacy that postliberalism critiques with so much insight and yet cannot itself seem to transcend. Like the earlier biblical theology movement, narrative theology seems divided between (intraparadigmatic) faith and (extratextual) doubt, a characteristically modern dilemma.

Yet even David Tracy notes the a prioristic character of the higher-critical enterprise. Were not classical liberals (especially Ritschl), in their "quest" for the
in this respect, we share with liberalism an undue concern for ostensive reference, and in that act have thrown in their lot with the higher-critical school. Despite his emphasis on the “suppression of the original speech” in order to make room for the unfolding of textual meaning, Ricoeur seems more balanced in his integration of sense and reference. He writes,

Advocates of a narrative theology try to discard this issue by merely listing biblical narratives among stories for which the question of factual truth is irrelevant. But this apparently merely descriptive stage is a way of begging the question. . . . The suggestion, then, would be to substitute relevance for truth, in the sense of factual truth. And relevance would mean ability to further a certain kind of action, to invite the hearers “to imitate the actions of the story.” But the practical use of the biblical stories is not a substitute for an inquiry into the relation between story and history.100

Narrative theologians do not believe that Jesus is a legitimate referent merely of the narrative and not of real history. So why would predicating more of his correlation than mere existence be a case of diversion? Why the reluctance to take external, historical reference as seriously as the narrative itself? If, as Lindbeck recognizes, the whole system refers (indeed, corresponds) to ontological reality, why not the parts? Surely one cannot dismiss this semiotic holism as Hegelian idealism. For Frei, it is probably due to literary (structuralist), cultural-anthropological (Geertz), and theological (neo-orthodox) biases, but is also in considerable debt to what, we will argue below, is a misreading of Wittgenstein's language game analysis. But for Lindbeck there seems to be an additional commitment: an inflexible model in which Christian doctrine is understood as and not merely as analogous to, a cultural-linguistic system in which the totality is “a gigantic proposition.”101 Has neo-Kantianism simply exchanged the terminology of grammar for that of categories, with both serving essentially the same function, the whole swallowing the parts?

While narrative theology is a far cry from Bultmann’s way of expressing his position, I cannot see how postliberals really get beyond the Historie-Geschichte divide, after all their efforts. Just as Bultmann surrendered the “Jesus of history” to the critics as an irrelevance to faith, postliberalism’s avoidance of reference amounts to the same, despite a theoretical commitment to historical events. If, in this respect, we share with liberalism an undue concern for ostensive reference, we must not, because of that, relinquish our suspicion of fideism. In spite of the remarkable insights and useful chastening at the hands of the postliberal critique, one is still left staring into Lessing’s awful chasm.

Reference is not imposed from without, but is part of the warp and woof of the narrative throughout. Nevertheless, narrative theology has directed our attention once more to the sequential, episodic, and emplotted character of divine revelation. Thus, it seems to me, drama is a more comprehensive metaphor than narrative and text, and it shows up at just this point. The relationship between text and world is less of an either-or when viewed as analogous to the relationship between script (textual narrative) and stage (a projected or an empirical world). The play cannot be reduced to either of those, any more than it can be reduced to either speech or action. Each has its own integrity and importance within the drama. While a script performed on stage may be more interesting and perhaps even more meaningful (given the “presence” of the speaker), directors and actors do not normally get uptight over the distanciation of the author when they are reading scripts.

In relation to Wolterstorff’s proposal, to which mine is in some measure indebted, authorial discourse interpretation could be enriched not only by a redemptive-historical and covenantal hermeneutic but by this metaphor of drama. What if, for instance, appropriated discourse is more analogous to a playwright who nevertheless—simply by the act of putting the script on stage—leaves lavish space for the actors to interpret and to act it out? Here there is no need to discern which parts are appropriated discourse, any more than to figure out how much of the play is the authorized or appropriated discourse of the playwright. Furthermore, it avoids literalistic approaches that would reduce divine discourse simply to true, timeless propositions, which makes it difficult at times to interpret scripture when it is clear from the text that what an actor/speaker says is not always what God is saying. But the drama is not only about the enactment of its characters’ identities and a unified plot—it is all of this. This drama is history, as told from the inside.102

Like a good play, scripture possesses a single, unified meaning.103 But also like a good script, the biblical text does not sacrifice plurality (in terms of genre, implications, applications, complexities and reversals in the plot, surprising twists on prophetic fulfillment, discrepancies in reporting/narrating) to this unity of sense.104 This single sense is so pregnant with meaning that it must never be confused with a single, much less sufficient, explanation. It is to this notion of a unified sense that we now turn.

TEXTUAL SENSE: THE ONE AND MANY PROBLEM AGAIN

As is well known, Alexandria and Antioch represent two distinct tendencies within ancient Christianity: allegorical spiritualizing and literal sense interpretation, respectively. The implications of such hermeneutical distinctions would
receive their fullest expression in the christological controversies, which again points up not only the impact of hermeneutics on christology, but of christology on hermeneutics. Antiochenes Theodore of Mopsuestia was prolific in his defense of the sensus literalis and in opposing any form of docetic spiritualizing of Jesus’ true humanity.\textsuperscript{109} In the very early Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions (ascribed to Clement of Rome and often cited by the church fathers), Greek mythology is scoured not only because it is myth but because it is allegory. In the myth of the supper of the gods, “Clement” then claims that the apostle Peter explained, “They say that the banquet is the world, that the order of the gods sitting at table is the position of the heavenly bodies,” down to the dishes which represent reasons and causes in the world.\textsuperscript{106} Peter’s alleged response is that the scriptures must not be read in this manner.

For there are many sayings in the divine Scriptures which can be drawn to that sense which every one has preconceived for himself; and this ought not to be done. For you ought not to seek a foreign and extraneous sense, which you have brought from without, which you may confirm from the authority of the Scriptures, but to take the sense of truth from the Scriptures themselves.\textsuperscript{107}

It is the regula fidei, drawn from the analogy of scripture, that will assist in this interpretation.

Whatever one calls the challenge—the mystical-allegorical sense, demythologized sense, symbolic sense, metaphorical sense—Kevin Vanhoozer is not stretching to conclude that those who defend the perspicuity of scripture (or, for that matter, any text) once again face steep opposition. Contemporary “enthusiasts” and “papists,” to appeal to the Scylla and Charybdis of the sixteenth-century context, form a common fortress against the claim that God has spoken clearly (and therefore sufficiently) in scripture. The concern over multiple sense interpretation, however, is hardly modern—even early modern. An early medieval formula based on Augustine was sensus allegoricus non est argumentivus (the allegorical meaning is not conclusive). Hardly a minor figure, Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1340) declared,

One should also understand that the literal sense of the text has been much obscured because of the manner of expounding the text commonly handed down by others. Although they have said much that is good, yet they have been inadequate in their treatment of the literal sense, and have so multiplied the number of mystical senses that the literal sense is in some part cut off and suffocated among so many mystical senses. Moreover, they have chopped the text into so many small parts, and brought forth so many concordant passages to suit their own purpose, that to some degree they confuse both the mind and memory of the reader and distract it from understanding the literal meaning of the text.\textsuperscript{108}

According to the Quadrige method, each reading could contain the following senses: historical, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (i.e., eschatological). While often appropriated to edifying uses, this method also could be used to undermine just about any self-serving or fanciful interpretation. As Mickey L. Mattox reminds us, “Pope Innocent III, for example, claimed that the ‘greater light’ and the ‘lesser light’ of the creation narrative in Genesis represented, respectively, the papal authority and that of the secular ruler.”\textsuperscript{109} Calvin used Luke 10:30 (the parable of the good Samaritan) as an example of allegorical exegesis.

They have nothing more constantly on their lips than Christ’s parable of the traveler, whom thieves cast down half alive on the road. I know that almost all writers commonly teach that the calamity of the human race is represented in the person of the traveler. From this our opponents take the argument that man is not so disfigured by the robbery of sin and the devil as not to retain some vestiges of his former good, inasmuch as he is said to have been left “half alive.”\textsuperscript{110}

But long before the reformers, Aquinas considered it important in his day to defend the priority of the literal sense and to warn against abuse of the subordinate senses:

The multiplicity of the senses does not produce equivocation or any other kind of multiplicity, seeing that the senses are not multiplied because one word signified several things, but because the things signified by the words can themselves be signs of other things. Thus, in Holy Scripture . . . for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended allegorically, as Augustine says. Nevertheless, nothing of Holy Scripture perishes because of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense.\textsuperscript{111}

Since so much of the debate over hermeneutics these days lays explicit claim to antecedents either among the mystics and “enthusiasts” or “Rome” on one side (as in comparisons of Derrida and Meister Eckhart or Hauerwas’s union of Stanley Fish and Pope John Paul II) or the Reformers (as in the stated goal of Frei and Childs as well as Thielck, Watson, and Vanhoozer), it might be helpful to indicate some of the key directions of Reformation hermeneutics. First we must understand just how the reformers did read, interpret, and use the text. Out of the gate we need to recognize that “literal” does not mean “literaltic.” This will become clearer in our development of especially Calvin’s emphasis on divine accommodation. The only difference from medieval practice at this point was whether the sensus literalis was the chief sense, upon which alone conclusions could be based, or whether it was the only sense. This did not prejudice the Reformers against nonliteral forms of speech, but against interpretations that are not obvious (or obviously nonintended by the author). This is precisely the advice of Austin, Searle, Wolterstorff, and others: take the utterance or inscription at face value, in its most obvious sense, unless there is very good reason to do otherwise. Thus far, scripture should follow the ordinary rules of general textual
interpretation and not be treated as a magical book containing secret codes and hidden meanings.

Adopting Occam’s razor as successfully in exegesis as it became for science, in which the simplest explanation for a particular phenomenon is preferred, Luther answered one of his Schwärmer critics in 1521:

The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and speaker in heaven and on earth. This is why his words can have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue. But words and language cease to have meaning when the things which have a simple meaning through interpretation by a simple word are given farther meanings and thus become different things so that one thing takes on the meaning of another. This is true for all other things not mentioned in Scripture because all God’s creatures and works are sheer living signs and words of God, as Augustine and all the teachers say. But one should not therefore say that Scripture or God’s word has more than one meaning.

For Luther, when the book of Hebrews, for instance, interprets Christ as the new Aaron, the writer is not employing a sense other than the literal (for instance, the allegorical). Rather, “the Spirit interprets him in a new literal sense” (emphasis added).

This becomes a keystone of Protestant hermeneutics, but it was also the method of such church fathers as Irenaeus in their controversy with Gnosticism and the latter’s substitution of allegorical flexibility for the perspicuity of an obvious sense. Irenaeus says that they “twist them . . . from a natural to a non-natural sense. In so doing, they act like those who bring forward any kind of hypothesis they fancy,” especially by appealing to an allegorical method that they call the “spiritual” interpretation, reserved for the elite who are “in the know.”

So Frei is correct in his insistence that figurative interpretation is not figurative interpretation; that it is not, in other words, allegorical, but that the plain sense simply is the promise-fulfillment pattern of a unified canon. Viewed in this light, it is not that there are no allegories in scripture, but that they are rare and are flagged as such already by the author. For example, in Galatians 4, the apostle says—not of the narrative itself, but of his particular use of the Sarah/Hagar narrative in this place—“Now this is an allegory (allegoroumena); these women are two covenants” (v. 24). It is a self-conscious allegory. Like Jesus’ parables, it is already a figure of speech. The sensus literalis suggests its figurative character, especially when Paul actually cues us, “Now this is an allegory.” Paul does not introduce us to an allegorical method, but to his own divinely authorized allegorical use of the Old Testament narrative. Both the Old Testament narrative and Paul’s allegory are meant to be interpreted according to a single sense (sensus literalis), which is to say, as one would normally interpret a narrative in the first case and an allegory in the second. Similarly, there are moral imperatives and moral implications of other forms of speech. But this does not imply an additional “sense.”

As we have indicated above, multiple sense interpretation is alive and well in our day. In a narcissistic culture especially, it is easy for interpretation to move from “Thus says the Lord” to “Well, it seems to me.” Therapeutic usefulness and well-being become the norma normans non normativa, or a canon within a canon. This transition is evident in evangelical Bible studies as in Richard Rorty. Vanhoozer indicates the parallels between allegorical method and deconstruction:

After all, the primary thrust of the logos-centered thinker is to say, “This means that.” What of the contemporary penchant for seeing multiple meanings in texts? Is this not a new form of allegorizing? Indeed, does not Derrida’s own emphasis on indeterminacy foster the notion that a text has several senses? While there are indeed historical precedents for deconstruction, I believe they are to be found in the rabbinic and gaonic traditions of biblical exegesis, not in Christian allegorizing, much less in figural interpretation . . . . The new element in modern and postmodern allegorizing is, above all, the theology that governs its practice . . . . The new allegorism locates textual meaning not in a system of higher truths, but in a sea of indeterminacy.

As we have emphasized in our model, eschatology is not only the topic here and there, but is an interpretive lens. Nevertheless, it is the interpretive lens that the sensus literalis gives to us. Noticing that the kingdom of God is a heavenly reality breaking in on “this present evil age” is not the result of interpreting according to an anagogical (i.e., eschatological) sense of a given passage, but is the literal or plain meaning of the passage—or else an implication that may be legitimately made on the basis of correlating it with other passages.

“Calvin’s rejection of allegorical and anagogical readings of the biblical texts was, if anything, even more pronounced than Luther’s. He was persuaded that the grammatical sense was the genuine sense, except where the writer’s intention or the larger context indicated otherwise.” Frei is correct here and it is easy to see the close proximity of this position to speech-act theory and, more specifically, authorial discourse interpretation. The most serious flaw in allegorical interpretation is that it marginalizes Christ, allowing the readers in power to manipulate scripture to suit their own purposes. Appealing to the lepers’ being sent by Jesus to the priests (to prove Jesus’ claims), allegorical exegesis seemed to justify the necessity of auricular confession for the forgiveness of sins. “If they are so fond of chasing after allegories,” Calvin writes, “let them set before themselves Christ to the priests, and let them be brought to the priests for the forgiveness of sins.”

Do you see how, after Christ’s resurrection also, [the apostle] thinks that the promise of the covenant is to be fulfilled, not only allegorically-
but literally, for Abraham’s physical offspring? . . . But if we listen to their titles, what will become of that promise by which the Lord in the Second Commandment of his law pledges to his servants that he will be merciful to their offspring even to the thousandth generation [Ex. 20:6]? Shall we here take refuge in allegories? That would be too frivolous an evasion.118

On one hand, the Reformers saw Rome as confusing the Mosaic covenant with the Abrahamic (or, more simply, law and gospel), so that Jesus was a “new Moses” and the gospel announced in the new covenant was the “new law.” On the other hand, the radical “enthusiasts,” to the Reformers, represented a neo-Marcionism. “Christ the Lord promises to his followers today no other ‘Kingdom of Heaven,’” said Calvin, “than that in which they may ‘sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ [Matt. 8:11].”119 Defending the unity of the canon Old Testament revelation is accommodated to the era of the church’s infancy, as God’s people were led by shadows to Christ.120

While it is true that he equates the literal or obvious sense with the authorial intention, it would be gross anachronism to identify this position with psychological interpretation. For Calvin and Luther, figuring out what the author intended has nothing to do with divining the author’s inner thoughts, but merely with discerning the intentions that were stated in the discourse itself. Contemporary linguistic theory might suggest that this is to engage in discourse analysis.

While Hans Frei has directed our attention once more to the sensus literalis, almost merging sense and reference, narrative theology continues to accept the separation of the sensus historicus from the sensus literalis. It does not do this consciously, but in its suspicion of “external reference” it renders the historical sense somewhat problematic or at least redundant. As the author has been separated from the text by textual-sense interpretation and deconstruction, sense has now been severed from reference and the literal sense from the historical. As with reference, however, the historical sense cannot be so separated, precisely because of the inherently historical character of this particular text. The classic categories of historical and literal sense, which were integrated in traditional figural exegesis, have now drifted apart under the categories of the universal-historical and the hermeneutical. We can see the line from Troeltsch to Tracy in the former, and from Barth to Frei in the latter. Pannenberg is right to insist that the textual-sense theologian simply cannot ignore the historian:

For us, the historical sense [sensus historicus] and the literal sense [sensus literalis], which were considered identical in the Middle Ages and even in the Reformation, have moved apart as belonging to two different dimensions of the interrogation of a text. Therefore, the dogmatician has not only to deal with exegetical statements that bring out the original meaning of the different writings, but also, beyond this and above all, with historical statements (in the broadest sense of the term) about the history of Jesus himself and the process of its transmission in tradition and interpretation in primitive Christianity.121

Pannenberg noted that the divorce between sense and reference is largely motivated by the suspicion that the biblical reports are not in fact historically reliable. Pannenberg himself does not insist upon a uniform reliability, but his point is suggestive even for those who do. Often, one wonders whether the recurring postliberal lament concerning the propositionalist’s obsession with facticity betrays a prejudice, not against historical-critical studies, but against the conservative’s refusal to accept those “conclusions.”122 Francis Watson states the matter directly: “The programme of reconstructing an original Sinn im Leben as an interpretative matrix for a text may stem from the sense that the verbal meaning alone is too ‘obvious’ to be interesting. It is in extracting non-obvious meanings out of apparently straightforward texts that interpreters can best demonstrate their own virtuosity.”123 Instead, we have to ask what the speech is trying to do. In the Gospel of Mark, “What Mark is doing is not simply telling a story but proclaiming the gospel.”124 This already places limits on interpretive possibilities.

To conclude this section we will briefly touch on the question of canon, since this is inseparable from a unified sense or meaning of the text. While it is not our purpose in this work to provide a defense of the canon, it is necessary at least to indicate that this very notion implies some notion of divine authorship. The sources are simply too diverse in terms of background, style, date, and circumstances of composition to possess an inherent unity without some sort of “omniscient narrator” or “playwright.” And in the process of reading, Christians have traditionally found just that kind of unity from Genesis to the Apocalypse. God must not only authorize this “collected writings” as divine speech, but must directly guide the process from inscription to canon. Furthermore, the Spirit’s inspiration in this process is matched by the Spirit’s illumination for the believing reader. The Spirit’s illumination does not complete the meaning of the text, but exposes us—or better yet, disposes us—to the active text. We will touch on this topic more directly below.

By being confused with Enlightenment and American individualism, the Reformation’s idea of scripture’s perspicuity—the text’s essential clarity and unity—has often been caricatured as an invitation to a naïve hermeneutical realism.125 But in Reformation and post-Reformation hermeneutics, the “obvious sense” may not be so obvious in every place. As the Westminster Confession acknowledges,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.126

According to Francis Watson, the literal sense comprises “(i) verbal meaning, (ii) illocutionary and perlocutionary force, and (iii) the relation to the center.”127 It is “from the centre of holy scripture” that we interpret the whole. This perspective
has the merit of being christocentric, but in our estimation it reverses the proper relation. Luther's definition of the canon as "that which preaches Christ" has been taken by many such as H. Faber and Kümmel as an invitation to reduce "scripture" to a few essential elements in the name of christocentric exegesis. Pannenberg also follows this canon-within-a-canon perspective (in this case, the deity of God).  

But at least for Reformed theology, the rationale for the canon is frankly circular: "The divine character of the Bible itself gives it its authority." Bavinck adds, "The canonicity of the books of the Bible is rooted in their existence. They have authority in and of themselves, iute suo, simply because they exist." As Barth put it, "The Bible makes itself to be canon." This is hardly biblicism, since the scriptures, according to Jesus' own testimony, are "they that testify concerning me" (John 5:39). This christocentricity is determined not by picking out the central figure and taking it upon ourselves to determine what is in keeping with his centrality (as if the whole of scripture did not witness to him), but is already the content of the canon. It is precisely because the canon is normative apart from any central motifs that its central motifs can be regarded as organically arising from its soil and not as a result of imposing an already-constructed interpretation. The whole of scripture is therefore canon not because Christ is preached throughout, but because it is the product of divine discourse. Having said that, we can assert with Jesus himself that the whole of the self-authenticating canon testifies concerning him (cf. Luke 24:27).

Nevertheless, there is a danger of emphasizing canon and the self-authenticating nature of scripture apart from the rest of scripture itself, namely, God's promise in Christ through the covenant of grace. As we have argued above, it is the covenant that constitutes the biblical canon as canon. It is not an ontological principle or primal Urgeschichte, but a constitution or charter, that ties the diverse elements together as historical prologue (which justifies that which follows), stipulations and sanctions, and then the covenantal hymnal (the Psalter), the new covenant treaty with its continuities and discontinuities in administration, but altogether the fulfillment of one covenant of grace as the seed of Abraham appears in history "in the fullness of time." The Gospels and Acts announce a new—or better yet, redrawn—historical prologue, while the epistles are the new covenant prophetic and wisdom literature, the Apocalypse serving as a "summing up of all things in Christ." This unity is therefore not imposed from without, nor even constructed from a central dogma, but is organic, eschatological, and redemptive-historical, from its Alpha-point to its Omega-point.

When the undoubtedly central figure, Christ, is abstracted from the drama or is moved to the periphery, he is easily transformed into a cipher for all sorts of things (transcendence, immanence, essence, existence, universals, particulars, truth, goodness, beauty, love, and service, etc.). In other cases, one runs roughshod over the parts in favor of the whole, which does justice to neither. But what we actually have with this text is a script of the drama of redemption. Rather than an ahistorical "center" radiating from a textual core to its edges, there is a time line running through history—not just one moment or central figure or event pulsating outwards, but a plot moving forward, served by diverse characters, subplots, reversals, and, above all, promise and fulfillment.

This figural interpretation assumes, of course, the sensus plenior, or the fuller sense. In the interaction between divine and human authorship, the representatives of the covenant could only prophesy, rather than know, the future. From their horizon, defined not by a general hermeneutic but by the redemptive drama up to that point, biblical writers could not foresee the precise details of what they themselves were committing to the history of prophetic announcement. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Heb. 1:1–2). This is what makes this messianic era of redemptive history, "the last days," a fulfillment that could not be totally comprehended in the prophetic anticipation. So while Israel quite correctly read Isaiah's prophecies as referring penultimately to Cyrus, king of Persia, she was led to look further over the horizon. After all, it is clear from the text itself that much was left in the prophecies that simply did not and could not have fit Cyrus, and this realization of the nonfulfillment of Old Testament prophecy more generally seems to have fueled Israel's expectations of Messiah within Second-Temple Judaism.

An excellent example of this sensus plenior occurs when the Sanhedren meets to determine what to do with Jesus:

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for them, that is, to put him to death. (John 11:49–53)

First, Caiaphas was an authorized carrier of divine discourse, the last high priest of the Mosaic covenant. Ironically, he sat in judgment over the one whose servant he was deputized to be. But, despite himself, he prophesied Jesus' death, and not only for Israel, but for the world. If any of Israel's prophets said more than the prophet could have been aware of, it was surely Caiaphas. He was not forced to say it, but he also "did not say this on his own." Note the centrality of the covenant again: it is not the individual—his person, his character, his spiritual sensitivity or piety—but his office as the representative of the covenant, that determines the status and reliability of his discourse.

To reverse a phrase of Polanyi's, prophets tell more than they can know, just like the apostles themselves in relation to the still future eschaton. Quoting Isaiah, Paul writes, "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'" (1 Cor. 2:9). This is not to embrace equivocality, however, as Paul says in the next
sentence: "These things God has revealed to us through his Spirit" (v. 10). As in all analogical description, the dissimilarities are greater than the similarities, but efforts to reduce all of scripture to equivocal discourse ignore the genre codes explicit in the text itself.

Watson is correct in his objection to attempts to convert rather straightforward Gospel narratives into “parabolic” or “metaphorical” interpretation. Of course, there are parables in the Gospels, but we know where they are. “Why should the Gospel of Mark not be read as a multiple, opaque text, as recommended by postmodern homiletics?” he asks. “The answer is that, if it is indeed gospel, it cannot be multiple or opaque.... The Gospel of Mark is gospel, not parable.” Whether one chooses to accept the unity and perspicuity of scripture’s message is one thing. Nevertheless, to read the scriptures as a covenant is to treat it as consisting of sections that belonged to every ancient Near Eastern treaty: historical prologue, stipulations, and sanctions. A covenantal, redemptive-historical, and eschatological approach accounts for both unity (because of the “promise made to Abraham and to his seed”) and diversity (because of the distinct administrations and polities of God’s kingdom in different “acts” of the drama).

Single meaning does not entail either uniformity or a uniformly simple meaning. Nor does it require, but in fact resists, the possibility of exhaustive meaning. No interpreter or interpretive community could ever so fully and faithfully interpret the scriptures that there would be nothing left to exegete. Ironically, it is its fecundity that opens itself up to multiple interpretations, but this largesse will limit interpretive options, once we as readers touch ground again. The covenant in its concrete canonical unfolding constitutes that terra firma. Perspicuity and sensus literalis do not entail complete explanations but do indicate the potential for being able to sufficiently summarize the work as a whole.

Having joined the conversation, indicating general lines of agreement and overlap with certain trends in hermeneutics, we turn next to some of the distinctives of our own proposal.