

## THE WORD AND WORDS\*

### ENCOUNTERING GOD IN LANGUAGE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Language, per se, bears revelatory witness to the nature of God and, in consequence, important insight into the structure of the cosmos. However, theological scholarship rarely engages language as a revelatory category, instead limiting its attention to the behavior of sacred words. This is unfortunate, for a deeper engagement with the essence of language offers fruitful possibilities that include encountering the triune God as a linguistic community, and the implications of all things existing within God-speech. What follows probes the soul of language, positing the claim that who God is, language does.*

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#### Introduction.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”  
John 1:1.

In the essay to follow I will assert that a deeper understanding of how language works offers fresh insights into the character of God. It is my hope that, thus informed, post-modern Christian communities might find unity in bearing witness to an inviting God who shares of himself poetically.<sup>1</sup>

As the Word God spoke the Creation into being, and *with* words he blessed it. He continues to converse with humans made in the *Imago Dei*, persons to whom he imparts those reflective, communicative, and imaginative processes of semiotic thought and speech mysteriously concomitant with his own nature. In so doing, God has chosen to reveal himself via language—broadly defined for this essay as semiotic discourse, that is, communication through a full spectrum of images (including words), sounds, and gestures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term intentionally and according to Ricoeur’s use of poetics as a work governing its own reading. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 159.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Chandler, “[Semiotics for Beginners](https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~chazelle/courses/BIB/semio2.htm),” <https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~chazelle/courses/BIB/semio2.htm>.

Interest in the power of language theory has risen remarkably since Friedrich Nietzsche's observation that language is somehow involved with the process of knowing.<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, Austin, Searle and others have since contributed much. Given the self-identity of Christian communities as textual communities it is not then surprising that theological interests have been piqued as well.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Anthony Thiselton considers the issue as one of the most significant developments in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup>

I contend that an expanded understanding of language has the potential to enlarge the very ground upon which knowing God occurs. For not only does it bear meaningful messages, it also offers the meaning of itself. To better know language is to better know its Maker. Understanding how it behaves in front of, in, and behind texts funds a deeper appreciation of both what God says and who God is. Thus informed, Christian communities might become more than textual communities, instead becoming *Sprachengemeinschaften* in which the Spirit graciously enlivens the Word to greater glory with, by, through, and in, language.

It should be now noted that my interests are primarily directed toward Christian communities generally hospitable to two pertinent presuppositions underpinning my work. First, I accept mystery as a reality, including the mysteries of a triune God and a bodily resurrected Christ. Second, I presume the inspiration of Scripture, that being the Holy Spirit's supervision of the formation, transmission, and reception of the scriptural texts, including ongoing divine presence in the lives of today's reader/speaker/hearer.

Further, I acknowledge that my perspective is shaped heavily according to my experience in and migration away from American conservative evangelicalism. Given this tradition's ninety million adherents,<sup>6</sup> I find it both important and of personal interest to include some attention to its relevant assumptions. I do not pretend that my consideration will or can be objective, but I will endeavor to be fair.

My discussion will begin unconventionally with a fictional narrative offered for the purpose of creating an interpretive atmosphere for the assertions that follow. I will then provide

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<sup>3</sup> R. Scott Smith and J. P. Moreland, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 30.

<sup>4</sup> David Larsen, *Telling the Old Story* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 470.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Babinski, *Leaving the Fold* (Amherst: Prometheus 1995), 22.

an overview of language *per se*, including an examination of the paradigms of Paul Ricoeur's worlds of words, as well as the implications of a variety of literary elements. Finally, I will consider how all of this might actually matter as a means to actualize authentic relationship with a talkative Creator.

### **Language Experienced; a Creative Excursus.**

A primary assumption underlying this paper is that language evokes an epistemological and hermeneutic *encounter*. Therefore, the short story below invites the reader into an experience with language through its employment of a number of literary devices that serve as a preface to what follows. Titled, *Gilad and the Sea*, the story is told from Jesus' point-of-view.

#### *Gilad and the Sea*

*Before my ascension, I made a small fire just before dawn along the Sea of Galilee. I was staring into the coals, weeping, when a fisherman's young son, Gilad, suddenly appeared out of the darkness. He asked, "Why do you weep, Master?"*

*I knew the boy. He and his mother were followers of mine and I loved them both. "Many shall soon suffer for my name's sake," I said. My heart was heavy. "Great is their reward in heaven. But others whom I do not know will soon claim my name and they will teach what I have not taught. They will not follow in the Way I have shown you ...woe to them. That is when truth shall be a thing much coveted but little loved. In that time, boy, go to the sea and remember."*

*"Some of your followers are hiding in the cliffs near Arbel," Gilad said. "My mother thinks we should flee to the caves."*

*"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself."*

*It was then when his mother, Leah, came. She was laughing. "Yeshua, I've brought some tilapia and some bread. I thought Peter would be outraged to eat fish from Ezra's boats!"*

*I was glad she came. She lifted my spirit and I began to laugh with her. "There is the silhouette of his boat," I said. "See, out there...against the gray light? All night Peter has caught nothing. He washes his empty net on one side of the boat and then yells at Andrew to do the same on the other!"*

*Gilad did not laugh with us.*

*Leah saw what I saw. "It is hard for Gilad to laugh," she whispered. "His father cannot bear that a fisherman's son fears the water. He badgers the boy day and night. I once hoped for*

*you to take his fear away but you passed us by in Capernaum and did nothing.” The tone in her voice had turned suddenly bitter.*

*“I know the day.”*

*“Then why did you not help?”*

*“Why did you not ask?”*

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*The three of us fell silent for a short time before Phineas, the husband of Leah and the father of Gilad entered the firelight. “Woman, you left my bed! You, boy, should be sorting fish. And we need gall for your grandfather’s eye...”*

*“I asked them to help me,” I said as we all stood.*

*“Who the devil are you?”*

*Leah answered with eyes lowered. “Husband, it is he, Yeshua of Nazareth.”*

*“Yeshua’s flesh rots in Jerusalem.”*

*“No, husband...but do not be afraid...”*

*“I fear nothing,” he said. “You, stranger, let me see your hands.”*

*I held my palms to the campfire. “Many see and do not believe.”*

*“Husband, the messengers have told the truth...”*

*“Truth? What is truth? Once I heard the real Yeshua of Nazareth blabber alongside my fish cart on the way to Magdala. I was parched as dry sand and he said his truth could quench thirst with everlasting water. But he was as dried up as the rest of us. What kind of truth is that?”*

*I smiled to myself. He was right. Meaningless words are not true words. “You speak rightly,” I said.*

*Emboldened, he fixed his eyes on mine. “So, tell me now, before I summon the rabbi to have you dragged away. Who are you?”*

*“I AM.”*

*“You are what? You are the truth again?”*

*“It is so,” I said.*

*“What is so?”*

*“I AM is Truth.”*

*“Speak so I can understand.”*

*Phineas was flustered; understanding had not been given to him because he had not walked with us. But I answered him. “An olive must be tasted before its tree is understood. You do not understand how truth is because you do not eat my fruit.*

*“But I do understand your tree, Phineas. I was hung upon it. And its fruits are the holes in my palms...and the scars on your wife’s cheek.” I felt heat suddenly rising within me.*

*“My wife is none of your concern. She is a liar; she deserves the back of my hand.”*

*“Deeds spring from words as petals burst from buds. Be warned. In the Judgment to come, the words of my Father will not return void!”*

*“Who is your father that I should be afraid?” said Phineas. “It is my son who should be afraid of his father. I judge him to be worthless. Gilad fears the sea. Who has heard of such a thing for the son of a fisherman! He weeps like a little girl on my vessel and shames my name.”*

*I searched the man’s soul. “A son fears a wicked father; the wicked father fears his own secrets. Who has more to fear?”*

*“Secrets are hidden. They have no power. The son has more to fear,” he said.*

*“Phineas, I know your secrets; they are terrors. Like demons they torment you. The day is coming when all the world will know them. You are to be pitied.”*

*“I do not fear my secrets and I spit on your pity!”*

*“Then hear me if you can: A rich man had three sons. One blind, one deaf, and one dumb. Which did he love the most?”*

*“How could he love any of them?” asked Phineas.*

*“You fool. You are one son who is blind, deaf, and dumb. Your Father is merciful and offers his love. But heed my words: you will not love him until you learn to fear the sea.”*

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*As you might think, the exchange was uncomfortable for us all. But the man was imprisoned by pride and tormented by secret demons. He did not seek refuge in the Rock, but within his own self.*

*No sooner had Phineas left us when Gilad turned to me. “Tell me, Teacher, how might I find peace with the sea?”*

*I looked at his young face, shadowed delicately by the firelight. I glanced eastward where a red horizon bode well for the coming day. "Come," I said.*

*We walked to the water's edge. The night had been calm so the wavelets lapped lightly. "There," I said. "About four hundred cubits away is Peter's boat. Call across the water to him and the others."*

*The boy cupped his mouth and cried in his high voice, "Have you fish?"*

*Peter and Thomas answered with oaths and I laughed. "See, when you cast your voice over water it travels far and finds the ears of many. But when you shout against the cliffs above the Sephoris highway, your voice is returned to you, empty."*

*He nodded.*

*"Do you remember the day you gave Andrew your two whiskered fishes and five barley loaves in the desert near Bethsaida?"*

*"Of course. You fed many thousands of us with them."*

*"Yes. And I was pleased with you that day for bringing me your basket so willingly...But after all had eaten I sent the twelve away in their boat toward Gennesaret whilst I bade the multitude farewell. I then walked some distance to climb a low mountain where I prayed in view of the sea. A strong south-western wind blew through my hair all the night and I decided to make my way back to the shore before dawn.*

*"I stood there like we are standing here. The sea boasted a different kind of beauty than today. It was not soft and gentle, but was ruffled with white-capped waves that ran at the beach like the arena runners in Tiberius."*

*"Were you not afraid for your disciples?" Gilad asked.*

*"No, but I knew they were afraid and were weary from fighting the contrary winds. So...and this is the part I love to remember...I decided to walk over the water and greet them."*

*Gilad had heard the story but had never believed it to be true. "You were not afraid?"*

*I smiled. "Little brother, hear me: the sea is a thing of majesty; it is always what it is, yet it is never the same. It is seen and unseen, it surprises us but we are never deceived; it swallows some to death and furnishes a bounty of life to others. It rises and falls by winds and rain but is always secured by a bed of rock. If you listen, you will hear its voice..."*

*"You are talking about Yahweh."*

*I was pleased. He had begun to understand. "Yes," I said.*

*“And you want my father to fear the sea because you want him to fear Yahweh,” he said.*

*“I want your father to understand that the sea will be what it is, and that he has no power over it. His boasts mean nothing. If a man can humble himself before the sea, he can walk with God.”*

*Gilad stared across the black-blue water. The low hills near Capernaum were catching the first slants of the sun now edging the eastern horizon. “Please, Master, go on with your story.”*

*“Well, to answer your question, I was not afraid because I love all that the sea is.”*

*“Even as you love the Father.”*

*My heart soared. “Yes! And so, I began to walk amidst the waves and I wept for joy. My Father was all around me. From the water I felt him move with me, in the wind I felt the breath of the Spirit, the far mountains made me sure, the breaking light guided my way. In all these things I heard his voice saying, “This is my beloved Son.”*

*“But then, ah, then, I approached the little boat. It was heaving; its shredded sail fluttered impotently in the wind. John spotted me first but Nathaniel cried out, “A ghost!” I waved but it seemed that Thomas had fainted straightaway. So, I quickly shouted, “Be of good cheer; it is I!” I can still see Peter climbing over Andrew’s back. “Lord,” he said, “say the word and I will come to you.”*

*Gilad’s mouth was hanging open. I laughed out loud. “Boy?”*

*“Peter said that?”*

*“Yes,” I chuckled. “And here’s why I tell you this story. Do you know why I changed his name to Peter?”*

*“No.”*

*“He is my rock.”*

*Gilad thought for a long moment. Then he realized something special. “Master, your Rock asked to walk on the water. Rocks don’t float!”*

*“Ha! Right,” I laughed. “After Rock asked to walk on the water I said, “Come,” and he did. I was very proud of him...poor impulsive Peter. I love him so.”*

*“And then what?” asked Gilad.*

*“Well, we walked toward one another, he being all smiles and chest out. But he then took his eyes off mine and looked at the windswept sea; he began to sink. “Lord, save me!” he cried. I*

lunged for his thick hand and lifted his feet to the surface. “Why did you doubt?” I said. “Why so little faith?” Then we climbed aboard the boat and I ordered the wind to stop.”

Gilad stared at me in wonder for the longest time. I blessed him. Then I had him face the waters, squarely. “Now tell me, Gilad, what do you see?”

“Everything, my Lord.”

“Do you fear what is before you?”

“Yes. And I love it, as well.”

“Then come,” I said. “Let us take a little walk of our own.”

### **In the Beginning...Language?**

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made; for he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm.” (Ps 33).

The third verse of the first chapter of Genesis announces the birth of Creation: “And God said...” God spoke, and the universe was formed. God-speech...language...is at the very foundation of all that is.

This claim is related to the scriptural claim that God is love (1 John 4:8). At love’s core is relationship; love seeks an object with which to commune or it cannot exist at all. One way or another, lovers must commune. Language is, therefore, essential to love.

Intrinsic to Scripture is a Trinitarian ontology of God, a mysterious unity of three Persons among whom love flows.<sup>7</sup> As such God *is* as relationship. Soskice offers, “the Trinity is friendship,” a relationship she describes as one of speaking and listening.<sup>8</sup> Referring to passages in the New Testament such as John 16:13-15, and John 17, Poythress makes a similar claim, arguing that the Persons of the Trinity function as members of an intercommunicative community.<sup>9</sup>

Going beyond relationship, Poythress asserts that divine relational discourse actualizes its essence meaningfully by way of divine speech at and in the creation. He writes, “If indeed God spoke to create the world, then the world from its beginning, and down to its roots, is structured by God’s language.”<sup>10</sup> The Word speaks and creation *becomes* according to the Creator’s words,

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God; Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 161, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Vern Poythress, *In the Beginning was the Word; Language, a God-Centered Approach*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



and in its continuous becoming it effectively exists grounded in language. And so, “language is not an alien imposition on the world but the very key to its being and its meaning.”<sup>11</sup> Poythress concludes: “The created world, as a result of God’s speech, bears within it from top to bottom a kind of quasilinguistic character.”<sup>12</sup>

Others agree. Hugh of Saint Victor (as quoted by Umberto Eco) claims, “the entire sensible world is a book written by the hand of God...All visible things (are) presented to us by a symbolic instruction...proposed for the signifying of things invisible.”<sup>13</sup> And turning to Paul: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Rom 1:20). God has offered a language-embedded cosmos to humankind as something of a meta-metaphor, a revelatory transcription that is according to the will of the Word who speaks.

Among the objects of Creation is humankind. Made in the image of God, she, too, is offered as something of a window into divine nature. The anthropology of selves-in-relation imitates, in part, the relational attributes of God; its communicative necessities do likewise. Accordingly, I contend that one finds language in humankind because one finds language in the divine, and the qualities of human language reflect the qualities of its Creator. As previously noted, Poythress makes the important claim that God has impressed his Trinitarian character on (human) language, ourselves made in God’s own image.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, I believe it is reasonable to assert that *who God is, language does*. Put another way, language behaves according to the qualities of its Maker. Therefore, it should be recognized as offering more than the messages it bears.

Some, however, vigorously resist associating God and language too closely, fearing the identification of language *with* God might lead to its identification *as* God. So conservative evangelicals like Scott Smith complain that post-modern theologians are clambering about on dangerous ground, perilously toying with language as constitutive of reality instead of representative.<sup>15</sup> I answer that slippery slope arguments are unremarkable. Any image of God on

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>12</sup> Vern Poythress, “[Science as Allegory.](https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1983/JASA6-83Poythress.html)” in *The Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 35 (1983), <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1983/JASA6-83Poythress.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco, “The Scandal of Metaphor: Metaphorology and Semiotics,” in *Poetics Today*, 4, no. 2 (1983), 235.

<sup>14</sup> Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Smith and Moreland, *Truth*, 40.

earth is subject to abuse without losing its inherent identification with its referent. If in doubt, one might consider humankind.

That said, I must be clear: I do not claim God to *be* language. I further contend that language does not and cannot reveal God—only God reveals God. Language may be revelatory, but it is not revelation.<sup>16</sup>

But objections can also be heard from beyond conservative circles. For example, Sandra Schneiders relies on principles of metaphor to disassociate God and language. She presupposes language to be a purely human phenomenon and thus innately finite.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, any attempt to think of God in literal discourse upsets that which is necessary to metaphor, i.e. the polar tension between what *is* and *is not*.<sup>18</sup>

Wolterstorff reacts to Schneiders by name, agreeing with her obvious *is not* of a divine larynx yet challenging her with an important *is*. What *is* in God-speech is the reality of divine illocution, i.e. the force or command of God as mediated by the Spirit through the scriptures.<sup>19</sup> The idea of God speaking can be understood as a metaphor for all sorts of actual divine *linguaging*. The point is important for as Ricoeur remarks, “The fact that the Lord speaks is what is essential.”<sup>20</sup>

The arguments are helpful but, in the end, one hopes that all sides might agree with Wright that “we need to understand better than we commonly do, how language works.”<sup>21</sup> But to what end? Trevor Hart makes the point that “the ultimate object of Christian theological concern and exploration is God himself, as he has given himself and gives himself to be known.”<sup>22</sup> I contend that a deeper understanding of the nature of language contributes mightily to that end.

Admittedly, fixing fast to a definitive view of language is a difficult task in the first place; it is like grasping water. Hart refers to language as “mercurial in its capacity to slip through our

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<sup>16</sup> This is a proper concern of special interest to Barth. See Anthony Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice; Responsive and Imaginative Participation* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Metaphor to be more thoroughly discussed below.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10; *see also* Brevard Childs, “Speech-act Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 58- 4 (2005), 380. Note: speech-act theory will be discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>20</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 63.

<sup>22</sup> Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995) 96.

fingers;”<sup>23</sup> Gadamer considers the workings of language to be a mystery.<sup>24</sup> But elusiveness notwithstanding, language is integral to the Creation; its communicative qualities have been imbedded in the fabric of all things and in so *being*, point to who God is. Thus, it is important that one plunges her hands into the well over and over again in hopes of cupping *something*.

Until this point I have considered language as inclusive of all sorts of semiotic expressions because the full range of words and wordless imagery is essential for language’s full labor and complete being. Certainly, the cello of Yo-Yo Ma invokes the language codes of mood; Rembrandt’s “The Prodigal” prompts cognitive and emotive responses. And, importantly, the figurative expressions of the apocalyptic scriptures are revelatory of God at the center of types. In fact, such figuration leads Sandra Schneiders to make the observation that “symbolic revelation is characteristic of a God who offers and invites but does not compel response.”<sup>25</sup> (I find this to be an ironic comment for Schneiders who typically resists the whole idea of God speaking, but it remains a profitable example of the ontological relationship between language and God. However, I would add that she also omits the effect of grace in enabling response...an effect warranted by a God who really speaks.) Indeed, the reach of language extends far beyond human imagination and is wonderful to contemplate, yet space now requires my turning the discussion to words.

**Situating Discourse: The Worlds of Word and Words. “The sum of thy word is truth;”  
Psalms 119:163.**

To state the obvious, one thinks with words. But, single words generally do little more than identify a referent. So that when one says *Israel*, an image of Abraham’s son is just as valid as the Hebrew nation, etc. Schneiders rightly argues that words alone do not *mean* at all.<sup>26</sup> Words need context and that begins with sentences. But sentences are context-dependent as well, finding clearer meaning in relation to preceding and subsequent sentences (a principle particularly important in approaching the scriptures).<sup>27</sup> That is why Malina insists that sentences may yield

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,135.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Ellis Benson citing Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Now I Would Not Have You Ignorant,” in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura Miguelez, and Dennis Okholm, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 191.

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 27.

complete thoughts but not complete meanings.<sup>28</sup> What is finally needed is an interplay of contextualized words, or discourse—defined by Ricoeur as the language acts equal or greater to a sentence.<sup>29</sup>

*Language acts* is of course, a very broad category indeed, and can include everything from interpretative sensory responses (sound, sight) to speech acts and linguistic structures. But the more context that is provided for discourse generally, the more meaning is likely. That is why an entire play conveys more than a single act; a whole novel offers more than a chapter. That is why Hart insists that Christian communities learn to appreciate the importance of approaching Scripture *as a whole* (emphasis mine).<sup>30</sup>

With words understood as pointers to meaning and with contextualized words more effectively empowered, I will now consider more precisely the contexts in which discursive meaning happens. I should note that thus far I have conducted my discussion with words both written and spoken in view. I must now narrow my attention further to the written word—to text.

Drawing heavily on Ricoeur, literary theorists have considered discourse to be situated in three primary worlds, i.e. the world *behind* the text, the world *in* the text, and the world *in front* of the text. As language theory has evolved, these perspectives on the worlds of words have taken their places historically in the order noted above.

Until the first half of the twentieth century, classical literary criticism was most interested in the author, her motivations, personal narrative, etc. leading to a pre-occupation with what lay *behind* the text. *Gilad and the Sea* might therefore pose the questions of why the author included this story in this way—and how would that answer alter the story’s meaning?

The New Criticism of the 1940’s challenged literary criticism’s authorial primacy, however, suggesting a formalist reading, or as Green and Turner claim, a hermeneutical realism that locates meaning in the text’s evocation of linguistic convention.<sup>31</sup> Attention had moved from clues lying behind the text, to the myriad of opportunities in the text, itself. I return to *Gilad and the Sea*. The world *in* that text includes the dialogic authority of text-as-conversation, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.

<sup>30</sup> Trevor Hart, “Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology*, eds. Joel Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 196.

<sup>31</sup> Joel Green and Max Turner, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?” in *Between Two Horizons*, eds. Green and Turner, 5.

grounding presence of propositions, etc. A grasp of their contribution to the overall meaning-making of the story become a focus.

Nevertheless, such elements also proved (and are proving) to be an insufficient means to comprehensively understand language. As Brueggemann states, “We now recognize that there is no interest-free interpretation... it is an illusion to think so.”<sup>32</sup> Postmodernism has made a compelling case for the contextual derivation of meaning, realizing that every reader brings a “horizon of expectation” to the text.<sup>33</sup> Meanings are fashioned under the influence of standpoint and so the world *in front of* the text is thus discovered. *Gilad and the Sea* provides an opportunity to consider how a narrative *in toto* prompts the languaging of meaning. What is it about how *I* read this story that makes it mean something to *me*?

Theological inquiry has followed in parallel form. As examples, liberal historic/redaction-critics and conservative textual critics have ironically dwelt together largely in the worlds behind the texts and/or in the texts, whereas more recent linguistic turns have tracked loosely with literary interests in the world *in front of* the texts.<sup>34</sup>

Ricoeur’s paradigms are surely helpful, but his paradigms are not without some peril. If not handled carefully, the evolution of language theory risks partitioning the whole of language into disconnected pieces. Even Ricoeur recognizes that meaning ultimately happens in the conversation that *transcends* his worlds.<sup>35</sup>

Trevor Hart offers an important reminder: “Reading the Bible as Scripture is never a mere matter of handling texts and the relationship between texts. It is above all a matter of being in the presence and open to the handling of the One...whose story it tells.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Holy Spirit remains present within the biblical witness, but is also active within the entire process of divine languaging, whether that occurs in the Scriptures, the book of nature, or in any other form of divine discourse. If meaning is to be rendered at all it must find its locus in the Spirit’s work, which is why Treier comments that it is the Spirit who takes up the linguistic slack between the many worlds of meaning.<sup>37</sup> We should remember that language is an interdependent totality that is best

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 63.

<sup>33</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Treier, “Canonical Unity and Commensurable Language,” in *Evangelicals*, eds. Bacote, et al, 212.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred; Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Hart, “Tradition” in *Between Two Horizons*, eds. Joel Green and Max Turner, 204.

<sup>37</sup> David Alan Treier, “Scripture, Truth and Our Postmodern Context,” in *Evangelicals*, Bacote, et al, 216.

understood according to its affinity with Christ—the Word—as its unifying center. Thus, a Christian understanding of both language theory and theology must be firstly clothed by a doctrine of God.<sup>38</sup>

With the active presence of the Spirit hereafter presumed, I will offer a discussion of each of Ricoeur's worlds. However, I will consider them in reverse order from their historical development since to do otherwise would be to naively ignore their own effects.

### **The World in Front of the Text: Words as Encounter.**

#### The Reader.

Ricoeur's world *in front* of the text refers to the complex universe of the reader. This universe consists of predispositions, suppositions, expectations, moods, motivations, memories—a constellation of factors that interpret texts and thus create meanings when encountering text. Because of this reality the reader is rendered unable to interpret meaning within a sphere of objectivity. Polyani puts it this way: "The way in which we each see the world...is the only way in which we are able to see it—precisely as the view from where we are."<sup>39</sup>

As example of an encounter in front of the Word, Jesus informs Nicodemus of his need to be born again. (John 3). "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus answers. Having a limited frame of reference—no horizon of understanding<sup>40</sup>--Nicodemus' rhetorical reply reveals an interpretation organized according to his limited perspective. So it is with all who stand before the Word in text. As Hart bluntly states, "a naked reading of Scripture is in practice a convenient fiction."<sup>41</sup>

Growing awareness of this phenomenon among language theorists has contributed to the development of reader-response hypotheses which endeavor to explain the manner in which the predisposition of readers contributes to interpretation and the shaping of meaning. Husserl offers much on the relationship between meaning and reader intention, suggesting that all perception is a matter of perspective.<sup>42</sup> Various emerging schools of thought provide any number of ideas on an expanding continuum. Stanley Fish is among those who would claim meaning to be utterly

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 61.

<sup>40</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Trevor Hart, "Tradition" in *Between Two Horizons*, eds. Green and Turner, 191.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Benson, "Now I Would Not Have You Ignorant," in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 76, 179.

indeterminate, hence ultimately created by the reader, herself.<sup>43</sup> Some distance away would be others who acknowledge that readers do, in fact, “see through the glass, darkly” (I Cor 13:12), but who will not go so far as to discount some sort of fixivity. These include evangelicals like Bruce Benson who acknowledges the reality of horizons of interpretative perception but claims that any reader of the scriptures is able to adequately discern authorial intentions.<sup>44</sup>

If nothing else, reader-response theorists have demonstrated the fact that *something* goes on between the reader and the text that ultimately fuels the derivation and management of meaning. I find Ricoeur’s world of the reader, then, not so much an existential question but rather a behavioral one. For example, to what extent does (can) a reader control the text? On what basis is interpretation validated? How is one interpretation valued over another? And what about the inevitable coercion that *meaning anarchy* would create? These questions take us beyond the scope and scale of this essay to be sure, but hopefully they will be addressed in future scholarship.

### The Imagination.

Meaning ultimately is derived, and that requires the gathering of pieces into new patterns of thought, or as Hart calls it, “meaning-making.”<sup>45</sup> This activity occurs within the faculty of human imagination, what Vanhoozer defines as “the cognitive faculty by which we see as a whole.”<sup>46</sup> Wright claims it as what provides the “necessary leap for a person to verify perspective;”<sup>47</sup> Hart asserts that it is the “all pervasive and transfiguring force within human life.”<sup>48</sup> In sum, the imagination is necessary to the formation of thought, the derivation of meaning, and the communication of ideas; its function in the world in front of the text can hardly be exaggerated.

Of particular interest to me is the intriguing relationship that the imagination distills between fiction, truth, and meaning. For if the imagination is a heuristic activity that is necessary to meaning-making, then what might one say about its engagement with the epistemology of historical reference? Ricoeur devotes five chapters to the apparent gap between the fictive vantage

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<sup>43</sup> J. Lye, “Reader-Response: Various Positions,” website of Brock University, accessed April 15, 2008, (page discontinued), <http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/rr.php>.

<sup>44</sup> Benson in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote et al, p. 189.

<sup>45</sup> Trevor Hart, “Transfiguring Reality; Imagination and the Reshaping of the Human,” (lecture, University of St. Andrews, November 1, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics,” in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, ed. Andreas Kostenberger, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005) 121.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *The New Testament*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Hart, “Transfiguring Reality.”

of the reader and the real history of the text, ultimately recognizing that historical knowledge is knowledge by faith.<sup>49</sup>

It appears that an inescapable relationship does, in fact, exist between the imagination, meaning, and truth, although I agree with Wolterstorff that there are certain sufficiently warranted facts (truths) to which reasonable persons can assent.<sup>50</sup> But the agency of imagination makes clear the reality of the fictive process even in the identification of such truths.

Interestingly, Ricoeur argues that the truth claims of religious texts should be considered more like those of a poet than of the historian.<sup>51</sup> While having elements of facticity, truth may be more fully understood as an organic, relational and even experiential essence with which we conduct discourse. This perspective applied to biblical truth claims suggests a person-to-meaning relationship that depends upon engagement through imaginative discourse.

As a created agency redeemed by Christ, the imagination becomes the Spirit's companion. George MacDonald's *Phantastes* helped influence C. S. Lewis' conversion by stirring a baptism of sorts within Lewis' imagination. It is this kind of sanctified imagination that Hart points to in his impressive case for the connection between the imagination and the great gifts of the Spirit: faith—the reaching toward the not yet seen, hope—the creative re-description of the world, and love—the imaginative projection beyond our selves.<sup>52</sup> In my mind, the baptized imagination conjures a lush pasture of possibilities in which my Shepherd leads me. As Stroup asserts, this liberating world “provides the images I need to bring order and meaning to the chaos of my personal history.”<sup>53</sup>

However, some fear the imagination as a source of abuse. Genesis 6:5 sounds a warning: “And Jehovah saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil, continually.” Thus, some rein the imagination harshly. Larsen is one critic from the “Biblicist” camp (defined for this essay as those whose positions are in close agreement with the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy) who voices grave concerns about the way in which the rekindled interest in the imagination may potentially harm the faith. He warns

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol 3, chapters 1-5.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew McGowan, *The Divine Spiration*, (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 37.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Comstock, “Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur verses Frei on Biblical Narrative,” in *The Journal of Religion*, 66- 2 (April 1986), 131.

<sup>52</sup> Hart, “Transfiguring Reality.”

<sup>53</sup> George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 64.



against placing interpretation inside the imagination for to do so is to abandon the text.<sup>54</sup> Larsen's fear is not without some merit; one should be wary of biblical interpretations that are born of sheer fantasy. But he fails to answer exactly where interpretation does take place if not inside the faculty designed to make meaning.

Hart also sounds a warning, agreeing that an imagination un-renewed by the Spirit, i.e. the un-baptized imagination, has a great potential for evil. However, he importantly adds that this risk should not disqualify a hermeneutic of imagination any more than sin-tainted logic should disqualify a propositional hermeneutic.<sup>55</sup> What is needed is a center of gravity.

### The Community.

It is self-evident that the Church considers the canon to be the primary source of textual authority. I have presupposed the supervision of the Holy Spirit in canonical formation, transmission, and application. However, this does not guarantee agreement in methods or in products of interpretation. On the contrary, the Church's various communities have created culturally-embedded theological foundations which have produced a wide range of perspectives.<sup>56</sup> For example, though sharing modernist epistemologies, liberal and conservative traditions usually draw opposing conclusions.

Barth notes that though the Church is "the reality of God's revelation for us," it is still a human institution.<sup>57</sup> Graciously, God has chosen to speak through and by his Church despite creaturely imperfections. However, what if God has allowed for competing poles in order to encourage collisions of ideas? Widely corralled by the Spirit's presence, it may be through lively polyphonic discourse within the Church that the Spirit continues to translate meaning (albeit fluidly) through time and tradition.<sup>58</sup> As with the polyphonic relationship that Israel enjoyed, it falls to the Church to *become* in the world in front of the biblical texts. It is unity conjoined with diversity, coherence coexisting with dissimilarity, and homogeneity understood heterogeneously that should ultimately define the Church who worships a God similarly described. In the end, one

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<sup>54</sup> David Larsen, *Telling the Old Story*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 40, 249.

<sup>55</sup> Hart, "Transfiguring Reality." Also personal communication with Hart, 19 May, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> John Franke, "Scripture, Tradition and Authority," in *Evangelicals*, eds. Bacote, et al, 206.

<sup>57</sup> Anthony Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 23.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Treier, "Canonical Unity and Commensurable Language," citing Vanhoozer in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 223.

hopes that through the Church, the scriptures may come alive to be, as Hart says, “a channel of our personal knowing of the God whose story it tells.”<sup>59</sup>

While some may debate the merits of reader-response theories, the imagination or the role of the Church, few would disagree that the world in front of the text is exactly where people are. It is here, in front of text where, as Gadamar suggests, the horizon of the text and that of the reader ultimately fuse.<sup>60</sup> But this is not only on account of what the reader brings to the text. Importantly, this fusion also occurs because of what the reader is brought by the Spirit.

Thus, the world in front of the text is the site of gracious encounter—the locus of event.<sup>61</sup> Its very being reveals God as willing to forego objectivity; a God who is fully aware of humankind’s incapacity to grasp understanding from some fixed point in the heavens. Instead, it reveals God as mercifully walking alongside his imperfect, biased, vision-impaired reader/hearer...even as he did in the Incarnation.

### **The World in the Text: Words Alive.**

Ricoeur’s second world is that found in the text, that is to say, in the dynamic functions of literary genres that provide fields for meaning. It is this world *in* the text where words breathe, freely; it is where they simply are. Schneiders sees words, themselves, as “mediators of transformative encounter,” thus providing what she calls a “norming of interpretation.”<sup>62</sup> Comstock is clear about this world’s separation from the reader;<sup>63</sup> Benson insists on its independent value: “Words have the power to express intentions.”<sup>64</sup> And why not? As Hart challenges: “try to imagine how you might make sense of the world...if there were no words upon which to draw.”<sup>65</sup> Thiselton claims yet more. Influenced by the Hebraic belief in the force of words (e.g. Isaac’s inability to revoke blessing on Esau), he states his conviction in the power of the texts to transform readers.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 161.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Divine Revelation*, 29. Barth made much of the canon *becoming* the Word through God’s grasping the reader through the event of encounter.

<sup>62</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 197, also xxxiv.

<sup>63</sup> Gary Comstock “Truth or Meaning,” in *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986) 124, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Benson in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 83.

<sup>66</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 30, 292.

Yet postmodern turns such as Gadamar's warn that texts in themselves can become self-limiting if not allowed to go beyond their self-contained meaning.<sup>67</sup> Green and Turner complain of attempts to interpret the text *as it was*, calling them formalist efforts.<sup>68</sup> Still, no one would disregard a role for this world in the text, leaving the question: how does the world in the text mean? Answers could be offered according to any number of paradigms, e.g. performance—which identifies texts as ultimately actions, or perhaps poetics—as with Heidegger's *dichtendes Denken*.<sup>69</sup> With space constraints in view, I have chosen to respond with a brief review of speech-act theory, metaphor, and dialogism before finishing with the important category of narrative which Ong claims to be “the primal way in which the human life world is organized verbally and intellectually.”<sup>70</sup>

### Speech-Act Theory.

J. L. Austin writes, “It is no longer enough to assume that saying something is simply stating something.”<sup>71</sup> His simple claim is profound: to say something is to *do* something.<sup>72</sup> Speaking evokes acts. Austin deconstructs the process into three movements found within discourse: first, *locution*, which is the utterance of a sense and reference, e.g. “Be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8); second, *illocution*, which is the conventional force of the words, e.g. command as per above, or perhaps promises, questions, warnings, etc. As example, illocutionary force is what challenges Phineas in *Gilad and the Sea*. Finally, *perlocution* which he considers the effects of illocutionary forces e.g. persuading, encouraging, dissuading, etc.<sup>73</sup> So, after Jesus's command his followers did, in fact, become witnesses.

What is important to story-telling is the intrinsic, inescapable relationship between the Story-teller's speaking and the changes wrought in the reader/hearer. If one considers the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, one is struck by Jesus's speech performance. He employs

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<sup>67</sup> Benson, “I Would Not Have You Ignorant,” in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 185.

<sup>68</sup> Green and Turner, “New Testament Commentary,” in *Between Two Horizons*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Worton, “Between Poetry and Philosophy: Rene Char and Martin Heidegger,” website of Nottingham University, accessed May 22, 2008, ([http://mlpa.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000038/01/Rec\\_Worton.pdf](http://mlpa.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000038/01/Rec_Worton.pdf)). (page discontinued).

<sup>70</sup> Walter Ong, “Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book,” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45- 4 (1977), 429.

<sup>71</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do Thing with Words* (Cambridge, 1975), 12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

locutions—references to those who are persecuted, poor, merciful, etc. which, in turn, become illocutions of blessing and promise, resulting in perlocutionary responses of astonishment (7:28) and hope which ultimately change the world.

As might be expected, Austin's claims are not with their critics. Wolterstorff dissents from what he believes are behaviorist attempts to understand speaking as *necessarily* efficacious. In other words, he cautions against the conflation of illocutionary acts (declarations, rebuttals, et al) with perlocutionary actions. Instead, Wolterstorff holds illocution to be at the very heart of speech, independent from the capacity of the auditor to accurately comprehend and enact the intention of the speaker.<sup>74</sup> However, he recognizes that one's speech at the least influences the hearer.

I find Wolterstorff's parsing to be somewhat persuasive. Indeed, the hearer does not always understand and act in accordance with the intent of the speaker. But that is not to say that Austin's perlocutive effects cannot happen. Furthermore, in the case of God-speech, I refer to the effects of the Holy Spirit on Austin's dynamic. It is the Spirit who is busy actualizing the intended responses of God-speech, thus graciously enabling the intended performance of Christian drama in the life of the Church.

If this is so, then I believe speech-act theory offers important insight into the nature of truth. As example: the Christian hears/reads the biblical texts which prompt an action (idea, behavior). That action (experience) fires the (metaphoric) conceptual processes about to be discussed below that seek cohesion between the Story and one's own story. The result is the dynamic emergence of truth. Thus, hearing/listening (speech) and truth are necessarily related to acts—to doing. Accordingly, one might say that truth *becomes* by faith, listening. "My sheep *hear* my voice and I know them and they *follow* me." (John 10:27)

### Metaphor.

Perhaps the most gracious literary element is the metaphor—an agency of cognition that Umberto Eco suggests defies definition because it is that which does the defining.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, what can be said is that a functioning metaphor is a reference that is comprised of an *is* and an *is*

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<sup>74</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 75-76.

<sup>75</sup> Yeshayahu Shen, "Cognitive Aspects of Metaphor Comprehension: An Introduction" in *Poetics Today*, Vol 13:4 (1993), 569. See also Umberto Eco, "The Scandal of Metaphor," in *Poetics Today*, Vol 4, (1983), 217, 256.

*not*, the distance between which provides a tension that invites the expansion of meaning beyond either pole. *Gilad and the Sea* has Gilad encountering GOD AS SEA.

In John 6:35, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life...” Jesus *is* a sustainer/life-giver, but he *is not* literally a loaf of bread. The gap of meaning between *is* and *is not* is the space in which the imaginative impulse considers the possibilities of how he *is* bread while not really being bread.

This gap is of great consequence, part of what Lakoff and Johnson consider an *epistemological* structure grounded in metaphoric concepts. For them, metaphor is more than a descriptive device—it is the cognitive process by which one unites reason and imagination to form understanding. This imaginative rationality is motivated by one’s natural urge to seek coherence, i.e., a desired state of harmony where life makes sense. Coherence is shaped by recurring experiences which form experiential gestalts that are, in fact, conceptualized metaphors.<sup>76</sup>

For example, a person’s early experiences with ideas about faith may be shaped by the claim in 1 John 4 that “we dwell in him (Christ), and he in us.” Consequently, she begins to understand faith metaphorically in terms of a position, creating a faith gestalt conceptualized by the metaphor, FAITH IS A PLACE.

However, she then may experience new ideas about the word *dwelling*. Considering dwelling as a verb instead of a noun is suddenly disruptive. This conflict conspires to change her understanding and since her purpose is to sustain a state of coherence she begins to re-conceptualize faith.<sup>77</sup> Eventually, she begins to understand faith in terms of activity so she creates an additional metaphoric gestalt—FAITH IS ACTION.

But something else is going on; the metaphors have overlapped to lead her to the shared conclusion that faith is dwelling with Christ. Lakoff and Johnson would call this a metaphoric entailment.<sup>78</sup> In this example, not only does the entailment fit each metaphor separately, it links them, symbiotically. Entailments expand understanding by acting as lines of connectivity that amplify or modify metaphoric concepts otherwise detached. In so doing, they contribute to the lively nature of metaphor by creating and recreating webs of understanding amongst the many constellations of experiential gestalts.

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<sup>76</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 193.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, 97.

I find Lakoff and Johnson's epistemological use of metaphor to be compelling. With understanding grasped as an emergent process, truth *becomes* as a fruit of experience. Thus, as one's own life story seeks coherence with the challenges of the Story, meaning is apprehended dynamically. Truth, then, is alive and very much engaged with the seeker.

With all its mysteries, metaphor is a gift of grace. Like metaphor, God's interest is in coherence without conformity. Inviting humankind to know him better through a labyrinth of imprecise pathways is revelatory of a God who does not demand fixivity, convention or perhaps even orthodoxy, but rather graciously enables possibilities.

### Dialogism.

The texts of Scripture offer more than words, they offer encounter; the reader/hearer is invited to listen, argue, question and otherwise expand discourse through conversation in which, as Thiselton notes, the text and reader/hearer interrogate one another.<sup>79</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin calls this a "dialogic event," that is, an event in which two or more voices explore truth.<sup>80</sup> Some debate exists about the particulars of these events. For example, Gadamar supports the idea that conversation is the locus of interpretation while Ricoeur argues that interpretation occurs after the dialogue ends.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the important point is that texts talk with readers who respond wherever meaning happens.<sup>82</sup>

This *talking with* is especially cogent when one considers the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating, listening, convicting, and inspiring via Word-as-text through a polyphony of images, ideas, and identities that enable response. The very presence of dialogue means that the Spirit does not overwhelm her/his conversation partner; she/he allows the exchange of discourse to continue, highly suggestive of greater interest in the discussion than conclusions. Importantly, Brueggemann recognizes a Hebrew God who chooses to remain in the fray, one who encourages relentless negotiation, petition, provisional settlements and appeals amongst many voices and with no interest in closing the arguments by sealing the texts against further conversation.<sup>83</sup> He writes, "For Israel and for Israel's God, there is no deeper joy, no more serious requirement, no more

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<sup>79</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 76.

<sup>80</sup> Newsome, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," in *The Journal of Religion*, 76-2, (April 1996), 294.

<sup>81</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 140.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>83</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 83.

inescapable burden, than to be reengaged in the process of exchange that never arrives but is always on the way.”<sup>84</sup> (This may leave one wondering if Jehovah was ironically disappointed in Abraham’s failure to negotiate for Isaac’s life; no record of a conversation exists after Genesis 22:2.)

I am left impressed with two observations about a God-in-conversation. First and foremost, it affirms the relational nature of the Story-teller...one does not normally have a conversation with oneself. This should be self-evident and I posit that no other element of language reveals relationship more clearly.

Second, an awareness of God-in-dialogue widens the lens on truth. Like Bakhtin, Ricoeur recognizes what Socrates had observed, i.e. truth is a dialogic event which happens in the space created in conversation.<sup>85</sup> Bakhtin argues that truth cannot be grasped within a single mind, instead truth requires multiple participants. Newsome adds that ideas are never atomistic: “An idea does not live in a person’s isolated consciousness, but only so far as it enters into dialogical relations with other ideas...and may develop new possibilities in the encounter with alien ideas.”<sup>86</sup> These ideas are reminiscent of the experiential nature of truth argued by Lakoff and Johnson, and as suggested by speech-act theory.

Truth understood in terms of experience leads me to wonder if questions about truth and meaning should be put in terms of *how* is truth instead of *what* or even *who* is truth. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to long-standing notions of monologic truth which presuppose the idea of a separate thought, that is, an independent, propositional truth-claim that can be apprehended by a single consciousness.

The effect of modernist notions of truth has been the attempt to disentangle the polyphonic voice of the canon into a collection of single voices from which competing theological systems glean propositions.<sup>87</sup> In contrast, dialogism inserts the reader/hearer into a unity of event rather than a unity of system.<sup>88</sup> So Borg writes, “The monarchial model of biblical authority is replaced

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol 1, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Newsome, “Bakhtin,” in *The Journal of Religion* 76-2, 294.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 294.

by a dialogic model...the canon names the primary collection of ancient documents *with which Christians are to be in dialogue* (emphasis mine).<sup>89</sup>

But Bakhtin offers yet more; he lauds a textual polyphonic dialogue, that is, a text in which the author yields his mono-dominance in favor of a multiplicity of voices which leave discussions open-ended, thus making so-called conclusions available to the reader/hearer in the form of unfettered possibilities. Thiselton cites the Book of Job as an example of a particular polyphonic text pointing to dialogic truth.<sup>90</sup> Here the dialogue between God, Job, and Job's friends is ironic, elusive, and ambiguous, defying attempts to shrink Job into a proposition; the author does not impose a conclusion. For Bakhtin the scriptures are polyphonic...a symphony of many voices within which truth is revealed. Soskice applauds his claim, adding that the Bible's heroes are "never objects but always subjects, predestined to be free by the divine author so that they continue with readers through time in an inconclusive conversation."<sup>91</sup>

However, one does wonder how far to push the Bakhtin model. On one hand its zeal in recognizing the conversational dynamic of Scripture is enlivening, but on the other I find some discomfort in the potential for abandoning meaning to the chaos of a chat as if truth is simply its exploration. Further, Bakhtin's dialogism in its purest form dismembers the holistic nature of the canon by resisting the notion of single authorship in favor of his polyphonicism. Newsome reluctantly concedes that the Holy Spirit might be considered as the single Author of a polyphonic Bible, but if so, she charges that Bakhtin's dialogism would then be limited to an interpretative attempt to discover some ultimate ending that dialogism would not otherwise permit.<sup>92</sup>

This leaves me wondering about the role of the Spirit. I am not convinced that the mysteries of the Spirit's presumed monologism (Trinitarian discourse aside) cannot coexist in polyphonic, dialogic intercourse. In fact, I find comfort in a unified Voice superintending a polyphony of voices. It seems analogous to a skilled conductor's inspiration of the divergent instruments of his orchestra.

The debate over the particulars notwithstanding, the discovery of language used dialogically by the Word is a ripe harvest of hope bursting with meaning about a God who wants

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<sup>89</sup> Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (New York: Harper/San Francisco, 2002), 30.

<sup>90</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 298.

<sup>91</sup> Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 179.

<sup>92</sup> Newsome, "Bakhtin" in *The Journal of Religion* 76-2, 297.



to talk with his people and not at them—who treats his beloved as subjects and not only objects. The *Sprachengemeinschaften* should find joy in this and should embrace such freedom by emboldening their conversations with one another and their Lord.

Schökel helpfully suggests particular attention be given to the power of liturgy as an agency of dialogue with the biblical texts.<sup>93</sup> Space denies a discussion of liturgical significance, but suffice it to say that liturgy provides coherence, unity and homogeneity for the divergent voices of the Church through time; it performs a discourse of constancy with a Story-teller who is not a lecturer but a conversationalist.<sup>94</sup>

### Telling Stories

“That is why I tell these stories, because people see what I do but they don’t really see. They hear what I say but they don’t really hear, and they don’t understand.” (Matt 13:13).

Recent attention to the role of narrative has enlivened the Good News for many by welcoming the life stories of individuals into the Grand Narrative of Jesus. However, it seems that no one knows precisely what the term means.<sup>95</sup> Drawing on my own profession, I will simply define narrative as a sequence of events in which change occurs to produce meaning.

Longenecker makes the claim that “human existence is experienced in narrative terms,” sharing Wright’s placing of narrative “at the heart of the matter between worldview and theological articulations.”<sup>96</sup> Thiselton considers the narrative-world of text as key in granting transforming effects;<sup>97</sup> Work lauds story as “the world in which God’s world encounters ours with power...(it) reshapes our understanding.”<sup>98</sup> And story contributes mightily to the formation of identity. Stroup writes, “people tell stories about themselves in order to identify themselves to one another.”<sup>99</sup>

But not everyone is pleased with narrative as a hermeneutic. For example, Larsen wants preachers to tell stories better but warns of literary theorists prowling about as if to change the very

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<sup>93</sup> Luis Schökel, *The Inspired Word: Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 148.

<sup>94</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 107, also Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 299, and Schökel, *The Inspired Word*, 148, on the broader significance of liturgy.

<sup>95</sup> Stroup, *The Promise*, 71.

<sup>96</sup> Bruce Longenecker, “Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed. Bruce Longenecker, (Louisville: Westminster, 2002) 4.

<sup>97</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 33.

<sup>98</sup> Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 7.

<sup>99</sup> Stroup, *The Promise*, 111.

concept of scripture.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, Sproul reminds his readers that “building doctrine from narratives alone is a dangerous business...we all must be careful to resist this.”<sup>101</sup> For these, then, narrative seems reduced into a useful form of illustration—a clever assistant in the explanation of propositional truth.

It remains a matter of debate as to whether the Bible should be seen primarily as a narrative or whether narrative is simply one of a number of genres contained within it. I find myself in agreement with Thiselton’s claim that “story is the overarching category in which others (doctrines, etc.) are contextualized.”<sup>102</sup> I believe narrative does, indeed, provide the umbrella that organizes the chronicles, parables, dialogues, stories, expositions, and propositions that live within the scriptures. As Longenecker rightly claims, even the Pauline letters presuppose an underlying narrative history.<sup>103</sup>

The debate is helpful, however, particularly in how it reveals *a priori* assumptions about words and Word. But much has been written already and I find myself less interested in recounting the arguments than I am by asking a different question: What does the language of Story reveal about the Story-teller?

*The Storyteller is Gracious.*

Ricoeur has done interesting work in his series aptly titled, *Time and Narrative*. He notes that “time becomes human to the extent it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.”<sup>104</sup> His point is that narrative accommodates time, becoming trans-cultural. The Story-teller abandons his time-realm in order to enjoin his reader/hearer and so he is gracious in his Incarnation. God’s willingness to trans-culturate into human time reveals his love and his desire to so identify with his reader/hearer that he becomes one of them. “He made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:7).

To enjoin the reader/hearer, the Story-teller humbly works within the variations that language offers. For example, some might respond best to the written texts because of their inherent advantage of fixation. Others argue that oral discourse is more powerful because of the

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<sup>100</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old Story*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 73.

<sup>102</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Longenecker “Narrative Interest,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol 1, 52.

advantages of performance, leading Ong to assert that “writing is not just a visual equivalent of speech.”<sup>105</sup> In that same vein, Ricoeur points to Plato’s comment that communication is ended when living speech gives way to notation.<sup>106</sup> Then again, Patte invokes Austin and Searle’s work claiming (perhaps a bit too enthusiastically) that texts are to be considered as speech acts.<sup>107</sup> And Ong qualifies his own comment by acknowledging that the biblical text is finally able to absorb what he considers the *death* implicit in Plato’s view because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>108</sup>

In all of this, language remains graciously adequate for discourse in its summoning of imaginative activity through many categories which open gaps for the filling. Linguistic features such as paradox, contradiction, humor, poetry, allegory, simile, song and satire even serve as flexible opportunities for fruitful ambiguity. For example, irony—the contrast between the explicit and the implicit—challenges the temptation to find exact correspondence between words and things because it opens space for alternative meaning; the Story-teller uses irony to chase the *last word* far away.<sup>109</sup> In the ironic story of Abraham and Isaac one is left reeling with a seemingly endless parade of why’s, what ifs, and yes, buts. Allowing for uncertainty and even confusion is evidence of grace at work because the story does not demand conformity.

In the end, the fact that God speaks at all is an act of grace. And the Good News of the Christian narrative is particularly good news; it is a love story that overwhelms this writer’s abilities. I will leave the splendor of its telling to the Story itself. If one listens carefully, she can even learn much about God’s grace in what is *not* told.

*The Story-teller Cares.*

God wants his fusion of worlds to be effectual; he wants his Story to bear fruit because he cares about his reader/hearers: “I come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10). Ricoeur, like Malina, observes that narrative has an inherent meaning-effect.<sup>110</sup> My story of Gilad was intended to actualize this claim. This would be true for all narrative

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<sup>105</sup> Walter Ong, “Maranatha,” in the *Journal of the American Academy*, 45-5 (1977), 445.

<sup>106</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring*, 219.

<sup>107</sup> Daniel Patte, “Speech Act Theory and Biblical Criticism” in *Semeia: an Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* 41, ed. Hugh White, (Decatur: Scholars Press, 1988), 89.

<sup>108</sup> Ong “Maranatha” in *Journal of the American Academy* 45-4, 445.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion, and Science: Fundamentalism vs. Irony, 1700-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37, 47, 51.

<sup>110</sup> Ricoeur, *Time* Vol 1, ix.

but it is especially true for the biblical narrative given the life-giving work of the Spirit. When the Word speaks, meaning happens.

In their caring, story-tellers engage others; their purpose is to invite their readers/hearers into another world where they may experience their own lives in concert and/or in contrast to another's. A story told is a story shared; it is a *with* experience—a doorway into meaningful relationship.

*The Storyteller is Reliable.*

“To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom...” (Luke 8:10). God’s narrative revelation of truth is reliably mediated by the full range of literary tropes and genres as noted above, but the most widely referenced (properly or not) is that of proposition. J. P Moreland defines a proposition minimally as “the content of declarative sentences/statements and thoughts/beliefs that is true or false.”<sup>111</sup> Newsome identifies it as a separate thought, that is, a statement that is not dependent on the one who says it for truth.<sup>112</sup> One might simply consider it to be a declaration related to a claim of facticity.

God’s offering insight into, or at the least, insight toward the securing presence of objective universals seems to me to be a gift of confidence, even if most may be tucked away in the unassailable mind of God. Who would abandon the comfort of reassuring claims such as “I AM that I AM.” (Exod 3:14), or “In the beginning, God...”? (Gen 1:1) Who would dismiss the reliability of Jesus, the absolute Rock upon which to build one’s life? (Luke 6:48). Indeed, Wolterstorff’s notion of warranted beliefs makes sense to me, for it is self-evident that reasonable persons can and do find agreement on basic realities, often asserted propositionally.<sup>113</sup>

However, given what has been previously discussed it is clear that the conclusive apprehension of absolute truth is a fiction. Moreland grants the notion of “some indubitable beliefs” but quickly adds that “there are simply not enough of them to ground our entire noetic structure.”<sup>114</sup> Brueggemann notes that the Old Testament offers what he terms as “cognitive constancies,” but in contrast to modernist urges toward closure he points out that these constancies

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<sup>111</sup> J.P. Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy and the Postmodern Turn,” in *Whatever Happened*, ed. Kostenberger, 86.

<sup>112</sup> Carol Newsome, “Bakhtin” in *The Journal of Religion*, 76-2, 292.

<sup>113</sup> McGowan, *The Divine Spiration*, 37.

<sup>114</sup> Moreland, “Truth,” in *Whatever Happened*, ed. Kostenberger, 85.

become highly provisional when Israel's God-speech is taken as a whole.<sup>115</sup> One may stand upon a firm foundation but the nature of one's access to that foundation must be carefully considered. Knowing needs to be tempered by an awareness that one's comprehension of a fact operates within the dynamics of the world in front of the text.

#### Excursus: Propositionalism.

Against these observations, large populations in the Church anchor themselves with indubitable, warranted, or absolute truth claims by unwittingly or otherwise investing faith in the primacy of Propositionalism—a linguistic approach to truth that is grounded in modernist themes of correspondence theories as noted below. In so doing, they discount the reliable contribution of less precise genres, e.g. metaphor, irony, et al by marginalizing them as dangerously unstable, subjective, or even subversive of the quest for absolute truth.<sup>116</sup>

Malina helpfully probes the propositionalist approach to truth by studying forms of reading. He describes a propositionalist model as a grammatically regulated chain of propositions that correspond to words with pre-intended meanings. For the reader, knowledge begins as these words describe a presumed separate reality. Truth emerges according to a proper correspondence between the reader's propositional description and that reality.<sup>117</sup> Lakoff and Johnson would place Malina's model squarely within an objectivist account of truth which likewise presumes the world to be comprised of separate objects with which language must correspond.<sup>118</sup> Thus, words mean to the extent they properly identify inherent realities; truth exists as disembodied from persons and is objectively attainable through the scientific method.<sup>119</sup>

Importantly, the correspondence model of truth is characteristic of Biblicism's reading of the scriptures. *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* declares: "We affirm that that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements (emphasis mine), and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute."<sup>120</sup> J. P. Moreland adds that which is true is "not a

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<sup>115</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology in the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 83.

<sup>116</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 196.

<sup>117</sup> Bruce Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), See generally. Also David Williams, "Scripture," in *Evangelicals*, eds. Bacote, et al, 230.

<sup>118</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 186.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 187, 199.

<sup>120</sup> International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Article VI (1982), accessed on March 2 2008, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>).

piece of language, but a proposition.”<sup>121</sup> Hence, the clarity of proposition is given far more currency than other genres.<sup>122</sup>

Vanhoozer calls the Biblicist view, “propositionalist theology” which he states, “tends to see Scripture in terms of revelation, revelation in terms of conveying information...language is concerned with stating truth...meaning is largely a matter of ostensive reference.”<sup>123</sup> I cannot help but note the irony of Biblicism’s standpoint as being subsumed by the metaphorical presupposition of TRUTH AS OBJECT.<sup>124</sup>

Of course, the *is* of TRUTH AS OBJECT can be found in biblical texts, e.g. 1 John 1:8, Ps 119:43, Gen 42:16, and I find these references to be comforting. But one must reconsider the primacy of proposition, i.e. propositionalism, for it refuses to consider the *is not* pole of the truth metaphor discussed above. Vern Poythress, a member of the committee which issued the Chicago *Statement* above, informs me that the zealous tone of the *Statement* had reactionary roots on account of linguistic turns which emerged from a hint of flexibility evident in the earlier *1978 Chicago Statement on Inerrancy*.<sup>125</sup> One suspects the ICBI had found it necessary to hold things together by putting ambiguity to bed in favor of certitude. To me this carries the scent of Brueggemann’s observation that reductionism has a teleological commitment to closure, one perhaps historically driven to legitimate religious authority.<sup>126</sup> This is consistent with the self-evident reality that describing an idea as a fact closes discussion.

One wonders if these communities, by choosing certitude over ambiguity, deny themselves the fuller face of God. Indeed, such reactions are not without consequences; the trajectories into Christian belief and praxis lay beyond the scale of this essay. But I point the interested reader to Babinski’s case studies of persons who have abandoned propositionalist communities because of a God who wore the mask of Propositionalism’s most unflattering qualities.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Moreland, “Truth,” in *Whatever Happened*, ed. Kostenberger, 76, 80.

<sup>122</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 1988), 17.

<sup>123</sup> Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation,” in *Whatever Happened*, ed. Kostenberger, 101.

<sup>124</sup> Williams, “Scripture,” in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 243.

<sup>125</sup> Vern Poythress, personal interview, April 2008. Also, see International Council on Biblical Inerrancy *Chicago Statement of Inerrancy*, Article XVIII, accessed February 26, 2008, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 82.

<sup>127</sup> Edward Babinski, *Leaving the Fold* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995). See generally.

### **The World Behind the Text: Words with a Past.**

Ricoeur's third world, his *world behind the text* is a wide landscape. In the field of theology, it has been the realm of historical criticism which has led to something of an excavation of historicity, particularly in efforts to discover a verifiable Jesus.<sup>128</sup> It has also been of great interest to Biblicists, in large part as a means to discover authorial intention, or better still, a way to unearth those elusive canonical autographs.

But these two quests barely wipe the dust from times past. The world behind the text offers more to consider. For one, it contains a constellation of cultural assumptions that shaped persons' encounters with the Word. As examples, the Galatians understood Paul's praise of their courageous welcome of him in his sickness because the experience of their world—unlike current experience—should have bound them in fear of their context such as the presumed power of the Evil Eye. (Gal 4:14).<sup>129</sup> And what did it mean to the women at the empty tomb to learn that they—as women—were blessed as the first witnesses to the risen Christ? (Mark 16). Historically informed, today's reader can glean meaning for her own experience by finding how and how not her own story resonates with times past.

Then, too, is the use of words behind the text. This is particularly important in regard to metaphor.<sup>130</sup> For example, to Jesus's followers the Cross was not the same metaphoric concept on Good Friday as it was post-Easter; CROSS AS CURSE became CROSS AS BLESSING. It was in the becoming of the new metaphor that understanding emerged in ways particular to their time. And what of other post-Easter metaphors such as CHRIST AS KING, or GENTILES AS ISRAEL ... did not their meanings become what they had not been? One might learn much by working into the metaphors of her own faith historically in order to discover in hindsight what her spiritual forbears had discovered while advancing.

It is also important to take account for the fact that what is today's world behind the text was not the same world for the early Church. The supervision of the Holy Spirit notwithstanding, the New Testament writers—who are seen today as in the world behind the text—actually wrote

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<sup>128</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 57, 89.

<sup>129</sup> Bruce Longenecker, "Until Christ is Formed in You: Suprahuman Forces and Moral Character in Galatians," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 61, no. 1, (January 1999). See generally.

<sup>130</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality*, 27.

in front of the text, as it were, and with all the assumptions that location suggests. Further, from their vantage the world behind their texts looked different to them than that same world looks today; they interpreted it in light of their own world, one much different than that of the modern reader. Therefore, one might ask whether and/or why Peter invested something new into the Isaiah of old. (1 Pet 3:24; Isa 53:5). Or how is it that Paul added to Jesus's words on divorce? (1 Cor 7).

And so the world behind the text is rich with opportunity but it is not without limitations. Brueggemann bluntly notes that this *world behind the text*, is simply not available.<sup>131</sup> Emerging scholarship recognizes that, at the least, it cannot be a sufficient source of meaning because interpretation happens in front of the text. So, for example, retrieving authorial intention is as Hart remarks, “a lost cause.”<sup>132</sup>

Ricoeur, too, is very explicit: “Having been poses a problem...The pastness of an observation in the past is not observable but memorable.”<sup>133</sup> This leads him to assert that discovering (history) and inventing (remembering) are indistinguishable, necessarily creating a fictive world behind the text.<sup>134</sup> He goes on to claim that “the world behind is re-configured through a confrontation with the world in front of the text.”<sup>135</sup>

This leads to the notion of witness. That which cannot be observed can still be held as true on the basis of reliable testimony. This happens daily in courts of law. But how much more significant is the canonical witness? Brueggemann helpfully refers to the “dramatic courtroom” of Israel's experience which “proceeds with a recognition that ‘what is’ (reality) effectively derives from ‘what is said’ (testimony.)”<sup>136</sup> “You are my witnesses, says the Lord...” (Isa 43) is no small statement. Accordingly, it is reasonable to authenticate the sacrificial testimony of many of Jesus's first followers; the Church has tested their claims through time and found them to be credible.

So I contend that history—however imperfectly re-configured—still provides valuable insight into warranted beliefs. I have not met Jesus in the flesh and I am quite sure that his personal history has been fictionalized to a point. Yet I remain confident of certain basic events and teachings that I accept as reliable. Further, I believe one can know *something* of an author's

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<sup>131</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 57.

<sup>132</sup> Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 123.

<sup>133</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 157.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>136</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 750.



intention and learn from it. The tone and declarations of 1 Corinthians leave me quite confident that Paul was unhappy with the behavior of that community; I have little doubt that James intended to encourage more ethical praxis among believers.

Important questions remain, of course: To what extent and on what basis is the world behind the text helpful? How does one enter this world? Here Wright intervenes with his proposal of critical realism, an approach to knowing that acknowledges the reality of the thing known as something other than the knower while still recognizing limitations of access to that reality.<sup>137</sup> Thus, some level of objective reality can be reasonably ascertained from historical context and may be helpful if critically managed.

Despite the presence of some fog, this world behind the text is still inhabited by God; he has invested inspired testimony with the currency of his grace. He has pronounced value in time, place and experience. Yet language reveals the limitations of this world and in so doing, reveals a God who is also willing to forego the precise memory of or slavish attachment to things behind words. Instead, he is shown to be a God who permits and even invites a humble exploration into the relevance of textual background without demanding subservience to its elusive and sometimes presumed expectations.

### **Concluding Thoughts.**

“Oh that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” (Ps 81:13.) Knowing better how language works may, indeed, make a valuable contribution to one’s knowing of God. But better knowing language—like better knowing God—should ultimately matter in the lives of persons and church communities. So I cannot conclude this discussion without asking in what ways a fuller appreciation of language might make a difference—what might the effect of words be once the whole of language is apprehended?

I believe that answers are implicit in every category discussed above—that every feature of language has efficacious potential and their range of applications are limited only by the imagination. But the question begs a more concrete answer so with space constraints in view I offer two examples. First, I will present metaphor as a potential site of Christian unity—a goal urged by the Spirit, e.g. Romans 15, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3. Second, I will consider the dynamic relationship between dialogism and praxis as they conflate to become performance, i.e.,

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<sup>137</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 35.

the outworking of truth in the life of the Church as commanded throughout the scriptures e.g. Rom 12, James 2, and Gal 5.

### Metaphor...Unity in Diversity.

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.” (Eph 4:12.) It would be good for emerging scholarship to widen the doors of Heidegger’s *house of being* so that language may be more clearly seen as a safe-house within which the Church may conduct profitable discourse.<sup>138</sup> And metaphor may be the singularly most important room, for no other linguistic element has more power to unify.<sup>139</sup>

In the essay above I discussed the might of metaphor as found in its holding of two opposing poles in tension for the purpose of expanding meaning. In so doing, living metaphors are forms of tensive language that require their poles to be neither literalized into absurdity nor banalized into meaninglessness. If either pole is destroyed, the metaphor dies.

Unfortunately, the corpses of metaphors lay heaped along the fault lines of many issues dividing the Church. One needs only consider concepts like inspiration, revelation, atonement, and baptism, etc. I contend that factions (communities that have stopped listening) remain so because they have eliminated one pole from view, thus killing metaphors by turning them into either abstractions or homonyms. As an abstraction the once metaphor, e.g. inspiration, is given a singular meaning with various uses; as a homonym it is fractured to a number of separate meanings.<sup>140</sup> In either case, the word is stripped of its tensive potential and enlisted into service as a referential truth object. In consequence, one is left surveying a linguistic killing field that has virtually eliminated potential loci of discourse.

This is a great loss. Metaphor points to a God who seeks for the Church what metaphor is: a unity of diversity. The grand opportunity for the Church then, may be found in the resuscitation of metaphor, i.e., the (re)erecting of two poles at the many points of divergence. The Church could begin by recognizing her own metaphoric identity of CHURCH AS ONE BODY; she should understand herself as being in the tensions she sustains. Comprehending her identity in this way

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<sup>138</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 34.

<sup>139</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 193.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

could challenge the divisive resistance arising out of fears of ECUMENISM AS COMPROMISE because the very nature of metaphor requires the ongoing engagement of opposing poles.

Of course, questions remain as to how one might encourage diverse groups to risk such discourse—resurrecting metaphor is discomfiting for it means abandoning certitude. Yet some toes are in the water. Colin Gunton offers the intriguing potential of a re-evaluation of the atonement in terms of metaphor, and Poythress acknowledges metaphor's role in his own willingness to look at things anew.<sup>141</sup>

Strangely, Biblicism may prove to be a premier site for metaphor to strut its stuff. For example, Biblicism has historically relied on a non-metaphoric understanding of inspiration, presupposing it to be a homonym. As such, it considers inspiration to represent a variety of closed definitions from which its adherents have chosen one, i.e. plenary inerrancy. However, as linguistic turns gain voices at Biblicist tables the concept of inspiration may be given back its metaphoric life. In so doing, its meaning would be expanded with a host of possibilities and the unifying implications are significant. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that evangelical David Williams recently wrote that metaphor offers the potential to “transform the life of the Church.”<sup>142</sup>

#### Performance...Listening Differently.

“So shall my word go out of my mouth and it shall not return void but it shall do that which I please, and it shall accomplish that for which I send it.” (Isa 55:11). From the first word God wants to matter by doing, and the locution of God does, in fact, actualize behavior. Likewise, as has been contended above, language theory reveals that to *language* is necessarily to *do*.

This matters a great deal for the life of the Church. If she would more fully appreciate the linguistic relationship between what she hears and how she acts she might begin to listen, differently. One can only imagine the consequences of the Church piqued with fresh intention to the God-speech of the Sermon.

Actually, I think it is fair to ask whether very many issues matter more to a church community (or to an individual) than their willingness to listen. This is especially pertinent to this discussion since the relationship between speech and performance spotlights the discursive

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<sup>141</sup> Gunton. *The Actuality*, see generally.

<sup>142</sup> Williams, “Scripture,” in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 243.

relationship between God and his people. This is a God who longs to converse with his own—to have his people speak and listen—and in so doing, to live truth. The performance nature of language demonstrates a God who wants to live his Story with his Church; WORDS AS DRAMA reveals a God who kindly speaks/writes his love Narrative from behind, within, and in front of his stage to a Church who is invited to hear/read it and make it her own.<sup>143</sup> This yearning mutuality—this gift of grace—at the very least ought to inspire the humility for one to listen respectfully to the Word. “He that has ears, let him hear.” (Matt 11:15).

That said, for those willing to listen, difficult and important questions regarding the broader relationship between God-speech and performance would prove fruitful to explore. For example, if performance is an interpretative act what are its heuristic criteria? To what extent is performance discourse-dependent? What of the inverse---does not how one behaves actually say something? How does one avoid Larsen’s objection that performance too easily becomes self-contained within its own purposes?<sup>144</sup> And how is the relationship between conversation and praxis actually mediated? To this Treier offers the discomfiting observation that controls are often set by the closing-off of questions.<sup>145</sup> This is unfortunate. It just may be that proper mediation is best observed within asking-listening church communities with emerging linguistic theory in view.<sup>146</sup> (For them, Wright’s critical realism with its patient listening could prove to be especially helpful.)<sup>147</sup>

It is these kinds of questions that are important for the listening Church to consider. The discussions they prompt have the potential to help her identify to what/whom she is listening and/or what she is saying. And as the Church assesses these things she might want to remember Ricoeur’s observation that it is in her conversations that her truth happens.<sup>148</sup> This would be why her present *happenings of truth* (performances) are what they are—for good or otherwise.

Finally, as an important aside, the Drama has still more to reveal about God’s love. He seeks (and wants his Church to seek) discourse with the audience. As Fowl and Jones write, Christians wishing to read (hence to perform) in communion must learn to engage and to listen to

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<sup>143</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 32.

<sup>144</sup> Larsen, *Telling*, 247.

<sup>145</sup> Treier, “Canonical Unity and Commensurable Language,” in *Evangelicals*, eds., Bacote, et al, 224.

<sup>146</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 89.

<sup>147</sup> Wright, *New Testament*, 64.

<sup>148</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 1.

the voices of outsiders.<sup>149</sup> The listening Church will be changed and even blessed by the perlocutive speech of the audience. And the audience will be likewise blessed because God's words do not return void; God-speech does not work that way. Indeed, under the Spirit's guidance so-called outsiders will leave their seats and assume their roles in the Drama because the Word so loves the world that he speaks with it. One can hardly imagine how language might matter more.

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In the preceding essay I have contended that language, ontologically considered, is revelatory of the nature of God. To that end I have surveyed various ways in which it functions so that a deeper understanding of its nature might serve Hart's compelling summons to know God better. I attempted a story of my own to emphasize the particular power of narrative in establishing an interpretive context. I went on to use Ricoeur's worlds of words as categories with which to organize a presentation of language's revelatory functions. I also contended that Ricoeur's models are enveloped by the unifying presence of the Spirit so that meaning might emerge in the lives of persons out of the dynamic function of the interplay of his worlds.

My hope in all of this is has been "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection." (Phil 3:10). It would please me greatly if I have succeeded in some small way in encountering who God is through my brief exploration into what language does.

### **Personal Reflections.**

"Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:20)

*I stand atop St. Andrews' cliffs  
And converse with the sea.  
By water and stone,  
By seabirds and foam  
I listen.  
By moon or by day,  
By silver or grey  
I imagine.  
I close my eyes and breathe deeply  
And know that I have encountered God.*

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<sup>149</sup> Stephen Fowl and Gregory L. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998) 129.

For most of my life the scriptures have been Word-made-flesh-made-propositions.” Therefore, the sudden recognition of these texts as *living* families of words has been liberating, particularly as new friendships with new literary forms have allowed me to unseat proposition from its lofty chair.

Of particular effect has been the realization of Biblicism’s heavy investment in the *world in the text*. By definition, plenary inspiration locates the power of language inside of inspired words. Recognizing the insufficiency of this emphasis has proven to be pivotal in my spiritual journey. The exploration into the wider world of language has re-located power, placing it in the living Word whose Spirit uses words as creative, organic agents of grace.

I do not pretend to know all the many trajectories that might occur within other persons or in communities whose image of the Word shifts. But surely, the way one knows God will affect how one acts, with whom one communes, and even what one dares to dream. It has already done so with me. Brueggemann’s work on Israel’s discourse with God has been a particularly helpful contribution to my stated thesis but, more importantly, has provided firm footing for my own leap off the cliffs. He effectively points to the many passages in the Old Testament (e.g. Job, Ezekiel 16, 20, 23, Jeremiah 20, Psalms 35, 88, Hosea 2) where Yahweh is found committed to negotiating, surprising, promising, confounding, instructing, confusing, explaining, baffling, and relentlessly engaging his people by way of the flexible, imaginative, ambiguous, propositional, paradoxical, descriptive, irrational, and relational qualities of...language.<sup>150</sup>

If I am to be honest, this journey has led me to encounter he whom I had hoped for but dared not expect. Until now, I have lived my Christian life in search of bedrock beneath the sacred texts. But language urged me to drill more deeply and in so doing I have been startled to discover the Word to be more a well than a quarry. “The voice of Jehovah is upon the waters.” (Ps 29:7). Language has shown God to be more sea than rock, and the difference matters a great deal. The God I had once thought as fixed and cold now opens his arms wide like the blue horizon; he moves with me, he listens. *This* God I wish to know better and I thank the Spirit who has directed my journey to this place through the worlds of language.

I am aware of the scholarship yet needed on my topic and am happy to see movement within the academy. Trevor Hart and Bruce Longenecker invested a great deal of interest in this

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<sup>150</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, See generally, but particularly 359 ff.

subject, greatly encouraging me. Vern Poythress happily surprised me with his candid enthusiasm over the implications of language theory for theology; Brueggemann has no doubt that Bakhtin's work will be crucial for future work;<sup>151</sup> Vanhoozer looks forward to fresh approaches for theology according to the significance of Scripture's *literary* forms.<sup>152</sup>

This all seems good to me, for I believe language to be a gift of the Word, the doorway to relationship and a window to God. Its diversity is its strength, giving it broad shoulders to carry the Good News where the Spirit wills. May the Spirit illumine language yet more as a means to know God better so that the body of Christ might walk as one with Jesus on the sea.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 83, note 57.

<sup>152</sup> Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation," in *Whatever Happened*, ed. Kostenberger, p.108.

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