

# Scripture, Semantics, and Ontology

## A Philosophical Map of Biblical Hermeneutics

Dennis Bielfeldt

**ABSTRACT:** This essay offers a philosophical map of biblical hermeneutics, tracing the major intellectual trajectories that have shaped the interpretation of Scripture from the classical Christian tradition to the present. The ultimate argument presented claims that disputes about interpretation are never merely disputes about method. Beneath the familiar debates over historical criticism, literary analysis, narrative reading, and theological interpretation lies a more fundamental question: how does theological language relate to reality? The essay surveys the premodern integration of exegesis and theology, Luther's account of the *nova lingua* of scriptural discourse, the Enlightenment displacement of theology by method, the rise of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics in Heidegger and Gadamer, and the Anglo-American trajectory through literary criticism, canonical approaches, and speech-act theory. Additionally, an examination of Hans Frei's recovery of the plain sense of biblical narrative occurs before the argument that even the most sophisticated theological responses to modern hermeneutics leave unresolved basic semantic questions: how do biblical terms denote, how do theological predicates apply, and under what conditions do scriptural sentences bear truth? Drawing on model theory in the technical sense developed within modern logic, the essay proposes that hermeneutics opens onto semantics and semantics in turn onto ontology. The interpretation of Scripture belongs not merely within biblical studies but within the wider vocation of philosophical theology where questions of reference, predication, truth, and reality cannot be avoided. The essay concludes firstly by connecting the model-theoretic argument to Luther's insistence that the *nova lingua* of theology demands not semantic indeterminacy but semantic seriousness, and secondly to the classical claim that the intelligibility of scriptural language is grounded in the Logos as the ontological condition under which language, world, and truth belong together.

## A Philosophical Map of Biblical Hermeneutics

Few questions in theology have generated more persistent disagreement than the one pertaining to how Scripture should be interpreted. Contemporary discussion presents a crowded and often bewildering field of approaches: historical-critical analysis, literary and narrative readings, canonical interpretation, theological interpretation, and a wide range of postmodern strategies that stress the instability of meaning and the contingency of interpretation. Each brings a characteristic method, vocabulary, and implied account of what the interpreter is actually doing when reading the biblical text. The result is not merely a plurality of exegetical procedures but also a deeper conflict over the nature of interpretation itself.

However, debates over interpretive method often begin too late. By the time interpreters argue over procedure, more fundamental judgments have usually already been made, whether explicitly or not. Hermeneutical strategies do not arise in a philosophical vacuum.<sup>1</sup> Every account of interpretation presupposes some prior understanding of language, meaning, history, truth, and the conditions under which understanding becomes possible. Privileging authorial intention, narrative coherence, readerly response, communal reception, or historical reconstruction indicates a prefixed stand within a determinate conception of how texts signify, how meaning is rendered accessible, and how discourse may bear upon reality.

For that reason, the interpretation of Scripture cannot be reduced to the application of a neutral technique. Interpretation is never simply a matter of selecting the proper method and applying it with sufficient care. Interpreting always takes place within a broader intellectual horizon that governs, often beneath the level of explicit awareness, the relation between language and world, text and meaning, as well as history and truth. What first appears to be a disagreement about exegetical procedure is often, at a deeper level, a disagreement about the very conditions under which meaning can emerge and claims to truth can be sustained. As such, hermeneutics is never merely methodological but rather inescapably philosophical.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. For the classic account of hermeneutics as grounded in prior assumptions about language, understanding, and history, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989); and Anthony C. Thiselton, *Why Hermeneutics?* (London: SPCK, 2019).

2. On the transition from methodological to philosophical hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), esp. 1–20; and Georgja Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 1–40. Against the modern tendency to locate intelligibility primarily in the subject's conditions of knowing, this essay suggests that intelligibility belongs first to reality itself. Theological semantics therefore cannot stop with the analysis of language use, readerly horizon, or historical consciousness. It presses toward ontology, and ultimately toward the Logos as the ground of a world capable of truthful speech about God.

Modern biblical scholarship has at times obscured this point by treating hermeneutics chiefly as a specialized technical discipline concerned with the rules by which texts are analyzed. On this view, interpretation becomes a sequence of operations performed upon a textual object—sources get identified, genres classified, redactional layers reconstructed, literary patterns traced, and historical settings described. Such work is often necessary and frequently illuminating, but it does not exhaust the task of interpretation nor does it answer the more basic question of what Scripture is and what kind of understanding is demanded by a text the church confesses to be divine speech. A method may govern how one handles a text while leaving unresolved the deeper issue of how the discourse of that text relates to the reality it claims to disclose.

Historically, the interpretation of Scripture belonged to a much larger intellectual and theological enterprise.<sup>3</sup> Being inseparable from reflection on God, revelation, language, and reality, to interpret Scripture meant not merely analyzing a text but asking how divine truth may be communicated through human words, how language may bear meaning that exceeds immediate historical intention without dissolving into arbitrariness, and how the reader stands before a text that addresses not only the intellect but the whole life of faith. In this older vision, hermeneutics was not a discipline standing alongside theology but an internal moment of theology itself. The deeper concern was never method alone but the possibility of receiving scriptural discourse as meaningful, truthful, and answerable to the reality of God.

The fragmentation of modern hermeneutics cannot, therefore, be understood apart from the larger intellectual history from which it emerged. Changes in biblical interpretation were bound up with changes in philosophical outlook. The shift from the classical and medieval synthesis to the epistemological anxieties of modernity, the rise of Enlightenment criticism, the development of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of phenomenology and existentialism, and the later turn toward language, subjectivity, and postmodern suspicion all reshaped the conditions under which Scripture could be read. What counted as meaning, what qualified as legitimate understanding, and what sort of truth biblical interpretation was expected to yield changed along with these broader intellectual transformations. Modern hermeneutics did not merely add new tools to an otherwise stable practice but arose from a deeper reconfiguration of the intellectual world within which Scripture was being interpreted.<sup>4</sup>

---

3. For the premodern integration of scriptural interpretation with theology and doctrine, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. I, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–40; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1–30; and Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 73–112.

4. For major accounts of this larger intellectual history, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and David E. Klemm, ed., *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, vol. I (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

In sketching the major philosophical trajectories that have shaped modern biblical interpretation by tracing the development of hermeneutics from the classical Christian tradition through the transformations of the Enlightenment, the rise of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics, and the contested debates of the contemporary period, we may see more clearly the assumptions that continue to govern present approaches to Scripture. Such a survey proves necessarily selective and does not pretend to resolve the many disputes that divide interpreters. It can, though, illuminate the deeper sources of those disputes by placing them within the broader history of ideas.

This clarification matters because many contemporary disagreements in biblical studies rest upon philosophical assumptions that remain largely unexamined. Methods often get debated as though they were neutral procedures available for simple comparison when in fact they are embedded within larger accounts of reason, language, history, and reality. To ask whether Scripture should be interpreted historically, literarily, canonically, or theologically never means to only ask about method. Asking what Scripture is, what kind of meaning a text can possess, whether truth is discovered or constructed, and whether interpretation aims at explanation, understanding, judgment, or obedience must also happen. More deeply still, it is to ask within what framework of intelligibility scriptural judgments become meaningful at all and how theological language may relate to reality in a way that is not merely expressive but truth-bearing. The issue is never merely how one reads but what must be presupposed about language, world, and the ordered forms through which discourse renders reality intelligible if scriptural speech is to speak meaningfully of God, promise, judgment, reconciliation, and hope.

A map of these philosophical developments cannot settle the disagreements surrounding biblical interpretation, dissolve the tensions between competing schools, nor supply a final method capable of universal assent. What it can do, however, is make those disagreements more intelligible by showing why modern debates so often appear intractable, why interpreters frequently speak past one another, and why disputes about exegesis so easily become disputes about truth, authority, and the possibility of theological knowledge. More importantly, it can help bring into view the often hidden frameworks within which different interpretive judgments acquire their force.

Once bringing the philosophical foundations of hermeneutics to light, a more fundamental question emerges. Should the interpretation of Scripture remain primarily a technical activity governed by the procedural frameworks of modern biblical studies, or should it be recovered as a task belonging properly within the wider vocation of philosophical theology? The questions lie beneath many of the most important debates in contemporary interpretation, and once pressed with sufficient seriousness, they open onto questions modern hermeneutics has circled without naming precisely: how does scriptural language relate to reality, under what conditions it can be truth-bearing, and what kind of intelligible order must be pre-

supposed if theology is to speak meaningfully at all? These specific questions—not merely about method but about reference, predication, and the semantic anchoring of theological discourse—give the present inquiry its urgency.

### The Classical Tradition

For most of Christian history, the interpretation of Scripture was inseparable from theology itself. What modern scholarship calls “hermeneutics” had not yet emerged as an independent discipline. Interpreting the biblical text belonged to the larger theological task of articulating the truth of the Christian faith as carried out within the doctrinal, liturgical, and contemplative life of the church. The biblical writings were not regarded as a collection of ancient religious documents and still less as a loose archive of historically conditioned voices. They were understood as the textual form of God’s redemptive self-disclosure in history, ordered toward Christ and received within the fellowship of the church. Interpretation, therefore, proceeded under the guidance of what the early tradition called the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, not as an arbitrary constraint imposed from outside the text but as the theological horizon within which Scripture was believed to possess its proper coherence.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine offers one of the most influential articulations of this classical vision. In *De doctrina christiana*, he argues that the interpretation of Scripture must ultimately serve the knowledge and love of God. The biblical text communicates divine truth through human signs, and the task of the reader is to discern how those signs direct the mind beyond themselves toward the realities they signify. Scripture gets read not merely to gather information nor simply to reconstruct the intentions of an ancient author but to form the reader in wisdom and charity.

Augustine’s hermeneutic is theological in the strongest sense: interpretation is ordered toward participation in the truth to which the text bears witness. Speaking from within the economy of salvation, Scripture cannot be rightly understood apart from the theological reality that grounds it.<sup>6</sup>

This Augustinian framework remained decisive for the medieval tradition, though it was developed with increasing conceptual precision. Medieval theology

---

5. On the *regula fidei* and its function in patristic interpretation, see Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1, where the rule of faith receives one of its earliest and most explicit formulations; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 108–120; and Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 9–38.

6. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.35–36. On Augustine’s semiotics and its hermeneutical implications, see Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

did not treat the biblical text as a flat repository of propositions but understood Scripture instead as a divinely ordered discourse with historical and verbal dimensions participating in a providential pattern of meaning established by God. Thomas Aquinas, for example, insisted on the primacy of the literal sense, which did not mean crude literalism but instead the sense intended through the words of Scripture as they signify historical realities. However, Aquinas also affirmed that because God is the ultimate author both of Scripture and of the history it narrates, the realities signified by the words may themselves function as signs of further realities. Within this framework, the traditional doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical—expressed the belief that the biblical text participates in the wider drama of creation, redemption, and consummation.<sup>7</sup>

Modern readers often miss that this interpretive vision rested on a broader metaphysical and theological framework. Language was assumed to be capable of referring to reality while history was assumed to possess intelligible form because it unfolded within divine providence. The events narrated in Scripture were therefore not merely occasions for religious reflection. They were themselves moments within the divine economy and could bear theological significance without ceasing to be historical. Text, world, and divine action were not placed in competition with one another. Because God was understood to be the author of both creation and redemption, the world itself could signify beyond its immediately visible surface. Scripture could be read as truthful discourse about God's action in history, and the question of whether language might fail to mediate reality did not yet arise as a theoretical problem.<sup>8</sup>

### Luther and the *Nova Lingua* of Theology

Luther's contribution to hermeneutics reaches deeper than the familiar Reformation principle that Scripture interprets itself. Beneath that methodological affirmation lies a more fundamental insight: the language of Scripture operates according to a distinctive grammar, one not reducible to the categories of ordinary discourse or to the conceptual habits of philosophical reasoning. This becomes especially visible in *De servo arbitrio* wherein Luther deploys formulations that strike the reader as paradoxical: strength disclosed in weakness, righteousness appearing in the midst

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10. On the fourfold sense and its theological rationale, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 75–165, where de Lubac develops the theological logic underlying the plurality of scriptural senses.

8. On the metaphysical presuppositions of classical biblical interpretation and their erosion in modernity, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1–50; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 73–112; and Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 33–67, which traces the broader metaphysical dissolution within which scriptural interpretation was progressively detached from its theological ground.

of sin, freedom found under the form of bondage, and life emerging through death. These are not ornaments of style but disclosures of theological form.

These formulations reveal that theological language does not simply borrow its meaning from common usage and apply it to sacred subject matter. Within the proclamation of the gospel, familiar terms undergo a profound semantic reordering. Words such as freedom, righteousness, power, and life do not retain the meanings assigned by ordinary moral intuition or philosophical reflection. They receive their proper sense only within the history of God's action in Christ.

Luther gestures toward this phenomenon by speaking of a *nova lingua*—a new language. The gospel does not introduce new vocabulary so much as it reconstitutes the semantic field within which theological predicates can be truthfully spoken. Terms already present in human discourse are transformed by being placed within the drama of sin, judgment, grace, cross, and resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

Luther's distinctiveness within the classical tradition lies not in multiplying the senses of Scripture but in sharpening attention to how the biblical proclamation reshapes the conceptual framework within which theological speech becomes possible. He directs attention not only to what Scripture means but to how scriptural language can mean at all. Theological discourse is not ordinary language extended toward divine objects but is rather a form of speech generated by the event of revelation itself. Because God is known in the crucified Christ, theological language inevitably bears the marks of that revelation: reversal, paradox, concealment, and disclosure. The grammar of theology is inseparable from the manner of which God gives himself to be known.

If hermeneutics concerns the conditions under which understanding becomes possible, Luther's importance lies not in offering a rule of interpretation but in exposing the deeper relation between revelation and language itself. Interpretation begins not with method alone but with the acquisition of a theological grammar given not by speculative philosophy but by the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

## The Enlightenment Transformation

The Enlightenment did not merely introduce new interpretive techniques. It altered the philosophical conditions under which interpretation itself was understood. What had long been treated as an internal task of theology was

---

9. On Luther's account of theological language and the semantic transformation of ordinary terms within the gospel, see Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 4 (1990): 249–273; and Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35–60.

10. For a broader account of Luther's theological language as shaped by paradox, cross, and revelation rather than by autonomous rational categories, see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 25–54; and Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 180–210.

gradually recast as a problem of method, governed by principles thought to be universally accessible apart from ecclesial authority or confessional commitment. As confidence in tradition eroded, interpreters increasingly sought foundations for judgment that could be justified by reason, grammar, and historical inquiry alone.

Within this climate, Johann August Ernesti formulated the principle that would become foundational for modern biblical interpretation: the Bible must be interpreted like any other book.<sup>11</sup> The force of the claim lay in its methodological neutrality. If Scripture is governed by the same linguistic and historical rules as all other texts, its interpretation can no longer depend upon the doctrinal judgments of the church. The interpreter's task became the recovery of what the human author intended to say in a particular historical setting. Once meaning was located in historical-linguistic process rather than in participation in a theological reality, the classical framework was no longer constitutive. It might remain a matter of belief, but it no longer governed method.<sup>12</sup>

Friedrich Schleiermacher carried this development further, transforming exegetical principles into a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding itself. Hermeneutics ceased to be a specialized concern of biblical interpretation and became a universal discipline, a general theory of the conditions under which any act of textual understanding becomes possible. According to Schleiermacher, interpretation involves two interrelated moments: grammatical interpretation, which attends to linguistic structure, and psychological interpretation, defined as reconstructing the interior act of thought from which the text emerged.<sup>13</sup> To fully understand a text is not only to parse its words correctly but to re-enter the mental world of its author. Interpretation no longer aims to hear Scripture as the church's witness to divine revelation but to understand an author better than he understood himself.<sup>14</sup> Sacred

---

11. Johann August Ernesti, *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (Leipzig, 1761). On Ernesti's significance for the emergence of modern biblical hermeneutics, see Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM, 1991), 30–35; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 132–138.

12. On the displacement of theology by method in Enlightenment hermeneutics, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 51–65; Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 51–84; and Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 1–30, which traces the broader intellectual conditions under which theological authority gave way to historical and grammatical method.

13. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5–10. For Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in broader context, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 85–105; and Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 84–97.

14. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 23. The phrase “understand an author better than he understood himself” derives from Schleiermacher's account of psychological

and secular texts are now treated within the same formal horizon, and Scripture becomes one instance of the broader problem of textual understanding rather than a unique kind of discourse bearing divine truth.

Hermeneutics became autonomous because theology was no longer permitted to provide its unquestioned ground. The consequences of that shift would deepen in the nineteenth century as the rise of historical consciousness transformed biblical studies further still.

### Historicism and the Rise of Historical Consciousness

During the nineteenth century, hermeneutics underwent a decisive transformation as European thought came increasingly under the influence of historical consciousness. The growing recognition of human ideas, institutions, and texts being products of particular historical conditions fundamentally altered the way interpretation was conceived. Meaning was no longer assumed to stand above history in the form of timeless rational or theological principles but was increasingly understood as something mediated by the historical worlds in which human beings live, speak, and think.

This development was closely connected to the rise of modern philology. Scholars such as Friedrich August Wolf and Friedrich Ast argued that texts can be understood only through careful reconstruction of the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual worlds from which they emerged.<sup>15</sup> Ast gave this a broader theoretical form by emphasizing the organic unity of historical cultures: an individual text expresses a wider spiritual totality, and interpretation must situate the text within the total life of the community from which it emerged. Meaning arises from the whole, and the whole can be grasped only through its particular expressions, the familiar hermeneutical circle of part and whole.<sup>16</sup>

---

interpretation and became programmatic for nineteenth-century hermeneutics. For discussion, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 84–87; and Paul Ricoeur, “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics,” *The Monist* 61, no. 1 (1977): 73–84.

15. On Friedrich August Wolf, Friedrich Ast, and the historicization of interpretation through philology, see B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 33–58; and Günter Scholtz, “Ast and Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and Critical Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 76–86.

16. On the rise of historical consciousness and its significance for hermeneutics, see Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, vol. 4: *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 235–260, where Dilthey develops his account of the rise of hermeneutics as the methodological core of the human sciences; and John H. Zammito, “Hermeneutics and History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Michael N. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 173–192.

Wilhelm Dilthey sought to provide a philosophical foundation for this approach in his account of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the human sciences. Unlike the natural sciences, which explain phenomena by causal laws, the human sciences aim to understand the meaningful expressions through which human life becomes visible to itself. Texts, institutions, works of art, and historical events are all embodiments of what Dilthey called lived experience (*Erlebnis*), not inert objects but expressions of life. Hermeneutics thus becomes the methodological core of the human sciences, providing the means by which the inner structures of historical life can be reconstructed from their outward expressions.

The influence of this orientation on biblical studies was immense. Scripture came to be treated as a historical artifact whose significance could be explained only by reconstructing the processes of composition, transmission, editing, and reception. From this setting emerged the major forms of modern historical criticism: source criticism identifying written strata behind the biblical books, form criticism classifying units of tradition by genre and social setting, and redaction criticism examining the theological intentions of editors. Different as these were, they shared a common conviction—the meaning of Scripture could not be adequately understood without historical explanation of the conditions under which it came into being.

The consequences were far-reaching. Earlier interpreters had attended to history within an overarching theological framework in which Scripture was read primarily as a witness to divine revelation. Historicism altered this order of priority. The biblical text appeared first as an object of historical analysis and only secondarily, if at all, as an authoritative theological word.

Revelation, doctrine, and ecclesial authority were drawn into the same historical field as every other human product.

Historicism also generated tensions it could not finally resolve. If all meaning is historically conditioned, the interpreter is no less conditioned than the text. By what means can the present interpreter overcome the distance separating one historical horizon from another? That question opens the way to philosophical hermeneutics in the twentieth century.

### Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Problem of Situated Understanding

By the early twentieth century, historical consciousness had become the dominant framework for interpreting texts. Soon, this historicist model became the object of philosophical criticism. The problem was not merely whether historical reconstruction could be carried out with sufficient rigor but more fundamentally whether interpretation could ever be reduced to method at all.

The most decisive challenge came from Martin Heidegger, who transformed the discussion by shifting the focus of hermeneutics from epistemology and method to

ontology. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that understanding is not first a specialized scholarly procedure applied to texts but instead a basic structure of human existence itself. Human beings do not begin as detached observers confronting a world of neutral objects. Rather, they always already find themselves situated within a world that is meaningful in advance of explicit reflection.<sup>17</sup> Understanding is not the overcoming of situatedness but its enactment. One does not first achieve a position outside all assumptions and then begin to understand—one understands from within a prior horizon of meaning never fully chosen nor never wholly escaped. Heidegger thus transformed hermeneutics from a regional discipline into a philosophical account of existence. The question was no longer merely how texts should be interpreted but how understanding belongs to the mode of being proper to finite and historical creatures.

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed this Heideggerian insight into what he called philosophical hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that the modern search for an objective interpretive method capable of neutralizing the interpreter's historical situation rests on a misunderstanding of how understanding actually occurs.<sup>18</sup> Understanding does not arise by escaping one's historical situation but by working within it. The interpreter does not stand over against the text as a neutral consciousness; he stands within a tradition of language, concepts, and expectations that makes understanding possible in the first place.

This is why Gadamer rehabilitates the notion of prejudice. Prejudgments are not obstacles to interpretation but its very conditions. The task is not to eliminate them but to allow them to be tested, corrected, and transformed in dialogue with the text.<sup>19</sup> Gadamer describes the resulting process as a *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*): the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter meet, and in that meeting understanding becomes possible. Meaning is not extracted from the past as a fixed object but comes to presence in the event of interpretation itself.

Gadamer's concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*—historically effected consciousness—names the recognition that interpreters do not confront history

---

17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), esp. §§31–32. On Heidegger's transformation of hermeneutics from method to ontology, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 124–154; and Theodore Kisiel, "Heidegger," in *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 223–231.

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), esp. 265–285, where Gadamer develops his critique of the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice and argues that method cannot serve as the sole guarantor of truth in the human sciences.

19. On prejudice, dialogue, and the fusion of horizons, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295–307, where the fusion of horizons and historically effected consciousness are developed; and Jean Grondin, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer,' in *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 155–163.

from outside history. The past is not a distant object laid before the interpreter for inspection but is active in the present, shaping the very categories through which the present understands itself.<sup>20</sup> Tradition is therefore not an impediment to knowledge but the medium in which understanding becomes possible at all. Human beings do not invent the language through which they think or the concepts by which they judge. They receive them.

This entire development stands within the trajectory inaugurated by Kant who argued that human knowledge does not simply mirror an independent reality. Experience is possible only because the knowing subject contributes the formal conditions under which objects can appear. Heidegger radicalized this insight by relocating it from transcendental subjectivity into concrete human existence. Gadamer extended it further by showing that these conditions are mediated through language, tradition, and historical life.<sup>21</sup> The result is a conception of interpretation in which understanding always occurs within historically conditioned horizons that cannot be bypassed in the name of pure method.

The implications for biblical interpretation proved profound. Every reading of Scripture arises from within a particular horizon of questions, traditions, and communal practices. Interpretation became reflexive: the reader must account not only for the historical world of the text but for the world from which the reading itself proceeds. The question is no longer only what the text once meant but how its meaning comes to address the present through the conditions of understanding itself.

Philosophical hermeneutics also introduced questions it could not fully resolve. If meaning arises through historically conditioned horizons, what becomes of truth? If understanding is always mediated by language and tradition, how can revelation claim authority over the interpreter rather than being absorbed into the interpreter's own horizon? The problem had shifted once again. Hermeneutics was no longer simply about recovering the past but had become the question of how truth, language, history, and human finitude belong together in the act of understanding itself. The question about the conditions under which discourse can be not merely

---

20. On *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* ("historically effected consciousness"), see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300–307; Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 75–100, which provides the clearest English-language analysis of the concept and its implications; and Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 120–135.

21. On the Kant–Heidegger–Gadamer trajectory in modern hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 88–123; Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–30, for the Kantian background of the subject's constitutive role in knowledge and David Linge, introduction to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xi–lviii, which traces the Kant–Heidegger–Gadamer line with unusual clarity and remains one of the best introductory accounts of the trajectory in English.

meaningful but genuinely truth-bearing points beyond philosophical hermeneutics toward a more precise account of how theological language relates to reality. It is there that the model-theoretic approach begins to take shape.

### The Anglo-American Trajectory

While continental hermeneutics developed through the philosophical work of figures such as Heidegger and Gadamer, a different trajectory unfolded in the Anglo-American world. Therein, reflection on interpretation was shaped less by a unified philosophical account of understanding and more by developments within biblical scholarship, literary criticism, and analytic philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

For much of the twentieth century, biblical studies in English-speaking universities remained dominated by the historical-critical method. Building on the nineteenth-century legacy of German scholarship, interpreters sought to reconstruct the processes through which the biblical texts had come into being. Source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism treated the biblical writings primarily as historical documents whose meaning was to be explained in relation to the conditions of their production. The central task of interpretation became historical reconstruction rather than theological reflection. Biblical studies increasingly aligned itself with the wider practices of historical scholarship and with adjacent disciplines, such as religious studies and ancient Near Eastern history.

At the same time, a different development was taking place within literary criticism. Movements such as New Criticism shifted attention away from authorial intention and historical background toward the internal structure of the text itself.<sup>23</sup> Utilizing this view, meaning arises through the interplay of formal elements—imagery, narrative design, metaphor, irony, and rhetorical pattern. The text got treated less as a historical artifact to be explained and more as a literary object to be read closely. This turn entailed important consequences for biblical interpretation, encouraging scholars to regard the Bible not simply as a collection of historical sources but as a

---

22. For broad accounts of the interaction between biblical scholarship, literary criticism, and analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American context, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 1–30; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1–40, which surveys the Anglo-American landscape with particular attention to the intersection of literary theory, analytic philosophy, and biblical interpretation.

23. On the New Critical turn from author and history to the internal structure of the text, see W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–488, the locus classicus of the New Critical rejection of authorial intention; Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), which exemplifies the close reading method in practice; and René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 139–158, for a systematic account of the text-internal approach to meaning.

body of texts possessing literary shape, narrative coherence, and rhetorical force. Narrative criticism examined the structure of biblical stories and the ways narrative form itself carries theological significance. Canonical criticism asked how the final form of the canon functions as a theological whole rather than as a mere repository of earlier traditions.<sup>24</sup> Reader-response approaches extended the discussion further by emphasizing the role of the reader in the production of meaning, specifically the recognition that interpretation is shaped not only by what a text contains but by the expectations and interpretive strategies that readers bring to it.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside these developments, another influence entered from analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein's later work emphasized that language functions within forms of life while Austin and Searle showed that utterances do not merely describe states of affairs but perform actions.

Speech-act theory proved especially suggestive for theology and biblical studies<sup>26</sup> in claiming that language is not exhausted by its descriptive content. Promises, commands, blessings, warnings, and declarations accomplish something in the very act of being spoken. When applied to Scripture, this perspective opened the possibility of understanding biblical language not merely as the communication of information but as a form of discourse that acts upon its hearers by summoning, judging, promising, commanding, and forming the community that receives it.

The result was an increasingly complex interpretive landscape wherein historical, literary, and philosophical approaches intersected without being integrated into a single theoretical framework. Unlike the continental tradition, which sought a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding, the Anglo-American world tended to produce a plurality of methods shaped by different disciplinary concerns. Historical critics asked how texts came to be, literary critics asked how texts function in their final form, and reader-oriented approaches asked how meaning emerges in the act of reading. Philosophers of language asked what kind of activity language performs when it is used.

---

24. For narrative and canonical approaches in biblical studies, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

25. On reader-oriented theories and their impact on hermeneutics, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 20–50, which provides the foundational account of the reader's constitutive role in the production of meaning; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–17, for the more radical reader-response position; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 503–615, for the implications of reader-oriented theories specifically for biblical interpretation.

26. On speech-act theory in biblical interpretation, see Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001/2004); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Beneath this methodological diversity a common question gradually came into view: how should the relation between language, meaning, and reality be understood in the interpretation of Scripture? Historical criticism located meaning in the past, literary approaches drew attention to the integrity of the text in its final form, reader-oriented theories emphasized the conditions of reception, and analytic philosophy reopened the question of what language itself accomplishes.

Taken together, these developments made it increasingly difficult to treat interpretation as merely a technical procedure. They converged from different directions on the same underlying problem: not simply how texts are read but what must be presupposed about the relation between language and reality if scriptural discourse is to be truth-bearing at all.

At precisely that point, the possibility of reconnecting biblical interpretation with philosophical theology begins to re-emerge. Once the central issue is recognized to concern the nature of language, the conditions of meaning, and the relation of textual discourse to reality, interpretation can no longer remain simply a matter of disciplinary technique but is drawn back toward the larger philosophical and theological questions from which modern hermeneutics had once attempted to detach itself. Therein, in the questions of how theological language is anchored to reality and how scriptural models disclose the structures of a world ordered by divine action, that a model-theoretic approach to interpretation finds its proper footing.

### The Contemporary Landscape and the Frei Proposal

By the late twentieth century, many theologians had begun to question the dominance of historical-critical interpretation. The issue was not simply whether historical criticism had produced valuable results—it plainly had. The deeper question was whether its underlying assumptions had come to shape the meaning of Scripture in ways that displaced the theological function of the text itself.

One of the most important voices in this discussion was Hans Frei. Frei argued that modern biblical interpretation had gradually subordinated the narrative world of Scripture to explanatory frameworks external to the text.<sup>27</sup> In the premodern tradition, the biblical narrative had functioned as the primary framework within which Christian identity and understanding were formed.

Modern hermeneutics altered this relation decisively. Historical criticism directed attention behind the text toward the events and sources from which it emerged. Philosophical hermeneutics drew attention to the role of the interpreter and the conditions under which meaning arises in the present. As different as these approaches were, both tended to marginalize the narrative coherence of Scripture itself, treating the text either as a window to view a historical reality lying behind

---

27. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 1–16, where Frei diagnoses the modern displacement of the biblical narrative's plain sense by external explanatory frameworks.

it or as a site in which meaning is generated through encounter with the reader. In either case, the plain sense of the biblical narrative as narrative was displaced.<sup>28</sup>

Frei's response was neither a retreat into pre-critical naïveté nor a rejection of modern hermeneutics. He pointed out that the meaning of biblical narrative is not finally secured by recovering events behind the text but by attending to the world the text itself renders. The literal sense, in Frei's account, is not a minimal residue of historical reference but a sense generated by the narrative shape of Scripture as it identifies its subject matter.<sup>29</sup> The Gospels do not merely provide materials from which a historical figure may be reconstructed. They identify Jesus Christ through the exclusive shape of the narrative itself. Frei accepts the irreversibility of historical consciousness yet resists the conclusion that Scripture's theological significance must therefore be subordinated to historical method.

Frei's work helped prepare the way for what would later be called the theological interpretation of Scripture, a movement seeking to recover the reading of Scripture within the doctrinal and ecclesial life of the church without abandoning the gains of modern scholarship.<sup>30</sup> Within Lutheran contexts, his proposal has been received in different ways, generating divergent hermeneutical trajectories visible in figures such as Voelz and Schmitt.<sup>31</sup> What these debates make clear is that hermeneutics remains a live issue within confessional theology. The question became no longer whether Scripture should be interpreted theologically but how such interpretation can be articulated under modern conditions.

However, Frei's proposal leaves a further question unresolved. To insist on the priority of the narrative's plain sense is to say something significant about where meaning is located rather than to say how the language of that narrative is anchored

---

28. On Frei's argument that modern interpretation displaced the plain sense of biblical narrative, see Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 1–16 and 323–357; and George Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: The Vision and the Verdict," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 2 (1992): 103–128, which provides the best secondary account of Frei's central argument and its theological significance.

29. On Frei's account of the literal sense as the unsubstitutable sense generated by the narrative depiction of its subject matter, see Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 11–35; and Frei, "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36–77, where Frei develops his account of the literal sense most explicitly and responds to critics.

30. For representative statements of the theological interpretation movement, see Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

31. On differing Lutheran hermeneutical trajectories, compare James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2020); and David Schmitt, "Preaching and the Hermeneutical Task," *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 2 (2012): 108–126.

to reality, particularly how scriptural discourse refers, predicates, and makes truth-claims about God, world, and human existence. The narrative renders a world, but what is the relation between that rendered world and the reality theology seeks to articulate? It is at this juncture that a model-theoretic account of theological language becomes indispensable. The question is no longer only where meaning resides but how scriptural language is structured so as to be genuinely truth-bearing.

### Model Theory and the Reference of Theological Language

The developments surveyed above disclose a recurring problem—modern hermeneutics has generated powerful insights into the historical, linguistic, and existential dimensions of interpretation, yet it has consistently left unresolved a more basic question: how does theological language relate to reality? While historical criticism clarifies the conditions under which texts arose, philosophical hermeneutics illuminates the situated character of understanding, literary approaches attend to the shape and force of texts as texts, and speech-act theory identifies what language performs, none of these, taken individually, fully answers the question of how biblical discourse refers to God, world, and history—how its terms denote, its predicates apply, and its sentences bear truth.

This is not merely a methodological deficit; it is a semantic one. When Scripture says “God is righteous,” “The Lord remembers his covenant,” or “Christ is risen,” what are the logical statuses of such claims? What sort of terms are “God,” “covenant,” and “Christ?” How do predicates such as “righteous,” “merciful,” or “judge” function when attributed to God? What kind of domain must be presupposed if such discourse is to be intelligible at all? These are not questions about piety or literary texture. They are questions about reference and predication, and they are questions that historical criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, and narrative theology each approach but do not decisively answer.

Model theory becomes relevant at this point, though not in the looser sense in which theologians have sometimes spoken of “models” of divine action but in the technical sense developed within modern logic.<sup>32</sup> Model theory is the branch of mathematical logic that studies the relation between formal languages and the

---

32. Model theory in the strict logical sense was developed in the work of Alfred Tarski; see Alfred Tarski, “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages,” in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J. H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 152–278; and Alfred Tarski, “On the Concept of Logical Consequence,” in the same volume, 409–420. For accessible introductions to model theory and its philosophical significance, see Wilfrid Hodges, *Model Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Michael Glanzberg, “Truth,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/>. For the theological appropriation of semantic and model-theoretic concepts, see Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); and William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

structures in which their sentences receive interpretation. A structure, in this technical sense, consists of a domain of objects together with assignments of referents to singular terms, extensions to predicates, and truth conditions to sentences. Model theory asks what must be the case for a term to denote, for a predicate to apply, for a sentence to be satisfied in a structure, and for a set of sentences—a theory—to have a model at all. These questions are not identical with those of theology, yet they are illuminating because they shift attention from the mere occurrence of religious language to the conditions under which that language could count as referring, predicating, and bearing truth. The issue is not whether theological discourse is reducible to formal logic. The issue is whether the conceptual precision achieved in formal semantics can clarify the problem of theological reference.<sup>33</sup>

The key insight is this: a formal language, taken by itself, does not yet speak about anything. Syntax alone, however well-formed, is semantically inert. A language requires an interpretation: a domain of objects, referents assigned to its singular terms, extensions assigned to its predicates, and truth conditions specified for its sentences. Only then does one move from inscription to meaning, from sentence-form to truth-apt discourse.<sup>34</sup> Once this point is seen, a parallel theological question comes into view. Biblical language cannot be understood simply as a sequence of historically conditioned utterances or as a self-contained literary world. Such language raises the question of what would count as a viable interpretation of that language; specifically, what sort of reality, order, or structure must obtain for biblical discourse to bear truth?

This reframes the hermeneutical problem in a precise way. Historical criticism can tell us when particular terms emerged and how they were used. Literary criticism can show how they function in narrative. Philosophical hermeneutics can describe the horizon within which they are received. Model-theoretic reflection, though, asks a different and more fundamental question: what interpretation

---

33. On theological language as world-disclosing and conceptually ordered rather than merely empirically descriptive, see Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 86–95; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

34. For the philosophical background of reference, predication, and truth as they bear on theological language, see Alfred Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4, no. 3 (1944): 341–376, the foundational modern account of truth as semantic relation between language and structure; Wilfrid Hodges, *Model Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–24, for the technical development; William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17–63, which applies the philosophical account of predication directly to theological language; and Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957), was an early influential Anglo-American discussion of how theological terms refer and function.

makes such predicates intelligible as predicates of their subject? It asks not only how discourse is produced or received but how it is semantically anchored or how it is interpreted relative to a domain. When biblical language speaks of God, Israel, Christ, sin, promise, kingdom, and new creation, it does not merely arrange symbols within a textual field but purports to identify subjects, ascribe predicates, and articulate relations. More succinctly, it invites semantic analysis.<sup>35</sup>

Such analysis need not imply naïve literalism. One advantage of model-theoretic precision is that it allows sharper distinctions among different semantic functions. Not all terms refer in the same way, not all predicates apply univocally, and not all sentences are interpreted by the same standards as ordinary empirical description.<sup>36</sup> However, this does not mean theological discourse is nonreferential. It instead means the logic of theological language must be clarified. The central question is not whether scriptural language refers but under what interpretation it refers and how its predications are to be understood.

Here the issue of predication becomes decisive. Biblical discourse does not only mention God; it says things about God. It predicates righteousness, holiness, mercy, patience, creative power, judgment, and faithfulness. It predicates actions: God creates, elects, commands, promises, delivers, raises, judges, and reconciles. A hermeneutical account adequate to Scripture must therefore explain not only the historical provenance of these predicates and their literary resonance but how such predications function as predications of their subject. What makes “God is righteous” more than an expressive formula? In technical semantics, to predicate is to attribute a property or relation within an interpretation—the predicate has application only in relation to a structure. Transposed into theology, this means one must ask what sort of ordered reality is presupposed when Scripture predicates justice or mercy of God. If those conditions are left wholly unspecified, theological

---

35. For accounts of models, metaphor, and analogy as cognitively serious and world-disclosing rather than merely decorative, see Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 1–50; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 99–117; and William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17–63. For the broader debate about the cognitive status of theoretical models, see Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 43–82.

36. On the cognitive and referential force of metaphorical and model-like theological language, see Max Black, “Models and Archetypes,” in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 219–243, the foundational philosophical account of models as genuinely cognitive rather than merely decorative; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256, on the referential and truth-bearing dimensions of metaphorical discourse; and Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 99–144, which applies these insights specifically to theological language.

discourse risks becoming semantically indeterminate—evocative perhaps, but not genuinely truth-apt.

The same issue arises with divine naming. Scriptural discourse employs names and titles: God, Lord, Father, Holy One of Israel, Messiah, Son of God, and Spirit. A name in semantic terms, though, is not simply a sound or inscription but functions by picking out a referent. The question is not only what connotations attach to divine names but what referential role they play across the full range of biblical discourse. How is continuity of reference maintained across narrative, prophecy, prayer, doctrine, and liturgy? In what sense does “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” identify the same referent as the one confessed in later Christian theological language? These are not merely philological questions; they are semantic questions at the heart of theology.

A further consequence concerns the relation between individual claims and their wider context. In model theory, single formulas receive their interpretation within a larger structure. As such, their respective truths depends on the whole semantic arrangement in which they stand. Something similar holds for theology. Biblical predicates and claims do not function atomistically. Their meanings depend upon a wider ordered field: creation, covenant, election, exodus, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, Spirit, church, and/or kingdom. These are not merely themes placed side by side but form an interconnected semantic order within which central claims about God and the world become intelligible. The move toward semantic rigor does not force one away from narrative or canonical shape but rather helps explain why such larger forms matter and why the meaning of any particular predication depends upon the whole within which it stands.

This also deepens, and presses somewhat beyond, the concerns associated with Frei. Frei was right to resist moving behind the text too quickly in search of some allegedly more basic explanatory level,<sup>37</sup> but the reason one cannot simply extract a neutral content from scriptural discourse is not only that meaning is narratively rendered but also that the discourse receives its semantic force within a determinate interpretive order. Terms and predicates are not detachable from the structure within which they function. Narrative is, therefore, not just the vehicle of meaning—it is one of the principal modes by which theological discourse becomes semantically ordered.

A theological appropriation of model theory must nonetheless proceed with caution. Standard first-order model theory presupposes a domain with members being available for quantification and predication within a common logical space. Theological language strains these assumptions, especially where God is not one entity among others. This does not invalidate model-theoretic reflection for theology. It means that theological semantics may have to adapt, qualify, or extend

---

37. On the irreducibility of biblical narrative form to some supposedly more basic explanatory substrate, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

the assumptions of ordinary formal treatment. The value of model theory lies not in supplying a ready-made theological system but in forcing one to confront with greater clarity the problems of reference, predication, identity, and truth.<sup>38</sup>

That clarification has direct consequences for hermeneutics. If scriptural language is semantically serious, then interpretation cannot be limited to reconstructing past meanings or cataloguing literary effects. To read Scripture is not only to recover what ancient authors intended nor only to describe how later readers respond but to confront a body of discourse that purports to identify subjects, ascribe predicates, and speak truly of reality under theological description.

Hermeneutics opens into semantics, and semantics in turn opens into ontology.

Within Christian theology, this especially matters because revelation is not given apart from discourse. God is known, if known at all, in and through forms of language that identify divine action and characterize divine being. Creation, covenant, exodus, incarnation, cross, resurrection, Pentecost, and kingdom are not merely topics for religious reflection but constitute the semantic field within which theological judgments are made. The question of interpretation is inseparable from the question of what kind of reality makes such judgments true.

Model theory does not replace the concerns of modern hermeneutics. It gathers them within a more fundamental inquiry. Historical context still matters because the language of Scripture arose within determinate linguistic settings. The interpreter's horizon still matters because understanding is historically situated. Narrative form still matters because scriptural meaning is carried through discourse larger than isolated propositions. Beneath all of this lies the more basic semantic question: how is biblical language interpreted so that its claims about God's action, promise, judgment, and reconciliation are intelligible as claims, not merely as expressions of a communal form of life but as discourse that is about something satisfied or unsatisfied relative to a reality that theology seeks to articulate?

The interpretation of Scripture is therefore not simply a regional problem within biblical studies. It belongs within the wider vocation of philosophical theology because the deepest issues at stake concern reference, predication, truth, and reality. Model theory matters not because it resolves every hermeneutical dispute but because it provides a more exact conceptual framework within which those disputes can be posed and within which a theological account of scriptural language can be at once historically responsible, semantically disciplined, and metaphysically serious.

---

38. On the possibility of genuinely referential theological discourse not reducible to flat empirical description, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 130–170; William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 64–102, on literal predication and its application to theological claims; and Max Black, "Models and Archetypes," in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 219–243, whose interaction model of metaphor provides relevant background for the account of theological reference developed here.

## Conclusion: Hermeneutics, Theological Meaning, and the Future of Interpretation

The history of biblical hermeneutics shows that disputes about interpretation are never merely disputes about method. Beneath the familiar debates over historical criticism, literary analysis, narrative reading, and theological interpretation lie more basic philosophical and theological questions: what kind of discourse is Scripture, and how does its language relate to reality? The deepest issue has never been only how Scripture should be read. It has also been how scriptural language can refer, how its predicates function, and under what conditions its claims may be understood as true.

In the classical Christian tradition, this problem did not arise in its full modern form because exegesis remained internal to theology. Scripture was received as a unified witness to the divine economy, and its interpretation unfolded within the rule of faith, the life of the church, and a broadly shared metaphysical horizon. The relation between biblical language and divine reality was not treated as a separate problem requiring independent demonstration but was already assumed within a sacramental, doctrinal, and ecclesial understanding of the world.

The Enlightenment decisively altered this situation. As interpreters sought foundations independent of confessional authority, meaning increasingly came to be located in grammar, authorial intention, and historical reconstruction. The nineteenth century radicalized this development through historical consciousness, treating texts as products of particular cultural and intellectual worlds. The twentieth century deepened the problem further by showing that interpretation is not simply a scholarly technique but a basic feature of human existence: all understanding takes place within historically conditioned horizons. For all their force, though, these developments left unresolved the fundamental question of how theological language relates to the realities it claims to name, describe, and predicate.

That unresolved question remained visible even in the most sophisticated theological responses to modern hermeneutics. Frei's recovery of the literal sense of biblical narrative was a powerful protest against reducing Scripture either to a quarry for historical reconstruction or to an occasion for readerly subjectivity. He rightly insisted that the biblical text itself shapes the world within which Christian understanding is formed. However, a further issue remains. If scriptural meaning is carried through narrative and if understanding is always historically situated, how is one to account for the reference of theological language itself? How do biblical names identify their subjects? How do theological predicates apply? What makes scriptural discourse more than a closed textual world or a historically conditioned religious idiom?

Hermeneutics becomes inseparable from philosophical theology. Every construal of Scripture presupposes some account, whether acknowledged or not, of how language relates to reality. Historical criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, literary

approaches, and theological interpretation differ not only in procedure but also in the semantic and ontological assumptions they bring to texts. Their disagreements are therefore not simply methodological but concern reference, predication, truth, and the kind of reality within which biblical discourse is to be interpreted.

Model theory becomes important here, not in the loose sense of “models” as heuristic images but in the technical sense developed within modern logic, which asks how a language is interpreted in a structure, how terms denote, how predicates apply, and under what conditions sentences are satisfied or true. Its importance for theology lies not in reducing Scripture to a formal calculus but in recovering precision about the semantic issues that hermeneutics has often left implicit.

Theological discourse is not merely expressive, evocative, or communal—it purports to refer as well as predicates, makes judgments, and claims truth.

Once this point is seen, the central debates of modern hermeneutics appear in a new light. Historical criticism remains indispensable, but explaining the genesis of a statement is not the same as clarifying its reference. Literary analysis remains indispensable, but describing textual function is not the same as explaining truth-conditions. Philosophical hermeneutics remains indispensable, but showing that understanding is historically situated is not the same as showing how theological language speaks of God. Each of these approaches identifies something real and necessary. None alone resolves the semantic question at the heart of theological interpretation.

A suggestive theological analogue appears in Luther’s insistence on the *nova lingua* of theology. Luther recognized that scriptural language frequently appears paradoxical when judged by ordinary reasoning: life through death, strength through weakness, and glory through the cross. Such formulations are not merely ornamental. They indicate that theological discourse cannot be measured by the expectations of ordinary descriptive language. Neither are they meaningless. Their very distinctiveness demands more exact reflection on how theological language means, how it orders judgment, and how it speaks truly of God’s action. The *nova lingua* does not license semantic indeterminacy but demands semantic seriousness.

The future of biblical hermeneutics lies not in abandoning the gains of modern interpretation but in carrying them into a more fundamental inquiry. Historical method, literary and narrative sensitivity, and philosophical attentiveness to the situatedness of understanding must all be retained. These must now be gathered within a more explicit account of theological language itself. The interpretation of Scripture cannot remain merely a regional concern within biblical studies because the deepest issues it raises are questions of philosophical theology, questions of language, reference, predication, truth, and reality.

At the furthest point of this inquiry, semantics drives to ontology. The problem is not only how language is interpreted but why language and reality stand in relation at all. To ask how Scripture can speak truthfully of God is finally to ask why

truth, reference, and intelligibility are possible. Christian theology has traditionally named the ground of that possibility the Logos—the ontological condition under which language, world, and truth belong together in the first place. If Scripture can speak truthfully of God, it can do so only because reality is not mute, irrational, or self-enclosed but already ordered toward intelligibility. The oldest question therefore remains the decisive one: how can human language speak truthfully of God? The history of hermeneutics has not dissolved that question. It has made clearer its difficulty, its depth, and its inescapability. The task of biblical interpretation must therefore remain larger than method. It belongs to the unfinished work of theology itself—to think with precision about how Scripture means, how it refers, and how, through its human words, it may speak truly of divine reality.

---

Dennis Bielfeldt (Ph.D., University of Iowa) is Chancellor of its Christ School of Theology, and Professor of Theology and Philosophy. He has published widely on theological realism, language, and metaphysics, with essays appearing in *Modern Theology*, *Dialog*, *Zygon*, and multiple edited volumes. His recent work develops a model-theoretic approach to theology, integrating formal logic and participatory ontology to recover the referential and causal integrity of theological language. His forthcoming book, *Model Theory and the Meaning of Theology* (Cascade), and his multi-volume *Collected Works* continue this project, exploring how the Word's causality grounds theology's truth and freedom alike. [dbielfeldt@ilt.edu](mailto:dbielfeldt@ilt.edu)

# Promissio

*A Journal of Confessing Theology*



## A Call for Papers

*Promissio* seeks submissions for the upcoming issues:

Volume 1, No. 4 (Autumn 2026):

How do creeds and confessions provide  
the grammar of the scriptural language of faith?

Volume 2, No. 1 (Winter 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Fatherhood of God

Volume 2, No. 2 (Spring 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus

Volume 2, No. 3 (Summer 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2, No. 4 (Autumn 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Holy Trinity

All submissions should be emailed to the General Editor

All accepted authors will need an account at [promissio.ilt.edu](http://promissio.ilt.edu)

Please see the Submissions Guidelines there for important information!

All questions can be directed to:

Paul R. Hinlicky, General Editor

[phinlicky@ilt.edu](mailto:phinlicky@ilt.edu)