

# AUTHORIAL REJOINDER TO RESPONSE TO “WHAT IS THE AUTHOR *DOING* WITH WHAT HE IS *SAYING*?” PRAGMATICS AND PREACHING—AN APPEAL!”

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I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to my esteemed colleague, Buist Fanning. Let me take this moment to thank him for the time and the attention he has paid to my article, and for the thoughtful issues he has surfaced in his interaction with it.

## I. THIN OR THICK READING?

Fanning confesses: “Kuruvilla’s approach ... strikes me as rather, abstract, theoretical, and vague. ... [T]extual evidence for his reading of what the authors are doing [in Mark 14–16; Gen 22] ... strikes me as a bit thin” (3).<sup>2</sup> In fact, to catch the author’s *doing* is to perform a “thick” reading of the text. It was the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who, contrasting a wink and an involuntary eyelid twitch, introduced the notion of “thick description”—the characterization of actions so as not to lose their intentionality. Vanhoozer effectively adopted this metaphor for textual interpretation: “A description is sufficiently thick when it allows us to appreciate everything the author is doing in a text.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, a thick description, judiciously and discriminately employing semantics that leads to pragmatics, explicates what the author is *doing*—the *world in front of the text* that, bearing the theology of the pericope, prepares the way for the move to application.<sup>4</sup>

Besides, the elements that drive such a thick description (the textual clues to the theology of the pericope, for a biblical text) cannot blanketly be categorized as “co-occurrence of certain lexical items in distant texts” or “absence of certain phrasing as the story moves along,” as Fanning alleges (4). Yes, those particular elements did play important roles in the examples I provided. However, they are not the only types of clues to textual pragmatics. If I were a museum docent in a gallery, my promotion of a single method, slavishly and mindlessly applied (e.g.,

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers referring to Buist Fanning’s response article are provided in parentheses.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Essays* (vol. 2 of *Collected Papers*; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 480–96; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 284 (italics removed).

<sup>4</sup> As noted in my published article, I’m making a broad distinction between semantic sentence-meaning and pragmatic utterance-meaning.

“look at the shapes” or “look at the colors”) would never help visitors comprehend the multiplicity and variety of paintings in an exhibition. Each painting (= pericope) is unique, and so is the mode of “thick” reading of each.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, what might be the better diagnoses of the disease symptoms in those patients (= better theological thrusts of the textual clues in those passages)? My invitation to other diagnosticians of texts would be to come up with something better, so that treatment may be instituted accurately (= application may be undertaken validly). So: How else might one understand, say, Gen 22, for application purposes, in a way that demonstrates coherence of *intrapericopal* elements that clue one to the single thrust of that pericope? How else would one also show coherence of *interpericopal* momentum, i.e., the serial development of theological thrusts across sequential pericopes, that explains why Gen 22 is where it is in the trajectory of the Abraham story (Gen 12–22) and what it is *doing* there?<sup>6</sup>

## II. SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

Let me reaffirm that I believe it is essential to explore the semantics of the text to discover its pragmatics, what the author is *doing*.<sup>7</sup> That being said, I maintain that reaching the destination of semantics doth not the journey of interpretation conclude, particularly when the intent is to arrive at the terminus of application. A code-model hermeneutic, that leads us only to semantics, is insufficient for this purpose; inference to pragmatics must be made from textual clues. The halfway mark is not the finish line of the race. It is the discovery of the pragmatics of the text that is the end of interpretation for preaching (followed by application, of course).<sup>8</sup>

Fanning notes that “traditional” exegesis was not unaware of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, quipping that “what is new is not always ... so new” (3). And, he defends: “Many evangelical works on hermeneutics, exegesis, or preaching do what I regard to be a fine job of walking a preacher through this process” (5). I beg to differ. I suspect it is our disparate definitions of preaching that is

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<sup>5</sup> I was, of course, constrained to a couple of illustrations that would fit a reasonably sized journal article, and that without the benefit of “curating” a spectrum of pericopes to showcase the range and diversity of textual clue types. For those interested in the greater breadth and variety of modalities for reading “thickly,” I would urge a glance at my book-length commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Mark, and Ephesians (referred to in my original article).

<sup>6</sup> We’ve already had over two millennia of standard, traditional, non-pragmatic interpretations of Gen 22; at least for that reason, we must be open to alternative diagnoses!

<sup>7</sup> In my *JETS* article, I pointed readers to the separate articles in that journal that dealt with Mark 14–16 and Gen 22—each about tenfold longer than my treatment of them in the current essay in *JETS*.

<sup>8</sup> I hope Fanning was not serious when he implied that I was propounding a sort of reading that takes “success” in Joshua 1 to mean “rich in possessions and status,” or “freedom” in Galatians 5 to mean “autonom[y] ... to define our own identities without external constraints” (6). God forbid! That would make *me* the author of those texts, arbitrarily investing in biblical words and terms any meaning that took my fancy.

the crux here.<sup>9</sup> After over a quarter century of engagement with homiletics, I have yet to see any clear evidence in print of traditional exegesis seeking to catch authors' *doings*. Setting aside flashes of insight here and there, such an understanding of how language works has not, to my knowledge, permeated biblical studies or pervaded application theory for preaching.<sup>10</sup> I continue to argue that pragmatics is *the* key to valid application, since such a comprehension of the thrust of any utterance/text (what the author is *doing* with what he is saying/writing), especially of an utterance/text intended for application, is the critical step to discovering what is required of the listener/reader by the speaker/author. Indeed, this is how language (especially language that directs application) *always* works, whether scripted or spoken, sacred or secular.<sup>11</sup>

I quoted Thomas Long as labeling traditional methods of exegesis “excavation.” But those methods, Fanning protests, are “exactly the processes of study that, when used appropriately, allow the text itself to speak afresh today” (8). My employment of that metaphor (“hermeneutic of excavation”) described unselective semantic analyses of texts—“brows[ing] over the field of nature like cows at pasture”—*that failed to move inferentially to pragmatics*.<sup>12</sup> Important though they may be, such indiscriminate and undirected explorations by themselves are insufficient to take us to the pragmatics and the endpoint of relevant preaching with valid application<sup>13</sup>. What kind of *semantic* analysis of Mark 14–15 or of Gen 22 would, by itself, “allow the text itself to speak afresh today” as Fanning declares (8)? This is a mis-

<sup>9</sup> For those interested in differing ideas of preaching (including my own), watch for the release of *Four Views of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> I have not seen any directed and purposeful impartation of pragmatics of specific texts in most commentaries, seminary language classes, and academic conferences. Here is a stark example: To my knowledge, שָׁמַע לְקוֹל דְּבַר יְהוָה in 1 Sam 15:1 is translated literally as “Listen to *the voice of* the words of Yahweh” only in the KJV and the NKJV. The redundancy of “voice” is swept under the rug in all other major English translations. What the author really meant, translations assert, was: “Listen to the words of Yahweh” (or something similar). Whereas, “voice” (קוֹל) forms a critical element of the whole story and is the key to determining what the author was *doing* in that pericope. Following Saul’s disobedience to God’s “voice,” likewise, in 15:4, קוֹל becomes “bleating” and “lowing.” The author’s *doing* with what he is saying (poking a finger in my sternum: “What voice are *you* listening to, child of God?”) is completely attenuated by a misguided enthusiasm for what actually happened *behind* the text, bleating and lowing. These translational missteps are a clear indication that Bible translators and scholars don’t think in terms of what biblical authors are *doing* with what they are saying. But for preaching purposes and, indeed, for any reading of Scripture intended to culminate with application, the interpreter must privilege the text, catching the author’s *doings*, for only then can one discover what is projected *in front of* the text (see *Privilege the Text!* 107n40).

<sup>11</sup> For a non-theological hermeneutic—legal—that works in this fashion, see my *Privilege the Text!* 143–45. Fanning observes that “Pragmatics or ‘what an author is doing’ is not limited to the consequent conduct” (3n5). Perhaps, but my focus is on preaching and life change. The response that is desired by the author of a text, be it of cognition, emotion, or volition, can only be discerned by the reader from the text via its pragmatics.

<sup>12</sup> See my original article for this reference. As well, see my analogy there of this kind of “browsing” in the identification of random signs and symptoms in a patient with a facial rash.

<sup>13</sup> I strongly doubt if Alter (cited by Fanning [8, 8n19]) would agree that the rabbinical “excavative” analyses ought to be taught to seminary students, Jewish or Christian, that they may catch the literary *doings* of the authors of texts.

understanding of how language works, particularly language that directs application. What the text is speaking about, the thrust of the text, is *not* the semantics, but the pragmatics (built upon [selective] semantics, of course). *That's* what the author is *doing*. *That's* what needs to impact us, God's people, that our lives may be changed through valid application enabling us to be conformed more and more to the image of Jesus Christ.

### III. BEHIND THE TEXT?

I would agree with Fanning's impression (to him, worthy of censure)—“The text itself as a literary artifact is what is important, not anything ‘behind the text’” (5)—but with some necessary caveats. First, this is primarily as regards preaching: for preaching purposes, yes, it is the text alone that must be privileged. For it is the *text* that is inspired not any event behind it. Second, considering the text as an *inspired* literary entity does not mean that “the larger historical-cultural-religious world” that forms the context of the pericope/book is “rather unimportant or even unnecessary for interpretation” (5). In fact, as is semantics, the broader behind-the-text context of the event of the *Aqedab*, for instance, is essential (though not sufficient) for catching the author's thrust: the importance of progeny in that culture, the story of the wife-sister escapades in light of historical realities of autocratic rulers, the meaning of “fear of the Lord,” the status of child sacrifices, the promises and covenants of Yahweh, etc. All of these certainly throw some light on the pericope in question.<sup>14</sup>

Take the case of my patient with a facial rash. Of course, I have to take a family *history* (of kinship diseases and genetic predilections), a social *history* (of prevailing habits and unrecognized behaviors), a personal *history* (of occupation and demographics), and a medical *history* (of previous illnesses and earlier maladies). But the medley of these “behind-the-patient” elements have utility only insofar as they influence the current problem—the facial rash. Histories and backgrounds are not sufficient, *in and of themselves*, for arriving at a diagnosis and moving to treatment (= “for discerning the theology and for developing application” in textual interpretation). The immediate physical exam, current imaging, lab work, etc., are of primary importance in the diagnostic process, informed though they are—to some degree—by the assorted histories: they are essential, but not sufficient.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, behind-the-text issues and semantic analyses only bring us to a better grasp of what the author is saying. My proposal is that we build on all of these *and* move inferen-

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<sup>14</sup> Once again, I refer readers to my commentaries on a number of biblical books that negate Fanning's implication that “the details of the text as the author has written it in light of the original situation” are being neglected (5). I'm talking of a diagnosis-for-treatment that comes *after* a (judicious, discriminatory) history-taking, examination, etc., and of an interpretation-for-application that comes *after* a (judicious, discriminatory) study of backgrounds, exegesis, etc.—pragmatics from (judicious, discriminatory) semantics, i.e., a *theological* exegesis.

<sup>15</sup> The overestimation of the values of these historical bits and bytes of information oft lead the interpretive enterprise astray.

tially to the *doing* (pragmatics), for without discerning what the author is *doing*, without arriving at the pragmatics of the text, *valid application is impossible!*

#### IV. WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

Fanning expresses reservations about my use of Paul Ricoeur's *world in front of the text* (4–5). I will be the first to confess (as I have done elsewhere<sup>16</sup>) that I have appropriated Ricoeur in a distinctive way, integrating his philosophy of symbol, metaphor, and the *world in front of the text* to address the specific issue of moving from text to praxis in a sermon. Ricoeur's own philosophical perspectives on these and other issues were generally more latent than concrete, works still in progress, as he often admitted. My use of *world in front of the text* is simply as a metaphor for what the biblical author is *doing* with what he is saying—projecting a world that is God's desire for his creation, God's ideal world. This picture of a projected world enables us to grasp the gracious invitation that God extends to his people in each pericope to inhabit his world, with him. Some have suggested that this is the *real* world, while every other world, of human concoction, is less than real.<sup>17</sup> Others have advocated calling this the divine *kingdom*.<sup>18</sup> I'm not unsympathetic to either notion. All that to say, a number of verbal pictures may be needed here.

Fanning also observes from my readings of texts that this *world in front of the text* “that we are invited to live in today appears almost effortlessly, without the frustrating complications of pondering specifically the text's meaning in its ancient setting and then moving responsibly to what it means for us” (5). I would that that were the case, that I could “effortlessly” make the *world in front of the text* appear with a wave of my magic wand. Rather, it is an unceasing (and often “frustrating”) grappling with the text and its features, employing semantic analyses (though in a more nuanced and targeted fashion) and conducting pragmatic explorations, that get me to my destination (hardly irresponsible, as Fanning implies [7–8]). But as far as a “scientific/engineering” method is concerned, which I suspect my interlocutor is after, I admit my inability to codify an inferential process into pedantic steps that will yield a uniform strategy of “thick” reading that can be deployed successfully for every text, everywhere, every time. That would be like attempting to understand every painting in every museum exhibition in some robotic, checklist-guided fashion. Perhaps there just isn't such a method, seeing that pragmatic interpretation is

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<sup>16</sup> *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 374; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 26n45. Some of Fanning's concerns (see 3–4) are easily alleviated: Ricoeur may well have been speaking of *application* of texts. The actual application, i.e., the response of the reader, can be, to some extent, disparate from “meaning”—I, following E. D. Hirsch, call this “significance” (see *Privilege the Text!* 61–64).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, personal communication.

<sup>18</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); and idem, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies 2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

not code-based, but inferential.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this is why programming a computer to understand natural language is so fiendishly difficult.<sup>20</sup>

All that being said, yes, there is more work to be done on what I propose. May there be more theses and dissertations on allied matters hermeneutical that explore these issues of pragmatics, preaching, and textual “diagnoses.” This is a work in progress—we’ve only just begun! No doubt, there are, kinks to be ironed out.

## V. HOW MUCH GREEK?

Fanning resists my conclusion that “preachers need only enough language ability to use commentaries and software”; he deprecates “a superficial knowledge of the original language” (7). But let me restate my case differently: Let’s say that Fanning has performed a stellar traditional analysis of Philemon in a commentary on the epistle—histories, backgrounds, word studies, parsing, classifying, diagramming, and all. Why on earth would I, a frazzled pastor preaching 45–50 weeks a year, need to repeat all that this expert has done, reinventing the Philemon wheel, so to speak—and that’s assuming the overworked minister has the time, capacity, and resources to do so? Now Fanning would be the first to admit that he is far from inerrant in his analyses; he would, no doubt, exhort: *caveat lector*. But would any pastor-preacher, with a few meager years of Greek under his seminary belt, be able to improve upon Fanning’s work based on decades of scholarship and immersion in that biblical language? I think not. What the aforementioned frazzled laborer needs is “enough” Greek (and Hebrew)—i.e., *some* level of competence, although not the level promoted in many seminary curricula today—to use what is given to the rest of us by the sages, including those resources *in silico*. And I’d even argue further that what those frazzled pastors really need are pragmatics commentaries that point out the textual clues to what the author is *doing* in each pericope and discern the theology of individual pericopes. Then, these footsore and wayworn preachers can devote their time and attention to the intense, real, and necessary struggle of how those theologies should be applied, both in their own lives, and in the lives of the people they minister to. I fear language scholars in their ivory towers have lost touch with what’s happening in the pastor’s study.

Therefore, sadly, at the end of this dialogue, I remain unconvinced that the old guard is open to bringing aid to current and future preachers, and to God’s people, to further life transformation through Scripture and the power of God’s

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<sup>19</sup> And, perhaps—or, most likely—such interpretive “methods” are more caught than taught, as I noted in my original article. In that case, what students need are “curations” of texts that model such interpretations.

<sup>20</sup> Arguably, this is the most unpalatable feature of pragmatics for us enlightenment-influenced, scientifically-predisposed folks who want everything numbered, weighed, and divided. Pragmatics, in a sense, is un-coded and non-mechanical. And that is how natural language *always* works! I would even say that humans are hardwired to for such inferential operations, both to create utterances and to comprehend them.

Spirit. Let me close by paraphrasing Fanning (4): “What is *new* is not automatically inferior; what is *old* is not automatically superior.” The way things have always been done is not necessarily the way things always ought to be done. So, my charge: “Forward!”