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"WHAT IS THE AUTHOR *DOING* WITH WHAT HE IS *SAYING*?" PRAGMATICS AND PREACHING—AN APPEAL!

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Abstract: *This essay submits that without discerning what authors of Scripture do with what they say—the theology of particular pericopes—there can be no valid application: a matter of tremendous importance to every Christian and, perhaps particularly, to every Christian preacher. In other words, there is more to biblical interpretation than a semantic analysis of the text; a pragmatic examination must also be undertaken to arrive at authors' doings. Valid application so derived from the pragmatics of the text moves the Christian towards greater Christlikeness—a Christiconic interpretation of Scripture. This essay also claims that traditional methods of interpretation as taught in seminary language classes and modeled in standard commentaries have been wanting in this regard: they remain inadequate for those seeking to move from text to praxis. In sum, this is the plea of a preacher and a teacher of preachers for more work to be done on pragmatics by scholars in the academy to aid practitioners in the church.*

Key words: *hermeneutics, homiletics, preaching, sermon, application, theology, pericopes, interpretation, semantics, pragmatics.*

POLONIUS*:* What do you read, my lord?
HAMLET*:* Words, words, words.
Hamlet, 2.2.191

I. INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, in a church I visited, I found a copy of a popular daily devotional that can often be seen in the foyer of many churches.[1] Skimming through its pages in an idle moment, I spotted a devotional on Acts 28. Paul is shipwrecked in Malta. And he joins everyone else in helping out, picking up sticks for a fire. So, the devotional recommended, we too should be willing to do menial jobs in churches. Always be willing to do even the lowliest job. Of course the writer of the devotional conveniently forgot about the viper that came out of the cord and bit the hapless apostle!

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I, being the clever guy that I am, could use that part of Acts 28 to recommend exactly the opposite: *Never, ever* do menial tasks, because—who knows?—a venomous beast, usually of the two-legged variety, may sink its fangs into you!

The Bible, it seems, is just "words, words, words," as Hamlet replied when asked what he was reading. Just words, it appears, that can be read for application any which way one wants, a wax nose vulnerable to the capricious whims of the preacher.[2]

How does one go about this task of finding valid application for an ancient text? Throughout the two millennia of the church age, this has been the gaping hole in every theory of preaching. The complex and critical issue of how the preacher moves from text to sermon—then to now—has not been explicated. Throughout church history it has remained somewhat of a black box. David Buttrick, homiletics scholar, once said:

> Many books have been written on "biblical preaching"; specifically on how preachers can move step by step from the Bible passage to a sermon. … But in all such books there seems to be a gap. There's something left out in between. The crucial moment between exegesis and homiletical vision is not described. The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps it occurs in a flash of imagination—is never discussed. So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic![3]

The lot of the homiletician is not easy: each week, this intrepid soul has to negotiate the formidable passage from ancient text to modern audience—a burdensome responsibility.[4] Stanley Porter agrees: "the move from the original text of Scripture, with all of its time-bound character, to theological truths for life today is one of the most demanding intellectual tasks imaginable"—a task that confronts preachers each time the Bible is expounded.[5] Thomas Long describes the perplexity of this movement from text to audience:

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[2] That sentiment was also echoed by Eliza Doolittle:

> Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
> I get words all day through;
> First from him, now from you!
> Is that all you [preachers] can do?

Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, *My Fair Lady: A Musical Play in Two Acts Based on Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1956), 146 (Doolittle actually used "blighters" in the last line).

[3] David G. Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 89.

[4] James D. Smart called this "a perilous road" (*The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* [London: SCM, 1970], 33–34).

[5] Stanley E. Porter, "Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation, and Theology: Hunch, Holy Spirit, or Hard Work?," in I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 121. And, Porter adds, "Anyone who proclaims how easy it is to do this is probably prevaricating, or is very bad at the task, or is so very experienced at it as to have forgotten the intellectual and spiritual task that it is" (ibid.).

> Alert biblical preachers have been aware for some time that there is a bit of deception, a touch of legerdemain, built into that classical text-to-sermon process. The preacher takes the text and puts it through the paces of a good exegetical process. The grammar of the text is analyzed, word studies are conducted, the probable *Sitz im Leben* is established, and so on. The handle is turned, the wheels spin, the gears mesh, and in the end out pops a reasonably secure version of what the text *meant* in its historical context or, to put it more bluntly, what the text *used to mean*. Now, so what? The exegesis yielded the information that Paul responded in such and such a way to a question in Corinth about meat offered to idols, a question that would never in a million years occur to anyone in Kingsport, Tennessee, or Fresno, California. So what? … The preacher is simply told that now the gap must be bridged from the history of the text to the urgency of the contemporary situation. It is presented as an obvious next step, a child's leap across a puddle, but the honest preacher knows that the distance between what the text *used to mean* and what the text may *now mean* yawns wide, and the leap seems difficult indeed.[6]

A direct transfer of imperatives from those biblical texts will not do for Kingsport or Fresno, or San Antonio or New Delhi, for today's Christians are not in ancient Corinth, they have nothing to do with Pharisees, and they do not face similar crises as were encountered by early believers. I empathize with Long's refrain: "So what?" How is all this intricate detail in the historic text relevant to me, the modern listener? The crux of the hermeneutical problem is the traversal from the *then* of the text to the *now* of the audience: words written in an earlier age are to be transposed in some fashion into a later era.[7] How do we read the text for preaching and application purposes? And who will guide preachers in this perplexing enterprise?

Speaking as a preacher, and as one also engaged in the pedagogy of homiletics, I will claim in this essay that it is Hebrew and Greek scholars and teachers who need to direct preachers. But permit me to give a couple of examples first—one from the NT and one from the OT—to indicate what preachers are looking for, in terms of guidance in reading texts for application.[8]

II. THE NAKED RUNAWAY AND THE ENROBED REPORTER

The story of Jesus's resurrection in Mark is puzzling. The evangelist depicts a "young man" at the empty tomb (νεανίσκος; Mark 16:5–7), an enrobed reporter

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[6] Thomas G. Long, "The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching," *Int* 44 (1990): 344.

[7] While I am placing this issue of bridging the gap in the context of the preaching endeavor, the question is one that is pertinent for *all* biblical interpretation intended to culminate in application: those conducted in Bible study groups, Sunday School classes, or even in one's own reading of Scripture.

[8] I've used narrative pericopes in both my examples, both for ease of further reference (papers in this *Journal* have dealt in detail with my approach to each of these texts; see below), and because the bulk of Scripture is narrative. Nevertheless, what I claim herein is applicable to all genres. See, for instance, a pericope by pericope analysis in this fashion, of an entire NT epistle: Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

announcing that Jesus has risen.[9] But all the other Gospel writers call this person an angel.[10] Mark could certainly have done so, too—such numinous beings had already been labeled "angels" at least five times in his Gospel (1:13; 8:38; 12:25; 13:27, 32). And curiously, in the entire Gospel, there has been only one other νεανίσκος featured, a naked runaway in 14:51–52. So, the only reason for Mark's unique appellation here in 16:5, calling the angel a νεανίσκος, must have been to create an overt link to that other νεανίσκος in Mark. Why? What was Mark *doing*? Strangely, the clothing of both young men is noted. The enrobed reporter is wearing white (16:5), and the naked runaway is clothed in linen (14:51). Mark's interest in the attire of these young men is foregrounded with another word that links these two incidents—the verb περιβάλλω, "to wear" (14:51–52; 15:5). In fact, these are the only two uses of περιβάλλω in the entire Gospel. What is going on?

In the first appearance of the νεανίσκος, upon the arrest of Jesus, he, like the disciples, "flees" (φεύγω, 14:50, 52). This one, again like the disciples, is described as one who had been "following" Jesus (συνακολουθέω, 14:51; and ακολουθέω, 8:34; 10:28). So here in Mark 14, the νεανίσκος is being painted as a disciple: the disciples "followed," the νεανίσκος "followed"; the disciples "fled," the νεανίσκος "fled"—followers had all become "flee-ers." And what a fleeing it was—naked, as the runaway shed his "linen cloth" (σινδών, ×2 in 14:51–52)! The wardrobe malfunction of the νεανίσκος vividly points to the shamefulness of his abandonment and that of the rest of Jesus's followers. This was ignominious unfaithfulness on the part of the disciples who had chosen shame over fidelity to Jesus. The young man's fleeing is thus symbolic of the total abandonment of Jesus by his disciples who fled to escape the baleful consequences of association with their Master. And thereby the discarded σινδών becomes a *garment of shame*.

The next time (and the only other time in Mark) that we see σινδών is when Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus's body in a "linen cloth" (15:46). Just as in 14:51–52, here also σινδών occurs twice. One remembers that Jesus's crucifixion followed a public humiliation that involved his being stripped naked twice in the process (15:17, 20).[11] In a clever narrative strategy, the garment of shame of the disciple has now become the garment of shame of the Master. In ignominious circumstances, the disciple is stripped of the linen cloth he wore, and—*voila*!—a linen cloth becomes Jesus's burial shroud following an equally degrading assassination. This, of course, is not to assert that it was the same σινδών worn by the young man that became Jesus's shroud. Rather, the garment is cleverly utilized by the narrator as a literary device for the furtherance of his theological agenda. That agenda becomes clear as one turns to the account of Jesus's resurrection, in 16:1–8.

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[9] See Abraham Kuruvilla, "The Naked Runaway and the Enrobed Reporter of Mark 14 and 16: What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?," *JETS* 54 (2011): 527–45; idem, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 317–18, 355–59.

[10] See Matt 28:1; "men" in Luke 24:4, but "angels" in 24:23; and "two angels" in John 20:1.

[11] Incidentally, "naked" (γυμνός) also occurs twice in 14:51–52. Both the νεανίσκος and Jesus are thus associated twice with σινδών and twice with open nudity.

But the νεανίσκος there is not wearing a σινδών, as was his earlier counterpart. Instead, the enrobed reporter is clothed in "white" (λευκός; 16:5). Here is another remarkable "coincidence": there is only one other instance of λευκός in the entire Gospel. At his transfiguration, Jesus is depicted in dazzling attire that is exceedingly "white" (λευκός; 9:3)—a *garment of glory*. So Jesus's garment of glory, in an act of literary prestidigitation, has now become the garment of glory worn by the νεανίσκος. Again, this is not to assert that Jesus and the young man shared the self-same white raiment; it is merely a literary device the evangelist employs for his theological purpose.

We discern that theological purpose by putting the two clothing transfers together. The runaway's garment of shame in Mark 14 becomes Jesus's garment of shame in Mark 15. And Jesus's garment of glory in Mark 9 becomes the reporter's garment of glory in Mark 16. The art of the narrator thus paints an incredible picture: the fleeing νεανίσκος, symbolic of the disciples who had shamefully abandoned Jesus, left behind a σινδών that buried Jesus. That was what the Master was given by the disciple—a *garment of shame*. But at the resurrection, there is a νεανίσκος clothed in the white that Jesus had worn at his transfiguration. That was what the disciple was given by the Master—a *garment of glory*. When one remembers that throughout Mark the disciples have been portrayed as obtuse and faithless, stumbling and failing, clumsy and hesitant, this artistic portrayal of the "exchange" of garments bears an implicit promise: there is hope for disciples who have failed to be faithful to Jesus. There is hope for all of us, feeble and fallible, who follow Jesus: our shame has been exchanged for his glory. Yes, there is hope, indeed! In fact, that was the message of the second νεανίσκος, the enrobed reporter: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter [who, in his last appearance in Mark, was denying Jesus; 14:66–72], 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'" I accept the shorter ending of Mark that renders this mention of Galilee particularly significant. Mark's Gospel is laid out as a one-way journey that begins in Galilee (1:1–8:21), continues on the "way" (8:22–10:52), and ends in Jerusalem (11:1–16:8). And here at the end of the Gospel, we find that Jesus has already returned to where it all began, Galilee, and is waiting for his failed followers to rejoin him to recommence the "Trip of Discipleship." There *is* hope for the fallen!

All this to say, Mark is *doing* something with what he is saying, as he organizes historical events into a theologically powerful narrative. Readers' apprehension of the narrator's art (which, like his words, is also inspired by the Holy Spirit) will determine whether that theological thrust is discerned and accepted, and whether lives are transformed thereby. For it is only by catching this theological purpose of the author, his *doing*, that valid application is possible. In this case, application would deal with taking encouragement when crushed by failure.

III. THE *AQEDAH*

Here is another example of authors' *doings,* this from the OT—the *Aqedah,* in Genesis 22.[12] The account begins with a time-stamp: "Now it came about *after these things*, that God tested Abraham" (22:1). What exactly were "these [preceding] things"?

In Genesis 12, God spoke to the patriarch for the first time; in Genesis 22, for the last time. Both speeches contain the same command, found nowhere else in the OT: לֶךְ־לְךָ, "Go forth/out" (Gen 12:1; 22:2). Both stress a journey, an altar, and promised blessings. In Genesis 12, God commanded Abraham to leave his relatives and father's house (12:1–3). Yes, Abraham showed faith in stepping out as directed, but he took along his nephew, Lot, even though the divine word called for a separation from relatives and father's house. Was Abraham thinking of Lot as the likely heir, seeing that he himself was already seventy-five years old, and his wife sixty-five (12:4)?

Soon after, as Abraham stepped into the Negev, his caravan is hit by a famine (12:9–10), and he promptly decamps to Egypt. Could he not trust God to provide? And one knows what happened in that land of refuge: Abraham passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, lest he get killed by Pharaoh (12:12–14). Since God had promised him seed, why would he have to worry about losing his life before he had had at least one child?

Later, the still childless Abraham tries to name Eliezer, his steward, as his heir (15:2–3), an attempt God immediately nixes: Abraham's heir would be "one who shall come forth from your own body" (15:4). The patriarch then resorted to a compromise: perhaps the chosen heir, "from [his] own body," was to come through the maternal agency of a concubine (16:2). Acting on this misconception, Abraham fathers Ishmael through Hagar, the Egyptian—another fiasco. Faithlessness constantly characterizes Abraham's response to God's promise of an heir.

Then, to make matters worse, in Genesis 20 Abraham *again* palms off his wife Sarah as his sister! This time to Abimelech (20:2), but for the same reason that he had conducted his subterfuge in Genesis 12—out of fear for his own life (20:11), again doubting God's word and promises of an heir.

Thus, all along, Abraham is seen rather clumsily stumbling along in his faith, at least as far as God's promise of seed is concerned. Genesis 12–20, then, is not exactly an account of pristine faith on the part of the patriarch. And so, now in Genesis 22, Abraham is tested: Would Abraham trust God now after all the lessons he had learned? We know the rest of the story: He would, and he did.

Notice the key phrase in the acclamation of the angel of Yahweh at the end of Abraham's test, in 22:12: "Now I know that you *fear God*" (יְרֵא אֱלֹהִים). The last time "fear of God" was mentioned in the Abrahamic saga was in 20:11 (in fact, these are the first two occurrences of the phrase in Scripture). When Abimelech

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[12] See Abraham Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah:* What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?," *JETS* 55 (2012): 489–508; also see idem, *Genesis: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2014), 250–64.

confronted Abraham with his wife/sister deception, Abraham's excuse was: "Surely there is no *fear of God* [יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים] in this place, and they will kill me on account of my wife" (20:11). The irony is that Abimelech and his people were terror-stricken by the possibility of having gone against God—they were said to be "greatly frightened [וַיִּירְאוּ … מְאֹד]" (20:8). On the other hand, it was *Abraham* who did not fear God enough to trust deity to take care of him in this crisis.

But that was in Genesis 20. In Genesis 22, Abraham appeared to have learned his lesson in fearing/trusting God (22:12). What had changed his attitude was the crucial intervening event of Genesis 21, between Abraham's faithlessness in Genesis 20 and his faithfulness in Genesis 22—the birth of the promised heir, Isaac. Three times in two verses, God's faithfulness in this matter is established unequivocally: "Yahweh took note of Sarah *as he had said*" (21:1a); "Yahweh did for Sarah *as he had promised* (21:1b); "Sarah conceived and bore a son … at the appointed time *of which God had spoken to him*" (21:2). This threefold reminder of a past divine utterance was a rebuke to Abraham's faithlessness thus far: God, ever faithful, had done as he had said/spoken/promised—Abraham could surely trust him!

And so in Genesis 22, trust him, he does. At the end of the traumatic test, the divine declaration, "Now I know that you fear God" (22:12), gave proof to the fact that Abraham now feared God, trusting him enough to obey him without question. "Genesis 22 may appropriately be read as a, arguably the, primary canonical exposition of the meaning of 'one who fears God,'" entailing "obedience of the most demanding kind," grounded in a deep trust in God.[13] In other words, the *Aqedah* defines the meaning of יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים—obedience and trust that holds back nothing from God—absolutely nothing!

Without even perusing the details of Abraham's test, the question of Abraham's loyalties is answered in the pre-test and post-test descriptors of Isaac:

Pre-test:

22:2	"your son, your only child, *the one you love*"

Post-test:

22:12	"your son, your only child"
22:16	"your son, your only child"

The trifold description of Isaac in 22:2 was to emphasize that this son, this particular child, was the one Abraham *loved*. It is significant that this is the first time the word "love" (אהב) occurs in the Bible. It appears then, that this love of Abraham for Isaac was a crucial element in the test, a love that potentially stood in the way of his fear of, and faith in, God. The subsequent post-test deletion of the phrase, "the one you love," was clear indication that Abraham had passed the ex-

[13] R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79, 96. Faith is, of course, an integral part of that "fear." Abraham's faith in God is underscored in 22:5, where in a series of first-person plural verbs, the result that Abraham expected as the outcome of the test is stated: "I and the lad—we shall go …, and we shall worship, and *we shall return*."

amination. The *Aqedah* was thus also a demonstration of the patriarch's love for God over and against anything that advanced a rival claim to that love. In sum, the test proved the patriarch's absolute allegiance to God—his unadulterated love for deity: fear of God.[14] Nothing would stand between Abraham and God. And, in a circuitous way, the text further confirms this.

An element of the account that has bewildered interpreters throughout the ages is the disappearance of Isaac from the Abraham stories after 22:16. In fact, the *Aqedah* itself concludes with: "And Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba" (22:19). Wait—what happened to Isaac? In fact, after this narrative, father and son are never shown speaking to each other again in Genesis. The only mentioned "contact" between the two after the stunning incident of Genesis 22 is at Abraham's funeral (25:9). After the test, it is as if Isaac has altogether vanished. But the author is *doing* something with what he is saying. A line had been drawn; the relationship between father and son had been clarified; the tension between fear/love of God and love of son had been resolved. Now *Abraham* so loved *God* that he gave his only begotten son. And to bring that home to readers, father and son are separated for the rest of their days—*literarily* separated, that is, for the purpose of achieving the narrator's theological agenda: the love/fear of God had trumped every other allegiance! It is only by discerning this theological thrust, the author's *doing*, that valid application is possible: being willing, ourselves, to give everything up for God.[15]

One might interpret the Bible in many ways depending on one's goals for those interpretations. But when we interpret the text *for preaching*—and I want to emphasize that that purpose is the exclusive concern of this essay—we must focus upon what the author is *doing* what he is saying in that particular text in order to elicit valid application for readers.[16] What is this entity—the author's *doing* with what he is saying?

IV. SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

There has been a longstanding tendency in the interpretation of utterances to abide by a code model of communication that sees the communicator's thoughts as being exclusively borne in a socially constructed code (the sentence) that when decoded by a receiver reproduces the communicator's thoughts in the receiver's mind. The encoded message thus seems to exist in a vacuum, autonomous and self-

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[14] The equation of "fear of God" and "love for God" is not illegitimate: Deut 6:2, 13 commands fear, while the *Shema* calls for love (6:5); Deut 10:12 and 13:3–4 each has both elements; also see Deut 10:20 with 11:1; as well as Pss 31:19, 23; and 145:19–20.

[15] Such generalizations and abstractions will not do for sermon applications, of course, that need to be more specific and concrete.

[16] For other examples of authors' *doings* in pericopes, developed pericope by pericope through individual books, see, besides my commentaries on Genesis, Mark, and Ephesians, Abraham Kuruvilla, *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

contained, suppressing authors and their intentions.[17] It has only been in the last five decades that the blossoming of language philosophy and cognitive science have made clear that communication is, in addition, an inferential process. In other words, there is a distinction between *sentence meaning* (i.e. semantics) and *utterance meaning* (i.e. pragmatics, what the author/speaker is *doing* with what s/he is saying). "While semantics deals with the meaning of language or the representational content, pragmatics focuses on language use."[18] Decoding an utterance provides the former; an inferential process yields the latter. Both, of course, are necessary for interpretation.

For instance, if *Mrs. A* tells *Mr. A,* "The trash is full," the sentence meaning indicates the state of the trash can, while the utterance meaning exhorts *Mr. A*, "Take out the trash!" That is what *Mrs. A* was *doing* with what she was saying. Pragmatics, an inferential process, uses the statement of a speaker as an input, and with contextual information, generates an output of the speaker's intended meaning. There is a resulting division of labor in which "semanticists deal with decoded meaning," and "pragmaticists deal with inferred meaning."[19] Let me hasten to assert that both are necessary. But linguistically encoded meaning, or sentence meaning, typically underdetermines the pragmatically inferred meaning, or utterance meaning. In other words, to catch what *Mrs. A* is *doing* with what she is saying needs more than just the decoding of her sentence; it needs inference by *Mr. A* if he is to grasp the thrust of his wife's utterance. Unless this thrust, the pragmatics of *Mrs. A*'s utterance, supervening in some way upon the semantics thereof, is comprehended, valid application cannot take place.[20]

All of this should cause the interpreter to be careful and nuanced about interpreting texts—their very nature of conveying information must be reconsidered. "The semantics of a text are signposts and in no way can be considered equal to the whole of a communicator's utterance."[21] In other words, the semantics (the linguistically encoded meaning, sentence meaning) is a template that must be enriched to arrive at the pragmatics (the inferentially discerned meaning, utterance meaning). Such inferential operations are integral to interpretation, particularly interpretation *for application,* which is every preacher's burden (more on that later).

The debate as to what constitutes the boundary between semantics and pragmatics is ongoing. While the semantic and pragmatic transactions of a text may not be separable, they are discriminable: what the author is *saying* and what the author is

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[17] Gene L. Green, "Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation," in *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (NT Monographs 11; ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2009), 219–20.

[18] Ibid., 220. Or "context-independent linguistically encoded meaning … versus speaker meaning (or communicated meaning or utterance meaning)" (Robyn Carston, "Linguistic Communication and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction," *Synthese* 165 [2008]: 322).

[19] Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), x, 9.

[20] If that pragmatic inference is not made, *Mr. A.*, in response to the semantics of *Mrs. A*'s observation, might well go and buy a larger trashcan—an invalid application!

[21] Green, "Relevance Theory," 233.

doing with what s/he is saying can be distinguished (sentence meaning vs. utterance meaning). No doubt, there are other ways of drawing the line between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. Proponents of Relevance Theory, for example, hold that *explicature* (broadly equivalent to sentence meaning: that which is explicit) includes semantics and even some of what is usually labeled pragmatics. For example, in understanding an utterance, "She asked for the trunk right away," explicature would include indexical resolution (Who is the "she"?), reference assignment ("*The* trunk"—Which particular one?), disambiguation ("Trunk" of a tree or a car? A piece of luggage? A body part?), saturation ("Right away"—When?), expansion of subsentential utterances, and so on. These elements are inferentially discerned and therefore part of pragmatics. Relevance Theory includes these (in addition to the standard operations of semantics) in the category of explicature. All *other* pragmatic inferences, made from shared private knowledge (the context of the reported event—an airport check-in counter; what else was said—the person at the counter informed "her" that the trunk was overweight; "her" known habits and idiosyncrasies—frugality and unwillingness to pay excess baggage fees), and from the encyclopedic knowledge of participants (of what generally happens at airports, permitted weights of checked-in luggage, excess baggage tariffs, etc.), fall into *implicature* (broadly equivalent to utterance meaning: that which is implicit). But to keep things simple, here I shall stick with a generic distinction between pragmatics and semantics—authors' *doings* and authors' *sayings*.[22]

One caveat with most linguistic theories that work with semantics and pragmatics is that these models deal primarily with spoken language, marked by the common physical context of participants, the unique personalities of speaker and listener, the private information they share, and their general encyclopedic knowledge, not to mention the numerous paralinguistic elements operating in such transactions, like inflections, gestures, facial expressions, etc.[23] Therefore the inferential part of interpreting is relatively easier for a listener located proximal to the speaker. Things are, no doubt, different when interpreting a text written millennia ago. But that is not to say that pragmatic interpretation of Scripture is impossible. In the first place, writing itself is an act intended to be consumed at an event sub-

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[22] For more on the semantics/pragmatics distinction, see Wilson and Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance*; Carston, "Linguistic Communication," 321–45; idem, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); idem, "Explicature and Semantics," *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 12 (2000): 1–44. Also see the various articles in *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). Wilson and Sperber acknowledge that "the semantics–pragmatics interface becomes an interesting interdisciplinary area of research in its own right" (*Meaning and Relevance,* 26). All this is still a work in progress. But rather than wait for experts to sort out concepts and labels, I have decided to get a move on for the sake of preachers and their listeners.

[23] Also, I suspect that most models that deal with pragmatics are, by nature, going to be more phenomenological than heuristic. Because every communication event is idiosyncratic, such theories tend to be descriptive, not prescriptive, and do not promise much in the way of specific guidelines or steps for interpretation. Besides, the moment an inferential model is *codified* into guidelines and steps that automatically generate pragmatics—if that were possible—it has mutated into a *code* model of communication. Such a reductionism of cognition into concrete operations is unlikely to be the way the mind works to bridge semantics and pragmatics, to catch what authors *do* with what they say.

sequent to its production, and the writers of Scripture—hardly rustics unschooled in the art of communication, not to mention the inspiration of their scripting enterprises—would have certainly been aware that that these contextual factors would be unavailable to a future reader. Besides, when dealing with sizable chunks of texts, say for example, Genesis 22 in the midst of fifty chapters of Genesis, set within a tome of thirty-nine books and a larger corpus of sixty-six, the difficulties are not insurmountable. I suggest that the volume of material available in biblical texts makes up for these deficiencies.[24]

For instance, if our favorite protagonist *A* says, "She asked for the trunk right away," and if that is all that was available to the interpreter, an early task would be to disambiguate the noun, "trunk." Did she mean a car trunk (probably not, unless this is happening in a junkyard and she is purchasing a used car part), an elephant's proboscis (possible if, in an elephant park, she is requesting of the mahout an opportunity to feel the animal's trunk), the thorax of a cadaver (perhaps, if this is taking place in an anatomy dissection lab), a tree trunk (in a lumber yard), a piece of luggage, …. Then when *A* continues, "She asked for the trunk right away, *and opened it*," some of these options are ruled out, leaving only luggage, a car trunk, or even a human thorax (the anatomist asking to perform a dissection of this particular trunk) as possibilities. And with the entirety of what *A* said—"She asked for the trunk right away, and opened it, *taking out some of her belongings*"—it becomes clear: "trunk" refers to a piece of luggage. Of course, there are other elements in this orphaned piece of contextless discourse that remain vague, but at least we have disambiguated "trunk" simply from having a sizable portion of the utterance to work with. Likewise, the considerable volume of text available to interpreters of Scripture enables them to discern authors' *doings* without undue difficulty, as my examples from Mark 14, 15, 16 and Genesis 22 demonstrate. It is only after discerning these *doings* by the author(s) that one can proceed to valid application, resuming one's discipleship with Jesus Christ after failure (Mark 14, 15, 16), or holding nothing back from God (Genesis 22).[25] And, of course, application is the terminus of all interpretation of Scripture.

V. SCRIPTURE AND APPLICATION

Application is what the texts of Scripture were written for, and application is the primary function of Scripture and the endpoint of its study. Philo proclaimed: "On the seventh day there are spread before the people in every city innumerable

[24] It is obvious that, in the interpretation of Scripture, authors' *doings* are discerned almost exclusively from the written text, modalities of conversational pragmatics being unavailable to distanced readers. This is a unique feature of *textual* pragmatics, and for this reason, I prefer the label "what the author is doing *with what he is saying* [*writing*]," emphasizing the text (the saying/writing) as the primary source/bearer of the pragmatics (the doing). (For the purposes of this essay, I do not make a distinction between human and divine authors.)

[25] Application is more than these general statements, of course. It involves specification: the bringing down of those abstractions to actual engagements for the particular audience, as the preacher, exercising pastoral wisdom, proposes specific applications.

lessons of prudence, and temperance, and courage, and justice, and all other virtues … what is of great importance and use, *by which the whole of their lives may be improved*."[26] This Jewish orientation of preaching with application was carried over into the practice of the church. In the early second century, Justin Martyr, describing a worship service, noted that after the reading of the Gospels, "the leader verbally instructs, and *exhorts to the imitation of these good things*."[27] Augustine affirmed that the aim of an expositor of Scripture was "to be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and *with obedience*."[28] Throughout church history, the goal of Scripture interpretation was application. "The Bible," Smart declared, "is marching orders for an army, not bedtime reading to help one sleep more soundly."[29] Scripture must be read for application, because Scripture is God's invitation to his people to live in a world that operates by his priorities, that engages his practices, and is geared for his purposes. What do I mean?

1. *World in front of the text.* A text is not an end in itself but the means to an end, a literary instrument of the author's action of projecting a transcending vision—what Paul Ricoeur called the *world in front of the text*.[30] Here's Mark (from the Naked Runaway story): "Come, live in this ideal world by being restored by Jesus from your failures and by being renewed to a new day of walking with him!" And here's the author of Genesis (from the *Aqedah*): "Come, abide in this ideal world fearing and loving God by holding back nothing from him—absolutely nothing!" To live in those respective projected worlds is to adopt the values of those worlds as proposed by those texts—being encouraged and restored in one, being utterly committed to God in the other.

Thus, in texts, a view of life, a *world in front of the text*, is portrayed, and an invitation to that world is extended. Lives are changed as listeners respond by inhabiting that world, abiding by its values. That is to say, a text's projected world enables subsequent application. Because Scripture is intended for future application by God's people, its interpretation cannot cease with the elucidation of its linguistic, grammatical, and syntactical elements—what the author is saying (semantics), but must proceed further to discern the *world in front of the text*—what the author is *doing* (pragmatics).[31] So this projected world forms the intermediary between text and application, and enables one to respond validly to the text.

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[26] *Special Laws*, 2.15.62.

[27] *First Apology*, 67.

[28] *On Christian Doctrine*, 4.13.29.

[29] *The Strange Silence*, 23.

[30] "Naming God," *USQR* 34 (1979): 217. Also see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 393; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 19–35.

[31] For all practical purposes, the *world in front of the text* and the pragmatics of the text (i.e. what its author is *doing*) may be considered equivalent. Later, I label this entity the "theology" of the pericope.

Indeed, *all* communication functions this way. For instance, if *A* tells *B,* "Hey, you are standing on my foot!" the sentence meaning (what the author is saying, semantics) asserts the spatial location of *B*'s foot upon the lower limb of *A*, while the utterance meaning (what the author is *doing*, pragmatics) attempts to get *B* to relocate that extremity from its traumatic situation upon *A*'s anatomy. In fact, what *A* was *doing* was projecting a *world in front of the text,* an ideal world in which no one is ever stationed upon *A*'s foot to produce distress. *A*'s desire was for *B* to inhabit such an ideal "nobody-ever-standing-on-*A*'s-foot-to-cause-*A*-pain" kind of world. That habitation could be accomplished only by conforming to the value of that world—removing the burden off *A*'s foot, thus alleviating the latter's agony, for in that projected world nobody ever stands on *A*'s foot to cause *A* pain.

Unfortunately, that is not how biblical texts are interpreted in a homiletic grounded upon the code model of communication. For instance, if that statement by *A* to *B* ("Hey, you are standing on my foot!") were an inspired utterance in Scripture, a preacher in the traditional camp expositing that "text" on Sunday morning would conceivably expatiate on the derivation of the word "foot" from the Old English *fot* from the Latin *pes* from the Greek πούς (and the Sanskrit *pād*). The preacher might discourse upon the foot's kinesiology (twenty-six bones, thirty-three joints, over a hundred muscles, tendons, and ligaments), its hematology (blood vessels), and its neurology (nerve supply). This preacher would, no doubt, wax eloquent about the pathology of that extremity (its various abnormalities: club foot, flat foot, athlete's foot, skew foot, rheumatoid foot, …), and so on, focusing on all the "-ologies," but completely missing the pragmatics and its intended valid application: *"Get your foot off mine!"* In other words, unless one catches what *A* is *doing* (pragmatics, the *world in front of the text:* an ideal world in which no one stands on *A*'s foot to cause *A* pain), valid application in response to *A*'s statement is impossible. All that regurgitation of kinesiology, hematology, neurology, Christology, ecclesiology, or one's favorite "-ology" *du jour,* can never bring one to valid application.

So also for the biblical text. The biblical canon as a whole projects a *world in front of the text*—God's ideal world, individual segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes.[32] Taken together, the integrated composite of all such segments make up the canonical projection of God's ideal *world in front of the text*—the plenary world.

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[32] Though "pericope" has the technical sense of a demarcated portion of the Gospels, I use the word here simply to designate a preaching text, irrespective of genre or length.

PERICOPE	SEGMENT OF THE WORLD	PLENARY WORLD
Pericope 1	Segment 1 of the Plenary World	
Pericope 2	Segment 2 of the Plenary World	
Pericope 3	Segment 3 of the Plenary World	
Pericope 4	Segment 4 of the Plenary World	God’s Ideal World
Pericope 5	Segment 5 of the Plenary World	
…	…	
Pericope *n*	Segment *n* of the Plenary World	

Thus, each sermon on a particular pericope is God’s gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust of that pericope—i.e. the values of God’s ideal world as called for in that pericope’s world-segment. Without such a transaction, there can be no valid application. And as God’s people accept that divine invitation, week by week and pericope by pericope, they are increasingly inhabiting this ideal world and adopting its values. One pericope at a time, the various aspects of Christian life, individual and corporate, are gradually being brought into alignment with the will of God for the glory of God—God’s word is being applied, and God’s world is becoming reality. This is the goal of preaching.

2. Pericopal theology. Because this world speaks of God and how he relates to his creation, this projected world may rightly be called “theology.”[33] Speaking as it does of God and his relationship with his creation, and bearing as it does direction for life change, this projected world is the concern and focus of theology as a discipline. Thus, the segment of this ideal world that each pericope projects becomes the theology of that pericope—*pericopal theology*.[34] To live by the theology of the pericope is to accept God’s gracious invitation to inhabit his ideal world; and by so doing, his people align themselves to the precepts, priorities, and practices of that ideal world—i.e. to the will of God.

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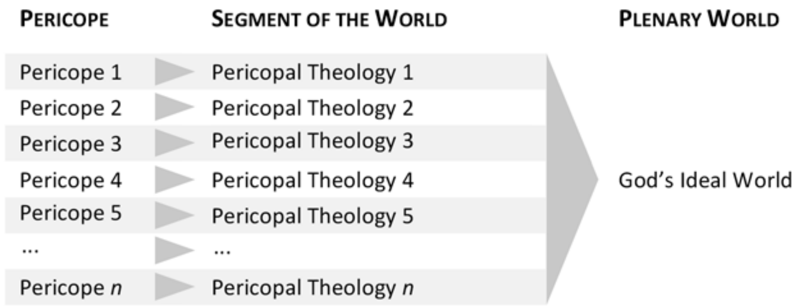
[33] “Theology is, and always has been, an activity of what I call the ‘imaginative construction’ of a comprehensive and coherent picture of humanity in the world under God” (Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* [3rd ed.; Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1995], ix).

[34] For distinctions between pericopal theology, biblical theology, and systematic theology, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 113–16.



So, each sermon must point out the theology of the pericope under consideration, elucidating what that specific text affirms about God and his relationship with mankind—the values of the *world in front of the text*. And what the pericope so affirms in its theology forms the basis of the subsequent move to derive application.

Biblical interpretation for application that does not elucidate this crucial intermediary, pericopal theology, is *de facto* incomplete, for without discerning this entity by pragmatic inference, valid application can never be arrived at.

3. *Christiconic interpretation*. What is necessary for preachers, then, is to grasp the pragmatics of the text, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying, to comprehend the projected world, the theology of the pericope. I propose, therefore, a *theological* exegesis that privileges the text, a directed exploration that discerns and synthesizes textual clues to arrive at pericopal theology. Within every pericope of Scripture, there are literary and stylistic traces of authors' agendas, evidence pointing the authors' *doings*, signs that lead to the discovery of pericopal theology.[35] This theological exegesis is exegesis done expressly in order to arrive at the theology of the pericope, for only from this intermediary can valid application be discerned.

Preaching is God's gracious call to his people to live with him in his ideal world, abiding by its values. Since only one Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, perfectly met all of God's demands, being without sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 7:26), one can say that this Person, and this Person alone, has perfectly inhabited the *world in front of the text*. Jesus Christ alone has comprehensively abided by the theology of every pericope of Scripture. In other words, each pericope of the Bible is actually portraying a characteristic of Christ (a facet of Christ's image), showing us what it means to perfectly fulfill, as he did, the particular call of that pericope. The Bible as a

[35] For example: the unique uses of νεανίσκος, σινδών, περιβάλλω, and λευκός in Mark 9, 14, 15, and 16; and the repeats of יְרֵאַת אֱלֹהִים, the dropping out of "one you love," and the literary disappearance of Isaac in Genesis 22.

whole, the collection of all its pericopes, then, portrays what a perfect human looks like, exemplified by Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the perfect Man (the plenary image of Christ). The written word of God thus depicts the incarnate Word of God.

Pericope	**Segment of the World**	**Plenary Image**
Pericope 1	Facet 1 of the Image of Christ	
Pericope 2	Facet 2 of the Image of Christ	
Pericope 3	Facet 3 of the Image of Christ	
Pericope 4	Facet 4 of the Image of Christ	Image of Christ
Pericope 5	Facet 5 of the Image of Christ	
…	…	
Pericope *n*	Facet *n* of the Image of Christ	

Thus, sermon by sermon, God's people become progressively more Christlike, as they align themselves, in the power of the Spirit, to the image of Christ displayed in each pericope. Preaching, therefore, facilitates the conformation of the children of God into the image of the Son of God. After all, God's ultimate goal for his children is that they look like his Son, Jesus Christ, in his humanity—"conformed to the image [εικών] of his Son" (Rom 8:29). I have, therefore, labeled this model of interpretation for preaching *christiconic*.[36] In this sense, the focal point of the entire canon of Scripture and all of its pericopes is the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect Man and the paramount *imago Dei* himself (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3), and "it is the destination of all the children of God 'to be conformed to him'" (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.8.1). Paul declared: "We proclaim Him, instructing all people and teaching all people with all wisdom, that we may present all people mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). That, I submit, is the primary function of God's word and, therefore, the primary purpose of preaching, for the Bible is God's inscripturated means to conform his people into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of his Spirit.

VI. TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION

Permit me to be so forward as to assert that most of us who currently teach in Bible colleges and seminaries obtained our theological education several score and many years ago. Speaking from a homiletics point of view, there have been major changes in this field in the last few decades: a better sense of what preaching is all about, set in the larger context of pastoral ministry; ground changes in the understanding of textual communication; and a clearer comprehension of what preachers need from the text in order to move to application; and so on. Unfortunately, the language departments still seem to be teaching students the route to a

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[36] Abraham Kuruvilla, "Christiconic Interpretation," *BSac* 173 (2016): 131–46; idem, *Privilege the Text!* 238–68.

destination that was fixed in professors' minds when *they* were in seminary (systematization, biblical theology, principlization, etc.). But that destination has changed—for the better!—with the growth of language philosophy and cognitive science and with the perception of the role of pragmatics and pericopal theology. Since the destination has changed, the route must, of necessity, also change.[37]

Unfortunately, preachers have not been helped in this direction by those of us in the academy. Kaiser lamented the "gap of crisis proportions … between the steps generally outlined in most seminary or Biblical training classes in exegesis and the hard realities most pastors face every week as they prepare their sermons."[38] Here is an OT professor lamenting how Hebrew is taught in seminaries: "The student is rarely, if ever, shown how exegesis impacts interpretation, let alone sermon preparation."[39] One does not have to go far to see the reason. The languages as they are currently taught—for the most part subscribing to a code model of interpretation—are, unfortunately, not particularly helpful for producing sermons. Smart commented that "the failure of exegesis was not from what it did but from what it left undone. It was valid as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. It explored the linguistic, literary, historical, and religious dimensions of Scripture but left untouched the dimension where it becomes the medium of God's word and action in the life of man now."[40]

The prescription of the bitter pill of traditional exegesis is not the cure for this affliction. In a standard work on interpretation, a "Guide for Full Exegesis" recommends: confirmation of the limits of the passage; comparing the versions; reconstruction and annotation of the text; preparing a translation; analysis of significant grammatical issues; studying the orthography and morphology for date or other affinities; explaining all words and concepts that are not obvious; concentrating on the most important concepts, words, and wordings; word/concept studies of the most crucial words or wordings; identification of any special semantic features, and of the genre and form; suggesting a life setting; outlining; looking for patterns; researching the historical background and foreground, and the social and geographical setting; examination of the literary function; analysis of authorship; analyzing the use of the passage elsewhere in Scripture; locating the passage theologically and analyzing its theological contribution; clarifying possible areas of ap-

[37] There is a centuries-old, well-entrenched, vested enterprise involved in this business of traditional exegesis, the inertia of which, no doubt, will be difficult to overcome. Vanhoozer, tongue-in-cheek, labeled this quasi-political entity "The Exegetical Industrial Complex" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Commentary and 'The Voice from Heaven': Exegesis, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Interpretation," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* [TENT 8; ed. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel; Leiden: Brill, 2013], 273).

[38] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 18.

[39] Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 9.

[40] *Strange Silence*, 43.

plication; identifying the audience; and investigation of what others have said about the passage.[41]

This is standard fare in most exegesis textbooks. Another, by a pair of NT teachers, has a "Checklist for Doing Biblical Exegesis" that recommends: listing significant textual variants worth studying; reviewing external and internal evidence for each reading; translation; listing the date, author, audience, location and circumstances of author and of the original audience; researching key concepts that may be illuminated by ancient Jewish and/or Greco-Roman history and culture; evaluating the textual context of the passage; outlining the entire book; noting figures of speech and other literary devices; identifying unusual, controversial, or theologically important words, determining the range of meanings of each, and selecting the meanings that best fit the context; identifying unusual, controversial, or theologically important grammatical constructions; formulating solutions to exegetical problems; identifying the number and location of complete sentences and making each sentence the main point of an outline; creating outline subpoints; rewriting the outline in one's own words; listing the categories of systematic theology addressed by the passage; determining the originally intended application(s) of the text; identifying the cross-cultural theological principle(s); and looking for different, contemporary applications of this principle(s).[42]

To all this, Thomas Long responds wryly:

> Conscientious biblical preachers have long shared the little secret that the classical text-to-sermon exegetical methods produce far more chaff than wheat. If one has the time and patience to stay at the chores of exegesis, theoretically one can find out a great deal of background information …, much of it unfortunately quite remote from any conceivable use in a sermon. The preacher's desk can quickly be covered with Ugaritic parallels and details about syncretistic religion in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor. It is hard to find fault here; every scrap of data is potentially valuable, and it is impossible to know in advance which piece of information is to be prized. So, we brace ourselves for the next round of exegesis by saying that it is necessary to pan a lot of earth to find a little gold, and that is true, of course. However, preachers have the nagging suspicion that there is a good deal of wasted energy in the traditional model of exegesis or, worse, that the real business of exegesis is excavation and earth-moving and that any homiletical gold stumbled over along the way is largely coincidental.[43]

I call this the hermeneutic of excavation—the exegetical turning over of tons of earth, debris, rock, boulder, and gravel: a style of interpretation that yields an overload of biblical and Bible-related information, most of it unfortunately not of any

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[41] Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (4th ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 5–62. A somewhat pared-down list—though not by much—forms his "Short Guide for Sermon Exegesis" (ibid., 63–82).

[42] Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 273–76. Not that these exegetical enterprises are fruitless, but the emphasis on semantics is overwhelming.

[43] "Use of Scripture," 343–44.

particular use for preaching a relevant message from a specific text. As Wordsworth said:

> Our meddling intellect
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
> We murder to dissect.[44]

This excavational tendency is what is, for the most part, being inculcated in students. Current practices of exegesis are akin to a doctor making myriad observations about a patient, but getting nowhere close to a diagnosis, without which there can be no valid treatment. When a patient comes to me, a dermatologist (my other job), for a rash on the face, there is no end to the observations I could make on the patient: a 59-year-old gentleman; tortoise shell-rimmed glasses; thinning hair on the frontal scalp; two ears; blue tie; 170 lb.; etc. Which of those observations bring me closer to an accurate diagnosis? Oh, and he has red papules and macules on the malar cheeks, and general erythema in the area. Ah, now those are significant observations. I am not saying that the patient's weight and hair loss and glasses and tie have no bearing on his facial rash—they might. But we textual diagnosticians are consumed with practicing a hermeneutic of excavation and shovel up loads of dirt, boulders, potsherds, arrowheads, and fishhooks, and dump them all on the dazed pastor's desk: everything is equally important and crucial, and there is hardly any inference and integration that leads to the pragmatics or theology of the pericope. And so the preacher goes: "What on earth [!] do I do with this, come Sunday morning? What's the author *doing* here? How do I get to valid application?"

At this frustrating juncture in sermon preparation, when the preacher's desk is piled up with "Ugaritic parallels and details about syncretistic religion in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor"—not to mention the list of clauses, moods, and tenses that the preacher has identified, cataloged, and pinned to Styrofoam like a collection of esoteric insects—at this disheartening stage, the preacher decides to abandon the mining expedition altogether. After all, what relevance is there in the morass of historical, geographical, and linguistic detail for living life come Monday morning?[45] And so the enlightened and modern preacher turns away from this outdated and seemingly irrelevant book called the Bible. The only recourse now is to expound something that is more emotionally and existentially relevant to the congregation, but only tangentially connected to the biblical text. Often the driving force of such sermons is a felt need scavenged from yesterday's newspaper or today's blog, boosted by the latest in media and technology, and bolstered by a smooth delivery, glib with humor and pathos, that sustains the rapt attention of listeners. After all, the Bible itself has nothing much to say about real life, such preachers conclude. Therefore they transact some sort of alchemy, transmuting the base metal of the remote and rambling text into the noble metal of an entertaining

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[44] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned" (1798).

[45] I exaggerate, of course, but it helps me make a point. See Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 6–9.

and enchanting sermon, though the lead and gold really have nothing to do with each other: alchemy!

With chagrin and woe, I suspect that it is we Bible scholars who have driven preachers to this. Recipe-driven exegesis is an attempt to derive the linguistically encoded meaning of the text by generating a plethora of semantic observations: parsings, aspectual discussions, prominence, salience, clausal inventory, and the like—static semantic analyses without dynamic pragmatic syntheses that answer "So what?"[46] Though such analyses are essential for interpretation, there is more to meaning than semantics. Only when we arrive at pragmatics, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying—only then, I submit, can we discern valid application and figure out what to do with it in our lives and in the lives of those who listen to our sermons, so that we may all become more Christlike.

VII. "SO WHAT?"

On the subject of NT studies, Martin Hengel declared: "The interpretation of our texts … is thus never a mere philological-historical task, but pushes to the foundation of the claim to truth of these very texts, for application and authentication in the present. Therefore our discipline should always also be understood as '*ecclesial studies*.' Without this goal it would in the long run become meaningless."[47] This is where language scholars in their lecterns have failed preachers in their pulpits and disappointed God's people in their pews. "One of the shortcomings of much traditional language study is that it has confined itself to the word or, maximally, to the sentence as the basic unit of analysis. The result has been an emphasis upon word studies, sentence diagramming (based on the principles of English analysis), and the like. Recent developments in modern linguistics (should) have forced scholars to recognize that language is simply not used in this way."[48] Instead, it is in language philosophy and cognitive science that most of the advances in understanding communication (of all kinds) have been made in recent years. So, again I submit that for preaching purposes, without attending to what the author is *doing* with what is being said (the pragmatics of the text, the theology of the pericope), there can be no valid application.

And this attention to pragmatics must guide and superintend exegesis right from the start. Patrick Miller was right: "The [potential] outcome of your interpretive work is always in mind from the beginning. You do not turn to the text and say, I will find out what this means and then think about preaching from it. You are from the start listening for and looking for ways the text opens up to communicate

[46] A process of rhetorical discernment, rather than mathematical dissection.

[47] Martin Hengel, "A Young Theological Discipline in Crisis" (trans. Wayne M. Coppins), in *Earliest Christian History: History, Literature, and Theology: Essays from the Tyndale Fellowship in Honor of Martin Hengel* (ed. Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston; WUNT 320; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 470–71.

[48] Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 89.

a word from the Lord to your congregation. … an open interpretive agenda."[49] When I see that rash on my patient's cheeks, I am already considering a diagnosis even as I take a history and conduct an examination: my patient may have rosacea, one of the commonest causes of face rash in adults. So, to confirm my tentative impression, I ask: "Do your eyes itch? Do you tend to get flushing reactions" (not unusual for rosacea)? "Nope," comes the reply. So, my diagnosis is suspect. Examining the facial rash more closely, I find it very warm to the touch, and somewhat indurated (i.e. hard) and shiny. It might be erysipelas (a bacterial infection), I suspect. "Any joint pain, headache, or nausea?" "Yes, my head's been aching for the last few days," answers the patient. Symptoms are evaluated, a diagnosis is proposed, local findings are assessed, the diagnosis is readjusted, local findings are reexamined, and the diagnosis is fine-tuned. Now I can prescribe treatment (antibiotics for erysipelas).[50]

All that to say, diagnosis is a focused task that has as its goal to discern what's wrong, so that one may treat. So also exegesis—*theological* exegesis—should be focused on "diagnosing" the theology of the pericope, so that one may apply. Right from the start, the textual interpreter, reading for application purposes, must ask if any observation is significant or not, worth following up or not, and what it might point to, in order to arrive at pericopal theology.[51] Clearly this discrimination is possible only with practice and experience, as it is in any diagnostic undertaking.[52]

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[49] Patrick D. Miller, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God: Preaching the Old Testament—and the New* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 6.

[50] The medical diagnostic undertaking—involving patient history, physical examination, blood work, imaging, etc.—is actually a process of *inference to best explanation* resulting in the adoption of one of a set of already known hypotheses/diagnoses as a best fit of the data, and its subsequent deductive validation (*hypothetico-deduction*). On the other hand, the operation for understanding a text (or for doing scientific research), where potential answers ("diagnoses") are unlikely to be known in advance, involves the process of *abduction* that generates a new hypothesis. See Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers. Vol. V, Pragmatism and Pragmaticism* (ed. Charles Hartshorn and Paul Weiss; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 89, 171, 180–81, 189. However, the distinction between these modes of inquiry is not so clear-cut: even for the interpretation of texts (or for the interpretation of data in scientific research), "new" hypotheses are not engendered *in vacuo*: there is a background material, contextual information, authorial idiosyncrasies, etc. (or for science: prior information, existing theories, analogous data, etc.) that constrain the development of plausible abductive hypotheses. The subsequent validation of a hypothesis, whether brand new or already known, is based on its explanatory power, predictive success, consistency with evidence (consilience), simplicity, precision, coherence with background knowledge/context, etc. See John R. Josephson, "Abduction-Prediction Model of Scientific Inference Reflected in a Prototype System for Model-Based Diagnosis," *Philosophica* 61 (1998): 12. Perhaps the process of generation, evaluation, and acceptance of an explanatory hypothesis follows this pathway: insight (abduction from available data to [unknown/partially known] hypothesis), inquiry (deduction from that hypothesis to other data), and inference (induction from other data to refined hypothesis). See Noeman A. Mirza, Noori Akhtar-Danesh, Charlotte Noesgaard, Lynn Martin, and Eric Staples, "A Concept Analysis of Abductive Reasoning," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 9 (2014): 1980. Obviously, more work needs to be done in this regard, particularly with regard to the logic and epistemology of textual interpretation as it relates to pragmatics.

[51] "Theological reflection ought never to be an 'add-on' or second step to other aspects of exegetical work" (Terence E. Fretheim, "Old Testament Commentaries: Their Selection and Use," *Int* 36 [1982]: 364). "Any adequate account of scientific method must include a theory of incentive or special motive [for Scripture this motive is application]. … We cannot browse over the field of nature like cows at

In the last decade and more that I have been grappling with this notion, I am realizing that textual pragmatics is more art than science. That does not mean it cannot be taught. It can. But not in the fashion of teaching word studies and parsing, multiplication tables and names of state capitals. It is best taught by curating. I propose the analogy of a curator or docent guiding visitors in an art museum through a series of paintings. Each pericope is a picture, and the teacher is the curator who mediates the text-picture and its pragmatic and theological thrust for students—gallery visitors—almost in the way I treated the passages from Mark and Genesis here, though with greater detail.[53]

VIII. CONCLUSION

As C. S. Lewis remarked: "The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used."[54] I submit that Scripture was primarily intended to be used for application, that God's people might be conformed to the image of God's Son in his perfect humanity (Rom 8:29). Therefore, we must read and interpret Scripture for application. And that is what preachers need help with—interpretation that moves towards application. Why should not we, the language experts, give it to them—semantics, pragmatics, and all—rather than forcing students to reinvent the wheel in every generation, as it were?[55] Why not curate those text-pictures in commentaries, creating accessible repositories for the fruit of such engagements, both semantic *and* pragmatic? Gordon Wenham was right:

> It is clear that the biblical writers were not writing merely out of an antiquarian interest to record the past: they wrote about the past to draw out lessons for the future. And if we are to do justice to their intentions, we commentators must seek to uncover their motives and methods in writing. … It is central to the

pasture" (Peter B. Medawar, *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought* [Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1969], 29).

[52] In the medical half of my split life, this has taken me about two decades of medical training and benchtop research, followed by almost two more decades of bedside patient care.

[53] Indeed, I hold that this is what preachers ought to do for their listeners as well—curate the text in the pulpit so that the audience catches the theology of the pericope (Kuruvilla, *Vision for Preaching,* 85–86). All this to say, pragmatics is probably more caught than taught, as text-picture after text-picture is curated for students. Even in medical training, while much can be passed on through lectures and books and such, impactful learning happens primarily as an "apprenticeship"— clerkship, internship, residency, and fellowship. That is when medicine is "caught," as one shadows an expert and practices under that one's aegis, with cases being "curated" for the trainee.

[54] *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 1.

[55] Traditional commentaries do provide students with the semantics of the text. Now, if students are unlikely to improve upon those tomes, what exactly are they being taught in language classes and why? In my opinion, preaching students need only sufficient biblical language education that renders them capable of using tools (commentaries, software, etc.) and efficiently (and judiciously) handling such increasingly available resources.

> commentator's task to address these issues: to dodge them is to miss the whole point of the Bible's composition.[56]

Instead, what we provide provokes an eight-decade-old, but still-relevant, Barthian umbrage:

> My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary. Recent commentaries contain no more than a reconstruction of the text, a rendering of the Greek words and phrases by their precise equivalents, a number of additional notes in which archaeological and philological material is gathered together, and a more or less plausible arrangement of the subject-matter in such a manner that it may be made historically and psychologically intelligible from the standpoint of pure pragmatism.[57]

Or as Scott Hafemann put it: "Commentaries and translations do not excel in tracing the flow of an argument and mapping out the melodic line and the theological heartbeat of a text. By definition, most commentaries are atomistic."[58] No wonder the sage of the twentieth century, singer Johnny Cash, after exploring numerous commentaries on Paul's letters, quipped: "Tons of material has been written … but I discovered that the Bible can shed a lot of light on commentaries."[59]

It is in pragmatic analysis that commentaries have let preachers down: "One critique of commentary writing stands above all else—the failure to provide theological and ethical dimensions. … Commentaries often provide no theological reflection at all or do not move beyond a summation of the exegesis into true theological reflection."[60] After all, scholars and writers of commentaries with their decades of experience can do—and have already done—traditional exegesis more accurately and efficiently than can the frazzled pastor in the midst of baptisms, funerals, dinners-on-the-ground, counseling sessions, elder meetings, budget committees, extinguishing "fires," cajoling volunteers, and so on. But, then again, what preachers need is *theological* exegesis to discern the pragmatics of the text and the theology of the pericope, so that they and the people of God can move to valid application.[61]

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[56] Gordon J. Wenham, "Contemporary Bible Commentary: The Primacy of Exegesis and the Religious Dimension," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem, August 16–24, 1989): Division A: The Bible and Its World* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 5. For the better part of a decade, I have been attempting to produce commentaries in this fashion, curating the text for preachers, and providing them with validated pragmatics of the text, pericope by pericope.

[57] Karl Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 6.

[58] "The *SBJT* Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching," *SBJT* 3 (1999): 88.

[59] *Man in White* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), xvi.

[60] Duane F. Watson, "Why We Need Socio-Rhetorical Commentary and What It Might Look Like," in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible* (JSNTSS 195; ed. Stanley E. Porter and Dennis L. Stamps; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 138.

[61] Perhaps it is time for a Consultation at ETS on "Pericopes, Pragmatics, and Preaching," or something similar, that explores textual pragmatics and the theological thrust of pericopes, and how this may be taught to future preachers.

Now, having said all this, let me assert again without equivocation: There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the study of biblical languages in seminaries is essential. Unless one comprehends what "t-r-a-s-h" means and how it relates to "full," etc., one cannot ever arrive at the pragmatic understanding of "The trash is full." But the mistake is in assuming that once one has sliced and diced and parsed the text, performing a meticulous semantic analysis upon it, the task of interpretation is complete. It is never complete until the applicational intention of the pericope has been discerned by pragmatic inference, until its theology has been grasped for application purposes. And for that, the interpreter has to figure out what the author is *doing* with what he is saying.

> Though we read Scripture, and never stop babbling about it, if we know not its use, and why it was given, and what should be sought in it, it profits us nothing at all. It is not enough, therefore, to read and talk of it only, but we must also beseech God insistently, day and night, to make us understand why the Scriptures were given, that we may apply the medicine of Scripture, every man to his own wounds. If not, we remain idle disputers, and brawlers about vain words, ever gnawing upon the bitter bark outside, and never reaching the sweet pith inside.

William Tyndale (1530)[62]

Author's Note: For those interested in carrying on this discussion further, please visit http://homiletix.com/KuruvillaJETS2017 for a curated conversation. In addition to this paper, a formal response from a colleague of mine, and a rejoinder from me to that response, have been posted there. Feel free to add your comments and ideas.

[62] "A Prologue by William Tyndale Shewing the Use of the Scripture, which He Wrote before the Five Books of Moses," in *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith* (3 vols.; ed. Thomas Russell; London: Ebenezer Palmer, 1831), 2:6 (archaic wording modernized).