

## GRAMMATICAL HISTORICAL METHODS AND THE CHINESE CHRISTIAN

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A grammatical-historical approach to the Bible is a legacy of the reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, John Knox.<sup>1</sup> As a departure from the allegorical method practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, it was intended to ascertain the meaning of a biblical text in its original grammatical and historical sense (*the unus simplex sensus, the sensus historicus sive grammaticus*).<sup>2</sup>

Given the immense variety of new methods developed in the past half century, it may sound passé to discuss the method. Nevertheless, it is worth revisiting for two reasons. Firstly, strong interest in the grammatical and historical sense of the Bible is still evident in some

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<sup>1</sup> L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 27; B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 48-51.

<sup>2</sup> E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 64.

evangelical circles.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, historical critical-biblical scholars still see the importance of the grammatical-historical sense of biblical texts.

As we can see, the interest is not uniquely associated with evangelicalism,<sup>4</sup> but also scholarship in the wider context. Due to our limited space, however, this paper concerns grammatical historical methods as advocated or practiced by evangelical scholars.<sup>5</sup> We are particularly interested in the effectiveness of the methods in recovering the original sense of a text and their impact on the reader, particularly in the context of Chinese church history and culture.

## I. Definitions and Assumptions

At the outset, a few clarifications are necessary. Firstly, "grammatical-historical method" has become a slippery term today,

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<sup>3</sup> The method is strongly advocated in the recent article by W.B. Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method," in *Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. B. Corley, S.W. Lemke and G.I. Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman and Holdman, 2002), 21-38.

<sup>4</sup> As G.F. Hasel (*New Testament Theology: Issues in the Current Debate* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 28-29) notes, the importance of *sensus historicus sive grammaticus* emphasized by the reformers was also embraced by liberal scholars. For instance, G.P.C. Kaiser in his *Die biblische Theologie* approached the Bible with what he called "the grammatico-historical method." This "grammatico-historical method," nevertheless, was applied with a liberal twist and employed in the perspective of "philosophical universal history of religion" which excludes anything supernatural.

<sup>5</sup> Such as Berkhof (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 67-132); Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, esp. 113-62); W.C. Kaiser ("The Meaning of Meaning," in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. W. Kaiser and M. Silva [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 33); D. McCartney, C. Clayton (*Let the Reader Understand* [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994], 122); G. Fee and D. Stuart, (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 23-31; also G. Fee (*New Testament Exegesis*, 3rd ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 12-16; W.M. Klein, C.L. Blomberg, R.L. Hubbard (*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Nashville: W Publishing, 1993], 132; cf. 117-118; 172-214); and Tolar ("The Grammatical-Historical Method," 21).

as evangelicals understand the term and the method differently.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of our discussion, "the grammatical historical method" is used as shorthand for the different approaches of a similar kind (grammatical historical methods) rather than as a unified method (*the* grammatical historical method).

Secondly, like the historical critical method, the grammatical historical method has its history of evolution. Earlier practitioners tended to be literal and modern in their orientation. Among the recent ones, while some remain literal and conservative,<sup>7</sup> others are more open to developments in the wider hermeneutical circle.<sup>8</sup> Given the diversity, we can only offer a general sketch in such a limited space.

Put simply, the grammatical-historical method is a method that seeks to discover the author's original intention by "applying standard rules of grammar and syntax" and by studying "immediate context, remote context, and historical context" of the text.<sup>9</sup> We shall qualify this simple definition by highlighting the method's basic assumptions.

Firstly, the grammatical historical reader assumes that the locus of meaning lies in the original author. Thus the goal of hermeneutics is to uncover the intended meaning of the author. As D. McCartney

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<sup>6</sup> For example, R.L. Thomas (*Evangelical Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002]) devotes a whole book to refuting the practice of the method by other scholars such as Roy Zuck, D.A. Carson, R.L. Hubbard, G. Fee and D. Stuart. See a similar criticism by the same author in "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: the Analogy of Faith," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* 23/1 (1980): 45-53.

<sup>7</sup> As represented by Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* .

<sup>8</sup> As represented by Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. See the discussion on note 42 and 55 below. For a debate over the issue of literalness of the grammatical historical method, see V.S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994); T. Longman, "What I mean by Historical Grammatical Exegesis – Why I Am Not a Literalist," *Grace Theological Journal (GTJ)* 11/2 (1990): 137-55.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by two evangelical scholars, B.T. Arnold and B. E. Beyer (*Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 28); see also T. Longman, "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 110.

and C. Clayton observe, "Grammatical-historical exegesis attempts to uncover the meaning a text would have had to its original human author and readers."<sup>10</sup> W.B. Tolar puts it in stronger terms, "It is a moral imperative for the interpreter to do his or her best to understand the text correctly so as to discover the meaning placed there by the original author."<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, as the result of the author-centered approach, like historical critical methods, the grammatical historical method is interested first in what a text meant to its first readers. Thus the first question is not "What does this passage mean?" but "What did the passage mean?"<sup>12</sup> Only when the exegete has established what the text meant to the first readers will they proceed to study what the text means today. Generally, the former is called *interpretation*, the latter *significance or application*.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, the means by which a grammatical historical reader uncovers the original author's intention are the language and the historical setting of a text. A grammatical historical reader attempts to access the author's mind by a consideration of what the author actually wrote and the background against which the writing took place. This requires the reader to have knowledge of the grammar and historical setting of the author.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, proponents of the grammatical historical approach emphasize the importance of a text's linguistic

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<sup>10</sup> McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method".

<sup>12</sup> As Fee (*New Testament Exegesis*, 1) observes, "Exegesis therefore answers the question, What did the biblical author mean?" Cf. McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> As we shall see later, scholars dispute the line between interpretation and significance.

<sup>14</sup> Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 67; Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method," 21-22.

aspects (word studies, grammar and syntax).<sup>15</sup> Also, the historical aspects of a text are deemed important for understanding a text, on the assumption that "The Word of God originated in a historical way, and therefore, can be understood only in the light of history."<sup>16</sup> The method, therefore, promotes investigations of historical, cultural and social circumstances that surround biblical events or the writing of a biblical book.<sup>17</sup>

## II. The Strengths of the Grammatical Historical Method

The grammatical historical method has the advantage of letting the biblical authors speak for themselves, instead of imposing one's understanding on them. It encourages the reader to get back to the meaning of a text as the original author meant it, a notion advocated even by secular literary theorists such as E. D. Hirsch.<sup>18</sup>

The grammatical historical method respects the purpose or the intention of a biblical text as it was written. As K. Vanhoozer argues, a text is the author's communicative (literary) act.<sup>19</sup> No serious writer wants the intentions of their acts to be misunderstood, and the biblical writers are no exception.<sup>20</sup> When we ignore the author's meaning, we

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<sup>15</sup> Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 67-112; Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 128-48; Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method," 21-29; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 112-49; D. Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 20-22; Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 113-32; Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 73-76; Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 16, 96-111.

<sup>18</sup> See E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 225.

<sup>20</sup> The author of 2 Peter expresses such a sentiment (2 Pet 3:15-16).

take over their place as the author. As Hirsch observes, "When critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place."<sup>21</sup> Worse, we *use* their texts to say what we want to say, which is tantamount to textual abuse.

Furthermore, focusing on the author's intention offers stability of meaning. In postmodern biblical studies, often meaning is the prerogative of the reader.<sup>22</sup> However, readers are of diverse presuppositions, which inevitably lead to diverse interpretations of the same text. As the reader is given the authority to determine the meaning of a text, the multiple interpretations lead to what Hirsch calls a multiplicity of authors.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the meaning of a text becomes fluid. In the light of this, emphasis on authorial intention becomes important. As Longman notes, "The author's intention provides a kind of anchor in the sea of interpretive relativity."<sup>24</sup>

Insistence on authorial meaning is also in keeping with the evangelical theology of inspiration. As the Bible is believed to be divinely inspired, God is therefore the Ultimate Author and the Bible is his message for the believer. In his message are his expectations and requirements of the believer. As such, it is necessary to know what this Ultimate Author has intended to say through his messenger (the human author). The grammatical historical method helps work toward this goal, as the linguistic and historical studies advocated by the method offer us a window to the intended meaning of the human author.

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<sup>21</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, S.E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

<sup>24</sup> Longman, "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," 108.

### III. The Limitations of the Grammatical Historical Method

However, like other interpretive methods, the grammatical historical method has its limitations. Firstly, while the goal of recovering the authorial intent is important to biblical interpretation, it is not without complications. These complications are made evident by two factors: contemporary hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of the New Testament writers.

#### 1. The Challenge Posed by Contemporary Hermeneutics

Contemporary hermeneutics has posed some serious issues for the goal of rediscovering authorial meaning. Suppose, following Hirsch, we assumed that the author's meaning resides in a text, we would have to answer some important questions that arise from this assumption. With the absence of the original author, how accessible is the meaning of his text? How much of the author's intention can we access on the basis of what he has written? How can we be sure that the authorial meaning which we reconstruct from the text is exactly the author's intent?

Despite his strong advocacy for authorial meaning, Hirsch is aware of the challenges associated with his thesis. Particularly, he speaks of the problem of "meaning fluidity," that is, the meaning of a text changes from era to era, or from reading to reading, even for the author. Hirsch is even aware of the challenge that the author's meaning is not always accessible; even the author does not always know what he or she means.<sup>25</sup>

As the result of these limitations, the grammatical historical method is challenged by several interpretive theories. Chief among them is the Gadamerian theory.<sup>26</sup> H. G. Gadamer contends that readers

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<sup>25</sup> For such awareness, see Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1-23.

<sup>26</sup> For Hirsch's critique of Gadamer's thesis, see Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 245-64.

approach a text with their cultural, social, emotional backgrounds, and these in turn shape their reading process and determine its outcome. In the process of reading, these pre-reading ideas (the reader's horizon) is fused into the text's ideas (the text's horizon), hence the "fusion of horizons." This being the case, the Gadamerian view challenges the possibility of reproducing the author's original meaning, as a reader's understanding of a text is neither completely the original author's perspective or their own.<sup>27</sup>

In response to Gadamer's argument Hirsch distinguishes meaning from significance (or implication). For Hirsch, "*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text"; whereas significance refers to "a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception or a situation."<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that here Hirsch suggests that the author's intended meaning is to be accessed through his text. For him, once written, the meaning is fixed (or "locked") in the text and unchanged. Though Hirsch recognizes the fluidity of a text, for him, what changes is not the meaning of a text (for what is represented by a text is fixed), but its significance (how the meaning of a text relates to the reader or even the author). The significance is dependent on how the reader (or even the author) relates to the text. It is here that the reader's pre-understanding influences a text's significance. Hirsch suggests that even authors "change their attitudes, feelings, opinions and value criteria in the course of time" and they will in the course of time "tend to view their own work in different contexts."<sup>29</sup> But, so Hirsch argues, what changes here is not the meaning of the text that has been written, but rather the way the authors relate to their written text.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 306-07, 373-75.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8, also 24-61.



However, in Gadamerian thinking, a distinction between meaning and significance is problematic. Gadamer contends,

We have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation. Thus we are forced to go one step beyond romantic hermeneutics, as it were, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising *one unified process*.<sup>31</sup>

For Gadamer meaning is a fusion of the text (in which Hirsch thinks meaning resides) and his cultural presuppositions (which Hirsch sees as elements that form "significance"). As such, for Gadamer, meaning is a composite of Hirsch's "meaning" and "significance."

Grammatical historical scholars have been divided over the issue of meaning since the 70s. Whereas scholars such as W. Kaiser, G. Fee and R. Stein advocate authorial meaning,<sup>32</sup> others such as W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, R. L. Hubbard are open to views along the line of the Gadamerian argument.<sup>33</sup> Apparently, the debate has shown no signs of abating.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, *Method and Truth*, 308. Italics are mine.

<sup>32</sup> See Kaiser, "The Meaning of Meaning," 41-45; idem., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 45-47; G. Fee, "History as Context for Interpretation," in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. E. Dyck (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 11; R.H. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 36. See also Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> While Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard (*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 136; cf. 86-116) advocate the authorial intention, they also admit, "Surely we may 'use' the Bible beyond its original intentions or meanings." V. Poythress seems to hold a similar view in one of his early works ("Analysing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions," *Scottish Journal of Theology (SJT)* 32 [1979]: 113), but in a recent work (*God Centered Biblical Interpretation* [Philipsburg: P&R, 1999], 76-77) he seems to return to the single-meaning view.

<sup>34</sup> Though R. Lundin (*The Promise of Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1999], 37) asserts, "Yet for all of their self-assurance, the evangelical promoters of Hirschian intentionalism are fighting a lone battle," strong Hirschian voices are still heard from evangelicals such as Vanhoozer (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, e.g. 201-65) and G.R. Osborne (*Hermeneutical Spiral*, 2nd ed. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006], esp. 465-521).

## 2. The Challenge Posed by the Hermeneutics of the NT Writers

The constraints of the Hirschian theory are brought to the fore in the debate on how the New Testament authors use the Old Testament. In many places the New Testament writers offer a meaning different from the authorial intent. We can only mention two here. A frequently quoted example is Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Mt 2:15). For Matthew, Jesus' return from Egypt is not an application of Hosea 11:1, but the fulfillment of the prophet's words.<sup>35</sup> But clearly this is not Hosea's original intention. Rather, Hosea alludes to the historical exodus of Israel and does not intend it to be a prophecy about the future.<sup>36</sup> As such, Matthew has given Hosea's text a new meaning.

Likewise, we note Paul's quotation of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." In its original context, the text is intended to ensure the welfare of domestic animals. But Paul uses it to provide a basis for giving financial support to Christian workers, as if the two were of the same species. Again, here, Paul does not say so as an application of Deuteronomy 25:4, but the very meaning of the text: "Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us..." (1Co 9:9-10). If so, obviously this meaning is vastly different from that of the original author. D. Moo even deems it "fanciful in the extreme that a law providing for the welfare of animals should be applied by Paul to the Christian ministry."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> As the word πληρωθῆ (fulfilled) in Mt 2:15 suggests.

<sup>36</sup> D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33a (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 36; W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 2004), 263. Cf. D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 177-78.

<sup>37</sup> D. Moo, "The Problem of Sensus Plenior," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, eds. D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1986), 189.

As we can see, contrary to the Hirschian tenet, in these passages, the New Testament writers do not stick to the original meanings of the Old Testament texts. Evidently, present issues such as their experience with Christ (as in the case of Matthew 2:15) and Christian service (as in the case of 1 Cor 9:9-10) serve as a pre-understanding and influence the way they interpret the Old Testament texts.

The phenomenon has generated a protracted debate among evangelical scholars.<sup>38</sup> Scholars such as W. Kaiser, for example, deny that the New Testament writers give new meanings to the Old Testament text.<sup>39</sup> Others note that the New Testament writers give allegorized meanings to the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup> Some others think that the practice of the NT writers suggests that there are multiple meanings to a text.<sup>41</sup> Yet others think that the New Testament passages in question are only the extensions (multiple referents) of the original meaning.<sup>42</sup> For scholars such as P. Enns, however, the New Testament writers give new meanings to the Old Testament texts with the goal of showing how these texts point one to Christ.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> An earlier attempt is reflected in R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), esp. 126-36; and the most recent is in *Three Views on the New Testament of the Old Testament*, eds. K. Berding and J. Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); and numerous articles in between, such as W. Kaiser, "The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10," *JETS* 21:1 (1978): 3-18; V.S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal (WTJ)* 48 (1986): 241-276; J. Sailhamer, "Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15," *WTJ* 63 (2001): 87-96; D. McCartney and P. Enns, "Matthew and Hosea: A Response to John Sailhamer," *WTJ* 63 (2001): 97-105.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. W. Kaiser, "Single Meaning, Unified Referent," in *Three Views on the New Testament of the Old Testament*, eds. K. Berding and J. Lunde, 81-88.

<sup>40</sup> Longenecker (*Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 126-27) opines that in Paul's appropriation of Deut 25:4 the authorial meaning is subordinated to (included in) the allegorical meaning, but not "rejected." However, Moo ("The Problem of Sensus Plenior," 189) is uncertain if this is the case.

<sup>41</sup> Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. D.L. Bock, "Single Meaning, Multiple Contexts and Referents," in *Three Views on the New Testament of the Old Testament*, eds. K. Berding and J. Lunde, 105-51.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. P. Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal," in *Three Views on the New Testament of the Old Testament*, eds. K. Berding and J. Lunde, 167-217.

The debate is far from reaching a consensus.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, unequivocally we have a biblical model of hermeneutics in the New Testament which challenges the view that every Old Testament text has a fixed meaning. The New Testament writers' hermeneutics alerts us to the complexity of meaning, and compels us to rethink our grammatical historical assumptions. As far as the New Testament writers are concerned, other than the historical meaning (the original author's meaning), an Old Testament text may have another meaning.

Interestingly, such a possibility is recognized not only by author-centered literary theorists such as Hirsch,<sup>45</sup> but also by grammatical-historical oriented evangelicals. Faced with the compelling evidence, though stressing the importance of authorial meaning, Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard admit, "Our reading of how NT writers employ the OT still leaves us reluctant to say that the historical meaning of a text is the only meaning."<sup>46</sup>

More importantly, the New Testament hermeneutical model reminds us not to brush aside the reader's presuppositions. As we have noted, theological presuppositions influence Matthew and Paul's reading of the Old Testament. To be more precise, their theology shapes their interpretation. Their theology is such that these New Testament writers have one hermeneutical goal: to show how the Old Testament points to Christ and his salvation work. This way, they find the Old Testament speaking to them as God's word for them. The importance of finding a biblical text speaking as God's word becomes evident when one speaks of meaningful reading, as we shall see below.

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<sup>44</sup> Besides the debate in *Three Views on the New Testament of the Old Testament*, the inconclusiveness of the matter can be seen in the differences between the treatment by Vanhoozer (*Is There A Meaning in This Text?*, 263-65) and that of Poythress ("Divine Meaning of Scripture," 241-276), and in the debate between Sailhamer ("Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15," 87-96) and D. McCartney and P. Enns ("Matthew and Hosea: A Response to John Sailhamer," 97-105).

<sup>45</sup> Speaking about the fluidity of meaning, Hirsch (*Validity of Interpretation*, 9) observes, "the same sequence of linguistic signs can represent more than one complex of meaning."

<sup>46</sup> Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 122, 138.

#### IV. The Problem of Meaningful Reading

Beside the problem of authorial meaning, the grammatical-historical method raises another issue. Its insistence on linguistics and historical context, helpful as it is, has a serious side effect: it does not always offer a meaningful reading. Complicated linguistic analysis and debate over various theories of historical background can be dry and uninteresting, a problem some grammatical-historical advocates concede.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, the emphasis on going back to original meaning and context also complicates a meaningful reading. Even if one could go back to the original author's meaning on the basis of his written work, this would only tell us what a text *meant* to its ancient readers. As the Word of God, Christian readers are also interested in what the same text *means* to them today.<sup>48</sup> Also, granted that the idea of moving "from our language and culture into the different languages ... and cultures of the writers" may prevent us from "changing or distorting their meaning,"<sup>49</sup> but that is only a trip to the past. One must bring that "undistorted meaning" back to the present, and be able to appropriate it in terms of our language and culture. With Thiselton, we may say that an exegete should bridge the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> While Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed., 105-06) advocates the grammatical historical method, he admits that the method "can become dry, lifeless, and pedantic" and "in its effort to be accurate and precise it is in danger of missing spiritual relevancy and devotional application."

<sup>48</sup> It should be reiterated, however, that the line between "what it meant" and "what it means" is open to debate. As pointed out earlier, it is not always possible to discern whether our interpretation is really what the text meant (exactly as the author intended) or what it means (a fusion of the text's meaning and our presupposition).

<sup>49</sup> Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method," 21.

<sup>50</sup> A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 10-23.

At this juncture, it is helpful to offer an illustration from a biblical passage. While 2 Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is God-breathed," it also adds, "and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (ESV). Here the subject (all Scripture, *πασα γραφη*) is qualified by two adjectives: God-breathed (*θεοπνευστου*) and profitable (*ωφελιμου*). The two adjectives tell us two things about Scripture: first, it is inspired by God; second, it is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The first refers to how God's revelation functioned for the Old Testament writers (he inspired them), the second to how that recorded revelation (the inspired text) functioned at the time of the NT writer. In other words, the New Testament writer was not only interested in how God's inspiration functioned for the Old Testament writers, but also how that inspiration continued to function for his generation. For him, Scripture continued to speak to his generation (by teaching, rebuking, correcting and training them in righteousness). In fact, for the New Testament writer, the present function was the very purpose why he read Scripture.

I. H. Marshall is right to criticize exegetes who assume that "the text would speak to the modern reader more or less as it stood" and there is little need to make it intelligible to people today.<sup>51</sup> The works of such exegetes usually make those who seek God's message frustrated. Frequently, we hear pastors and theological students lament the lifelessness of exegetical commentaries, and church members complain about their pastors' dry linguistic and history lessons on a Sunday morning. These complaints reflect the desire for relevance, the very goal of God's act of communication and the objective of biblical interpretation.

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<sup>51</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Beyond the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

## V. An Illustration from China's Church History

The issue of meaningful reading becomes especially relevant when we speak of China's church history in the past half a century. Wang Ming Dao's biblical interpretation illustrates this well. Living in a tumultuous period of Chinese history, Wang underwent the pressure (even persecution) of the anti-Christian movement and the liberalism of his days.<sup>52</sup> Such experience shaped Wang's theology,<sup>53</sup> especially his theology of suffering;<sup>54</sup> and the theology in turn has its impact on his biblical interpretation. For this reason, though Wang stresses the importance of authorial intent,<sup>55</sup> at times his theological conviction allows him to go beyond it. For instance, in his exposition of the story of Gideon's men breaking the jars, he notes that the jar represents the Christian's body and breaking it means to suffer physically for the Lord. Just as Gideon's men, so he argues, a Christian will be God's effective instrument when he is willing to break the jar (to suffer physically) for the Lord.<sup>56</sup>

Evidently, this interpretation is influenced more by Wang's theology of suffering than his principle of authorial-intent. In fact, while Wang may not have been aware of it, some of his biblical explanations demonstrate Gadamar's theory of the fusion of horizons; a fusion of biblical teachings and the Confucian culture he lived in.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See Wang Ming Tao, *The Fifty Years* (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1993), 73-84; 124-25; 179-82; also Lam Wing-hung, *Wang Ming-Dao and the Chinese Church* (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1982), 28-99.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. See Lam, *Wang Ming-Dao and the Chinese Church*, 167-84.

<sup>54</sup> As reflected in many of his writings; among others is Wang Ming Tao, "Suffering is good for us," in *Treasuries of Wang Ming Tao*, vol. 6 (Taichung: Conservative Baptist, 1998), 385-402.

<sup>55</sup> Wang Ming Tao, "Beware of the Devil's Scheme," in *Treasuries of Wang Ming Tao*, vol. 4 (Taichung: Conservative Baptist, 1998), 68.

<sup>56</sup> Wang Ming Tao, "The Call of Gideon," in *Treasuries of Wang Ming Tao*, vol. 6 (Taichung: Conservative Baptist, 1998), 14-15.

<sup>57</sup> Lam (*Wang Ming-Dao and the Chinese Church*, 203) points out that Wang's theology of suffering has traces of Confucianism.

However, it was such a fusion that often offered him timely help. While the "fused meaning" is not exactly the authorial intent, the living God spoke to Wang through it there and then. Undoubtedly, such an experience became his source of strength during his years of imprisonment.<sup>58</sup>

Wang's experience is definitely not unique to Chinese Christians in China in particular and Chinese Christians overseas in general. Having faced persecution and having been brought up in Chinese culture, inevitably circumstances and cultural presuppositions play an important role in the Chinese Christian's biblical interpretation.

## **VI. Conclusions and Questions for Further Investigation**

This paper has shown the dilemma known to evangelical biblical scholars: while most affirm the value of pursuing authorial intent, they are aware of its complexity and limitations. Two issues are particularly significant. Firstly, the intention to rediscover the original intent of a text is complicated by issues such as the complexity of authorial meaning, historical background, and the pervasiveness of the reader's presuppositions. Undoubtedly, any attempt to recover authorial meaning should keep in mind that the text is the only access to an author's intention;<sup>59</sup> and our conclusion about the authorial meaning is at best a conjecture.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> As Lam (*Wang Ming-Dao and the Chinese Church*, 121) observes, during his imprisonment, Wang often found encouragement from biblical texts on suffering which he memorized..

<sup>59</sup> As Hirsch has recognized. See Part III.1.(p. 57).

<sup>60</sup> Longman, *Historical Grammatical Exegesis*, 140.



Secondly, reading for the authorial meaning, even if it was achievable, would not always be meaningful for the Christian. In light of what we observed about the practices of the NT writers and Chinese Christians such as Wang Ming Dao, a meaningful reading often involves the fusion of the text's horizon and the reader's horizon. Moreover, the authorial meaning only tells us about how the text functioned as Scripture in the past. One must also ask how the same text functions for readers today. To have a meaningful reading, one must bridge the two horizons; for the Old Testament is the Word of God *now*, as it was *then*.

This, however, raises a number of issues for biblical interpretation. The reader's horizon is subjective, and the fusion of horizons theory is subjected to abuse. This being the case, should we or should we not place some control over our reading process, so that exegesis will not end up a "sea of interpretive relativity"? If so, how much control should we place without impeding meaningful reading or stifling the relevance of a text? How much room should we allow for the reader's presuppositions? Is there a need for guidelines? If so, what sort of guidelines? More importantly, can biblical scholars come to a consensus on guidelines?

Judging by the protracted debate in biblical hermeneutics, the answers to these questions are beyond our reach, if not impossible. Obviously, approaches at the hermeneutic level have reached a deadlock, a fact widely known to biblical scholars. In view of this, we pose the question: besides hermeneutical level, should we also approach the issue of meaning at the theological level? I.H. Marshall has made such an attempt in his recent book. He notes that as biblical texts were written for specific occasions and issues of the writers' time, not every one of them is designed to deal with "later questions and problems."<sup>61</sup> These later "questions and problems" are beyond what

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<sup>61</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 33-79.

biblical texts can address, thus beyond hermeneutics. A theological approach is therefore necessary. Marshall argues that while the canon (the inspired text) cannot be changed, "doctrine can and must develop beyond scriptural statements."<sup>62</sup>

As we can see, Marshall has proposed a theological solution to a hermeneutical problem. Though his proposed method (principles) requires refining,<sup>63</sup> he has probably put the discussion on the right track. As the biblical interpretations of the NT writers and Wang Ming Dao show, biblical interpretation is not just a hermeneutical issue, but also a theological decision. As such, besides hermeneutics, an appropriate theology for the appropriation of Scripture is also crucial. Many questions are awaiting such a theology: what are the biblical principles that help manage our presuppositions, so that our interpretation will not be out of line with the overall theology of the Bible? When there is a gap between 'what it meant' and 'what it means,' how much difference can we allow without altering the inspirational nature of the Bible? How can meaningful reading be prevented from becoming an excuse to advance our personal or group agenda?

These questions are beyond the scope of this limited study. However, they warrant further investigation; for a proper theology on God's communicative act which pays careful attention to both God's inspired text and the reader's horizon can complement biblical hermeneutics and minimize the problems we noted.

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<sup>62</sup> Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 79.

<sup>63</sup> See reviews of Marshall's argument by K.J. Vanhoozer ("Into the Great 'Beyond,'" in *Beyond the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 81-95) and S.E. Porter ("Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation and Theology," in *Beyond the Bible*, 97-127).

## ABSTRACT

Central to the grammatical historical method as practiced by evangelical scholars today is the rediscovery of the authorial meaning of a biblical text. This intention, however, is complicated by the Hirschian versus Gadamarian debate on whether the reader can really reproduce the authorial meaning without being coloured by their pre-understanding. Further complication comes from the instances of the NT writers moving away from the authorial intent of an OT text and giving a new meaning which addresses their contemporary concerns. This has intensified the protracted discussion about the role of one's pre-understanding in biblical interpretation. While the debate is raging on in the West, pre-understanding has played a rather important role among Chinese interpreters, as evidenced by the fact that such interpretations have left behind positive impacts on Chinese church history. This article raises two important questions: As Chinese exegetes, do we allow room for the reader's pre-understanding (such as our cultural values)? If so, to what extent?

## 撮 要

在福音派學者所採用的文法歷史詮釋法裏，聖經詮釋的宗旨是尋回作者的原意。不過，這目的因赫爾胥與迦達莫理論之爭論而複雜起來，使人質疑讀者是否能真的完全不受個人的前設影響之下重述作者的原意。這議題又因新約作者引用舊約的一些例子變得更為複雜：他們往往會離開舊約作者的原意，給經文提供一個又新又切合他們時代需要的解釋，加劇了在詮釋過程中有關讀者前設的影響之長期辯論。當西方學界為此議題爭個不休的時候，讀者的前設已在中國解經人士中扮演了相當重要的角色；這點可從這種解讀對中國教會歷史的一些正面影響看出來。這歷史事實給聖經詮釋帶來了幾個重要的問題：身為華人，我們在解經過程中是否可以容許個人前設（文化價值觀等）？若可以的話，到甚麼程度？