

THE  
CLARITY  
*OF* SCRIPTURE



# THE CLARITY *OF* SCRIPTURE

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HISTORY, THEOLOGY &  
CONTEMPORARY LITERARY  
STUDIES

JAMES CALLAHAN

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*HAROLD STURDY SMITH (1898-1987)*

*HELEN JULIE SMITH (1905-)*



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## Introduction

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.

JOHN 5:39

In the struggle of the church, it becomes increasingly clear that the confessed perspicuity is not a mere notation of a “quality” of Scripture in the manner in which we attribute certain qualities to other things, after which we can relax. This confession of the church will only be meaningful if it includes an insight into the power of the Spirit’s way through the Word (divine and human) in its historical form. This occurs with such strong and prevailing force that it is not possible for man to relax. We are being challenged by ever-increasing responsibility in the face of new questions and tasks. . . . No confession concerning Scripture is more disturbing to the church than the confession of its perspicuity.

G. C. BERKOUWER, *HOLY SCRIPTURE*

SCRIPTURE CAN BE AND IS READ WITH PROFIT, WITH APPRECIATION AND WITH TRANSFORMATIVE results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture’s concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. It displays a progressively more specific identification of that story, culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about.

Scripture’s clarity is a straightforward, unambiguous and heartening conviction about how Christians read and regard the Bible. It is a routinely assumed, often asserted, occasionally defended but rarely explored belief for Christians.

There exists an almost casual assumption that when used Christianly, Scripture's clarity is precisely what characterizes our relationship with the Bible. That is, Scripture is available (and makes its message available) to those who humbly approach, read carefully and obediently respond to God's Word.

It should also be noted that Scripture's clarity is an equally incredible tenet for many others. How can anyone be naive enough to believe that the Bible is clear without significant qualification or severe limitation, especially in light of almost three centuries of critical historical study, five centuries of serious division among Christians over the message of Scripture, and two millennia of often curious and colorful embellishments in intricate allegory and innumerable commentaries? It seems obvious that belief in Scripture's clarity is severely compromised by the real history of Christian disagreements about what the Bible says.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to recognize that even the most positive defenders of Scripture's clarity do not ignore the complexities of the subject. The Westminster Confession (1647) offers this well-known and often-repeated assertion, with interesting qualifications:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.<sup>2</sup>

Phrases such as "not alike plain," "not alike clear," "due use of ordinary means" and "sufficient understanding" help temper what otherwise might appear to be a simplistic and unsuspecting affirmation of clarity from certain Christians (evangelical Protestants, that is). The Westminster Confession also helps focus our attention on what Scripture is about, its message—salvation—to be known, believed and observed. Scripture is filled with details of great variety. Some are admittedly simple and others consciously mysterious, yet not all are clear, even to the learned. And even though "ordinary means" are employed, this is no guarantee: "nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word."<sup>3</sup>

Statements of Scripture's clarity, like that offered by the Westminster Confes-

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<sup>1</sup>James Callahan, "The Bible Says: Evangelical and Postliberal Biblicism," *Theology Today* 53, no. 4 (1997): 449-63.

<sup>2</sup>The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Evangelical and Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, ed. David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983), p. 604.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

sion, therefore lead to healthy and serious questions. In what way is Scripture clear? In its language, its translation, its every word, its expression of the authors' intent, its reference to historical matters, its narration of its story? And what do these matters have to do with Scripture's purpose? And further, what makes one text so easily understood and others so obscure? Isn't all writing intended to be clear, and all communication meant to be understood? And if so, what is special, if anything, about the Bible's clarity? And another important question follows: To whom is Scripture clear? To Christians only, to the critically educated, to church authorities like pastors or bishops, or to anyone at all? Interestingly, even the more explicit accounts of Scripture's clarity lack a suitable explanation of the complexities of its simple assertion.

### **An Overview**

It is the contention of what follows, especially so in the first part from a historical-theological perspective, that the belief and practices associated with Scripture's clarity have been persistent elements in the history of Christianity's identity, although the actual assertion and demonstration of clarity have not always been as noticeable. It is very much a systemic axiom within Christian history, particularly when we attempt to account for how Christians read and regarded Scripture. How confidently and conspicuously Scripture was used in theological commentary, in preaching, in liturgy and in educating Christians amply demonstrates how important its accessibility and perspicuity were in historic Christianity. Simply put, Christians have believed that Scripture works—Scripture accomplishes its purpose when read as Scripture, as Christians should read Scripture. And that is what we have come to refer to as Scripture's clarity.

In the second part in particular, with a literary-theological focus, an account will be offered of how Scripture's clarity might be understood at the present time. This will take on a threefold focus: the expression *clarity of Scripture* refers to how Christians account for the union of Scripture that is read, an appropriate reading of Scripture and Scripture's readers. Scripture, when read in a Christian manner, can be said to be clear in itself but not by itself (it has never been isolated from its readings or readers, historically or theologically). The relationship of this threefold focus is usually explained by means of the two-dimensional notions such as letter and spirit, or the outer and inner clarity of Scripture. Explaining Scripture's character in terms of outer and inner dimensions summarized the routine manner in which Christians accounted for the differing but unitive ways Christians actually use Scripture. Inner clarity of Scripture, according to Luther, "is internal, whereby through the Holy Spirit or a special gift of God, anyone who is enlightened concerning himself and his

own salvation, judges and discerns with the greatest certainty the dogmas and opinions of all men." The outer clarity of Scripture "belongs to the public ministry of the Word . . . and is chiefly the concern of leaders and preachers of the Word. We make use of it when we seek to strengthen those who are weak in faith and confute opponents."<sup>4</sup>

The threefold focus, explained by means of a two-dimensional explanation, is characteristically offered as a single assertion of Scripture's clarity. It is our common confession as Christians. As G. C. Berkouwer has said, it is "a confession of faith that praised the Word in its clarity and power."<sup>5</sup> Christians make use of the text in a way that both presumes and asserts the attitude toward how one reads and regards the sacred text; it summarizes the intrinsic union of theological commitments concerning the illumination of the Spirit, divine rather than simply conventional authority of the text, and the characterization of Scripture as realistically perspicuous (and many more and equally important topics).

The notion of clarity has served the Christian tradition well inasmuch as it represents the widespread working premise that the Bible aims (by God) to be understood after a certain fashion and is understandable (by Christian readers) when read as a Christian should read Scripture. Scripture's clarity helpfully addresses these basic assertions. And in this manner the subject of Scripture's clarity is a barometer of the continuing struggle with the interpretation of Scripture within Christianity.

### The Way Forward

Some will ask whether the effort is worthwhile—whether historical- and literary-theological deliberations of Scripture's clarity will revive what has become a subject of disdain in certain circles. I hope that this volume will contribute to an ongoing retrieval of historical-theological interests within a climate of literary-theological deliberation known by the label *postcritical*. It will take some effort to explain and unpack the significance of postcritical approaches, but suffice it to say at this point that the cues for this investigation of Scripture's clarity are taken in part from the effort to retrieve dominant themes from the Christian interpretative tradition and in part from the burgeoning interest in the Bible as literature (thus this volume divides along the lines of historical-theological and literary-theological topics).

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<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, "On the Bondage of the Will," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 159.

<sup>5</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 273.

One goal is to take advantage of this greater attention to the texture of Scripture as an opportunity to retrieve the interests of the Christian interpretative tradition; as George Lindbeck offered: "Modern literary approaches with their emphasis on textuality increase the possibility of a retrieval of the classic hermeneutics."<sup>6</sup> Appreciating the relationship of these historical and literary themes in a manner similar to a social scientist's approach to culture sets the stage for a renewed interest in Scripture's clarity in the Christian community. But this also presents a tempting opportunity to retell the story of perspicuity in a way that conforms to our sensibilities, justifying our interests in a subject that many believe to be an idea that has seen its best days.

While it will take the bulk of what follows to recommend Scripture's clarity, several provisions that orient what follows can be addressed in brief. Most important, it is not my goal to champion a retreat to the good ol' days when people did not question Scripture's authority, sufficiency and clarity. The struggle is as much with self-critical awareness wherein what is clearest from one perspective is indistinct from another, and I do not wish to retreat from this encounter. The assertion of Scripture's clarity does concern the character of Scripture itself but not without immediate attention to Scripture's readers and the readers' communities. As John Goldingay notes, "Behind the argument about the clarity of scripture is an argument about whom scripture belongs to and whether it is a means of control."<sup>7</sup>

### Another Caution

It is not wise to rely on a strictly modern attempt to justify the confession of Scripture's clarity, a literary-critical model of Scripture without the influence of the Christian theological tradition. Reading the Bible as one would read any other book, for example, is simply another way of saying that the Bible should not be afforded any special privilege but should exert its influence as the equal of all texts. (Optimists believed that this would vindicate the uniqueness of Christian Scripture in the modern world. No longer artificially supported by church tradition or authority, it would be free to accomplish its true purposes. Antagonists were convinced that treating the Bible as one would any literature would display the artificiality of its authority and bring about an end to Scripture's despotism.) There is another objectifying effort, fondly adopted by some Christians in their struggle for certain and authoritative interpretation of the Bible, to fix meaning in the intent of

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<sup>6</sup>George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 96.

<sup>7</sup>John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 345.

the authors of the biblical text. Authorship was and remains a significant topic in the interpretation of Scripture. However, there has been a dramatic shift from the general neglect or dismissal of this topic in early Christian circles, to the medieval contention that authorial intent was significant precisely because Scripture's author was God, to the rather routine presumption of historical and philosophical interest in a text as an expression of its human author's will in the author's historical setting, to the current literary discussion of the author's death (usually at the hands of the reader). These are not insignificant matters for our topic precisely because they raise the question of how it is that Scripture is clear and in what respects.

Within modern models the shift of authority is away from a privileged text, within a privileged community, understood by a privileged mode of interpretation, to the justification of Scripture's nature and message by matters formally external to the norming influence of Scripture, community and self-critical interpretation. It would be a great dereliction of Christian particularity to renounce claims to privilege, precisely when these contentious matters occupy our concern. Likewise, to fix matters of authority in extrinsic fields of understanding (such as authorial intent, history, writing or reading) misses the (almost) universal Christian confidence in Scripture read by Christians in a Christian manner. The assertion of Scripture's clarity both illustrates the substance of such debates and might offer Christians a way to survive these conflicts without losing Scripture in the battle.

The way of retrieval is historical precisely because discerning wisely our tradition of biblical *and* theological interpretative interests requires self-critical interest, not detachment. The main features of Scripture's clarity form a sometimes complicated network of themes: matters of Scripture's authority, history and literary quality (its realistic texture), origin, inspiration and message, and the subject of its meaning; as well as how Scripture is best considered—discerning meaning, sufficiency, the manner of reading we employ and how one form of attentiveness is preferred to another. It appears that the actual use made of Scripture (how it functions within the Christian community), Scripture's idiosyncratic nature (how Scripture itself is represented within the Christian community) and Scripture's relationship with the Christian reader (how to judge our understanding of Scripture) converge in the subject of Scripture's clarity. In one sense this consideration involves all facets of biblical interpretation and hermeneutics but only inasmuch as it deals with the particular, focused subject of Scripture's clarity.

A word of explanation regarding the dedication seems in order before beginning the first chapter. Harold and Helen Smith, my wife's paternal grand-

parents, were longtime Gideons. The Gideons International, founded in 1899, is dedicated to placing and distributing Bibles and New Testaments.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Grandpa Smith spent his adult life without sight, but this did not dissuade his love for God's word; his fifty years with the Gideons serves as ample testimony to his confidence in the accessibility of Scripture's message when Scripture is accessible. And Grandma Smith, at ninety-five years of age, continues to begin each day by reading Scripture—something she has done for many, many years. She has modeled a devotion to Scripture—to reading and appreciating her Bible—that has greatly influenced her family. This volume is written in loving memory of Grandpa Smith and dedicated to the Christian example of a devoted reader of Scripture, Grandma Smith.

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<sup>8</sup><[www.gideons.org/about.html](http://www.gideons.org/about.html)>.





# PART I

## HISTORY & THEOLOGY OF SCRIPTURE'S CLARITY

THE BELIEF AND PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH SCRIPTURE'S CLARITY HAVE BEEN PERSISTENT elements in the history of Christianity's identity, although the actual assertion of Scripture's clarity has not always been as noticeable. It would be an overstatement, on the one hand, to argue that Scripture's clarity was a topic of principal concern (something akin to christological focuses in the first millennium of Christian history), and it would be an understatement, on the other hand, to dismiss the significance of Scripture's clarity as simply a later (that is, Protestant and early modern) sentiment. The first five chapters trace the story of the fledgling efforts of Christians to interpret Scripture appropriately—appropriate to Christian interests—enabling us to see thereby how the assertion of Scripture's clarity serves to demonstrate a Christian reading of Christian Scripture.

Within the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history our topic is not discussed without a corresponding contention regarding the proper interpretation of the meaning of Christian Scripture, nor is it discussed explicitly apart from a contrasting admission regarding Scripture's obscurity (perceived or real). It is much more of an assumption than a conscientious assertion, at least until the modern era. When clarity is separated from Christian interpretative interests, it tends to suffer distortion and carry with it an obvious artificiality, but when subsumed within a pattern of Christian interpretative interests, it surfaces alongside the most essential elements of the interpretation of Scripture. The presence of the notion of Scripture's clarity within early Christianity is demonstrable but somewhat anonymous (chapter two); it is more explicit within early

Christian and early medieval theologians, but only inasmuch as Scripture's obscurity is also asserted (chapter three). We must wait until late medieval and Protestant theology to delineate the potential of emphasizing Scripture's clarity against other Christian interpretative premises—including the church and the tradition of Scripture interpretation (chapters four and five).

Prior to entertaining this history, a description of the present circumstances is in order, paying particular attention to how Christians have characterized the subject of Scripture's clarity. In more recent times it has become routine to associate historical concerns with the interpretation of Scripture, with serious consequences for the subject of clarity and the character of Christian faith itself. Christians of great variety share the assumption that Scripture clearly justifies their understanding of the nature and purpose of the Christian faith, but the tendency to distort such awareness is the most immediate problem we face (chapter one). Can Scripture be understood by anyone and by any means, or are there necessary conditions whereby one must understand Scripture if one is to understand it properly? And how might one use the appeal to Scripture's clarity at the present time? These questions are addressed by considering what it means for Christians to be readers of Scripture, particularly in light of so-called postcritical models of interpretation.

Illustrations and instances of Scripture's clarity—a survey of sorts—from Christian history are selected. It is an uneven treatment of the topic because the topic itself appears unevenly in Christianity's theological story. But the misshapen history of the topic should not force us to dismiss its significance. Scripture's clarity describes how Christians read and regard their Scripture. How that surmise is established, how it is practiced and how it is justified (when it is dealt with explicitly, which rarely occurs) is the concern of the first section of this book.

# 1

## CLARIFYING CLARITY

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

DEUTERONOMY 30:11-14

Suppose it was said in the New Testament—we can surely suppose it—that it is God's will that every man should have 100,000 dollars: do you think that there would be any question of a commentary? Or would not everyone rather say, "It's easy enough to understand, there's no need of a commentary, let us for heaven's sake keep clear of commentaries—they could perhaps make it doubtful whether it is really as it is written. (And with their help we even run the risk that it may become doubtful). But we prefer it to be as it stands written there, so away with all commentaries!"

But what is found in the New Testament (about the narrow way, dying to the world, and so on) is not at all more difficult to understand than this matter of the 100,000 dollars. The difficulty lies elsewhere, in that it does not please us—and so we must have commentaries and professors and commentaries; for it is not a case of "risking" that it may become doubtful to us, for we really wish it to be doubtful, and we have a tiny hope that the commentaries may make it so.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, "THE 100,000 DOLLAR GIFT"

THE EXPRESSION "THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE" IS BOTH HELPFUL AND MISLEADING. Scripture's clarity is, simply put, how Christians account for the union of text, reader and reading. It is not simply that the text is clear by itself, but that the (Christian) reader makes use of the text in a way that both presumes and argues that Scripture is clear itself. When used in this manner, the clarity of Scripture describes a Christian attitude toward how one reads and regards the sacred text. As such it summarizes the intrinsic union of theological commitments concerning the illumination of reader by the Spirit, divine rather than simply conventional authority of the text, and characterization of Scripture as realistically self-evidenced or perspicuous.

The notion has served the Christian tradition well inasmuch as it represents the widespread working premise that the Bible aims (by God) to be understood after a certain fashion and that it is understandable (by Christian readers) when read as a Christian should read Scripture. Scripture's clarity is a helpful way of addressing these basic assertions. One goal of this book will be to explain how the subject of Scripture's clarity is a barometer of the continuing struggle with the interpretation of Scripture. That is, one story can be told alongside the other, with both being better understood thereby. My procedure will be to rehearse how a Christian can read Scripture as Scripture; my goal is to indicate what Christians mean by Scripture's clarity.

With this said, we are faced with an irony: the assertion of Scripture's clarity—that the Bible can be read and understood plainly—is a complex and enigmatic subject. Why? Well, as a start, we assert that Scripture itself is clear, but Scripture is never by itself—never without historical settings, language grammar(s), never without readers both ancient and contemporary and everyone in between; nor is Scripture without academic scholarship, professional associations and publishing markets, the power structures of institutional academic accreditation; nor is Scripture without, for Christian theology, the Spirit; nor is it without Christians with their wide variety of interests or Christian authorities such as bishops, preachers and so many others.

In addition, the recent history of Christian interpretation of Scripture shows us that the notion of Scripture's clarity has been thought of as exhausted by history, personality, language, doctrine or a varied combination of these. That is, Scripture is said to be clear in a qualified sense in most Christian traditions: clear in essential matters, things having to do with saving faith, clear in articulating the identity of Jesus Christ, the nature of indispensable matters such as the church or God's grace or election or the return of Christ (depending on the Christian tradition). But other matters (the list of which could be interminably multiplied) are obscurities, mysteries, superfluous or ancillary matters; background information, sources or references external to the text itself.

In an attempt to overcome the seemingly inconclusive or unfounded trust in Scripture's clarity, Christian interpreters in recent years have misdirected our attention in an effort to ground clarity in other, discrete domains of knowledge instead of exploring how it is that Scripture's clarity might itself be understood. That is, the story of Scripture's clarity and the interpretation of Scripture cannot be told without rehearsing the (often negative) lessons that accompany what it means to assert that the Bible should and can be understood. This chapter focuses on recent examples of the employment of historical, authorial and methodological interests to demonstrate how Scripture can be regarded as

clear. These areas of concern demonstrate the ongoing struggle to understand Scripture's significance in recent interpretative efforts.

### Rehearsing the Threefold Concern

If Scripture's clarity were understood historically (usually described in terms of what it *meant*, which then generates what is important or significant for us to understand—what Scripture *means*), then this would effectively nullify Scripture's relevance. The resulting historical discontinuity would distance us from what Scripture is about. Such a view "sacrifices relevance, and it perpetuates concepts, forms, laws, and beliefs that belong squarely in the ancient world: it confers eternal sanctity on fossils."<sup>1</sup> In the split between *meant* and *means* the critical category of historical has become the dominant methodology by which understanding and meaning are established. Scripture's *meaning* would then be its original meaning, and its original meaning is its plain meaning, and its plain meaning is clear to us inasmuch as we have historically proximate knowledge of what was originally meant. One effect is that understanding Scripture becomes a technician's responsibility or an activity that is only professionally performed (as if Scripture is held captive to intellectually or academically professional criterion, and what is clear is what this class of professionals tells us is clear *according to them*). Theologically, this would mean that access to something other than, outside and apart from the text of Scripture itself (or its keeper, the Christian community) would be necessary to assert clarity. Another result is that a strictly historical understanding of the Bible's meaning is an attempt to interpret without commentary; for some this is sufficient (allowing God's Word to speak for itself or literalistically letting God speak for Godself), while for others this is corrective (avoiding the imposition of Christianity's doctrine on the real, historical nature of biblical literature). In each instance historical concerns govern our understanding of Scripture and effectively undercut assertions of Scripture's clarity.

Regarding our second area of concern: if read in terms of authorial intent (intrinsic in or through the text, or generated by collateral information about the author[s] of texts), then Scripture's clarity has to do with the objectivity of purpose and is based in a confidence in authors' abilities to express themselves clearly. Authorial intent takes two general forms: historical and literary, but each tends toward a similar emphasis upon authorial objectivism. The simplest form emphasizes the union of author and historical circumstances where the

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase is from another setting—about plain or applied meanings regarding Jewish interpretation of the biblical text—with specific attention toward historical views of the Bible (Baruch J. Schwartz, "On *Peshat* and *Derash*: Bible Criticism, and Theology," *Prooftexts* 14 [January 1994]: 81).

meaning of a text is limited to what the author could have intended in the circumstances of the text's composition. Thus, historical circumstances joined with authors' consciousness yield the possible object of the authors' meaning. Historical authorial intent stresses that reference is essential to meaning. Understood in this light, Scripture is a work product of the mechanism of writing, and the "meaning of a word sequence depends on our ability to relate it to a historical author."<sup>2</sup> A second form of intentionalism allows for an extension of meaning beyond (but consistent with) the authors' original intended meaning. A text's meaning is not only fixed by its intended reference but also involves the sense and significance of what was said. This allows for extensions and applications of the authors' intent based upon the capacity of authors to intend a sense that was provisionally more than what was said (there is much more to this second form of intentionalism, which we will return to in chapter six).

Historical authorial intent is often emphasized to the extent that we are told to resist treating a text's meaning simply in light of its reception or reading. The argument runs something like this: the *cause* of a text, any text, is author of the text; the text is only properly considered an *effect* of the author. In this manner *realism* is a synonym for *reference*, and reference is only validated by reliable appeal to the chronologically objective and prior event, saying, instance or activity depicted by means of the text. The appeal of this model of reference is the historical assertion that unless an event really happened, exactly as an author recorded it, then there is no reason to affirm the truthfulness of what was written. In this form of referentiality the text perspicuously refers to a previous, historical, extrinsic reality of authorial intent realized in text. Scripture's clarity is a matter of clarity of reference, a perspicuous mediator or a sign of the true reality—the reality of the author. This undercuts both a theological and historical understanding that Scripture itself is clear.

This raises a third concern regarding methodology: an exclusive (and unhealthy) focus upon personality dictates that the exertion of an author's will must control and manipulate the text itself, the reader of the text and any justifiable reading of the text. The necessary and important observation that biblical texts are authored texts is often developed into a methodological criterion of authentic interpretation. Noting the characterizations of Kevin Vanhoozer helps us understand how the appeal to authorial intent fixes the effort to interpret texts: "The author's will . . . imposes itself on language and literature. Precisely because they have authors, texts don't mean just anything. The author's will acts as a control on interpretation. Thanks to the author's willing *this* rather

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), p. 109.

than *that*, we can say that there is a definite meaning in texts prior to reading and interpretation."<sup>3</sup> This union of author and words and meaning and reference can be linked with a concern for a rather straightforward understanding of language (that words simply mean by referring to what is real). This is articulated by Gleason Archer, who contends, "Remember, no interpretation of Scripture is valid that is not based on careful exegesis, that is, on wholehearted commitment to determining what the ancient author meant by the words he used."<sup>4</sup> Meaning is what the author accomplished or hoped to accomplish in using certain words in a certain way in a certain setting, nothing less. Meaning is treated as a commodity, with the reader treated as a passive receiver of merchandise.<sup>5</sup> This is a more nuanced, but still troubling, characterization of meaning that fixes, authorizes or controls meaning by means of a theory that is not necessarily generated by and remains extrinsic to Scripture itself (such as the author's will or historic grammar). One result is that Scripture's clarity is understood in terms of readability or the accessibility of Scripture's language (the letters, put together this way or that, are of a meaning fixed by the author of the words themselves). Then anyone should be able to follow the text clearly simply by virtue of learned grammar or lexical sense, or at least acquiescence to the premise that meaning is something to be owned and vended.<sup>6</sup> In each of the three areas of concern Scripture's clarity is unfortunately about something other than Scripture itself.

Our dilemma is whether the texts of Scripture are ever independent of their generation (historically or authorially), reception (originally or presently), or

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 47. Vanhoozer's own account is much closer to the second type of authorial intent, appealing to that which lies in front of the text as well as the production of the text itself by the author (with the notion of a speech act accounting for the union of authored texts and intended meaning among the readers).

<sup>4</sup>Archer continues: "This is accomplished by painstaking study of the key words, as defined in the dictionaries (Hebrew and Greek) and as used in parallel passages." And referring to how a word can be used in various ways he noted, "Presumably each of these completely different uses of the same word go back to the same parent and have the same etymology" (Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982], pp. 15-16).

<sup>5</sup>The ideological premise is a type of "capitalist psychosis," the performance of which takes particularly practical and conservative forms; see David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 108-9.

<sup>6</sup>Note the following as an example of the notion of simplicity and lexical sense: "The clarity of Scripture lies in the fact that what we need to know from the Bible can, in fact, be known simply by reading it. The Bible is not a book of mysteries; it is not impossible to understand. What it has to say, it says clearly to all who read and study it. True, some parts are more difficult than others, and Bible teachers and scholars are needed to sound its depths. But what they teach about the necessary truths of the Bible should be clear to any reader of the Bible" (John Sailhamer, *Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998], p. 16).

reputation (fame or ascribed authority). At this point I would offer a qualified yes. The texts of Scripture are dependent regarding generation, reception and reputation for the purpose of orientation but not in the sense of limitation. Matters such as linguistic, literary, historical and cultural contexts of biblical texts are not incidental, especially when the concern is to offer historical demonstration in a historically privileged setting (contemporary academic and cultural settings, in particular). If we are attempting to study the Bible historically, then historical matters must dominate. But studying the Bible historically or authorially is not necessarily the same as studying the Bible Christianly. The role of the author as character is an important aspect of biblical texts themselves but often in a manner dissimilar from current assertions.

The authority of authorial matters is not and has not always been obvious, especially in the actual presentation of Scripture within Christian churches. Gregory the Great (540-604) insisted that it is "very superfluous" to inquire about the author of Job, for instance, because it is sufficient to regard the Spirit as Scripture's author. He offers: "If we were reading the words of some great man with his epistle in our hand, yet were to inquire by what pen they were written, it would be an absurdity."<sup>7</sup> The greater part of the history of Christian interpretation of Scripture treated that task as primarily theological, even at the expense of historical authorship. Thus, "traditional commentators admitted that they were less concerned about what an author intended than about how the text could be applied to particular circumstances."<sup>8</sup> Such a characterization is justified, only so, in such explicitly Christian terms.

After this fashion, the texts of Scripture are independent regarding generation, reception and reputation for the purpose of meaning but not in the sense of emancipation. One should not advocate the death of historical or authorial constraints in favor of readerly freedom but instead *contend* for the threefold, mutually dependent, practice of Scripture's texture, its reading and its readers.

What this has to do with Scripture's clarity is to point in a direction that might help us identify how sincere Christian people might proceed—people who wish to read the Bible for themselves, with some sense of confidence that God desires to communicate with them, with the corresponding confidence that God's communication is understandable. But what are we left with then inasmuch as affirming Scripture's clarity appears to be simplistic, misplaced or futile? (In the next section we will see illustrations of appeals to Scripture's clarity that should concern us, in part because they demonstrate that the ways

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, p. 221.



recent biblical interpreters appeal to clarity have little to do with anything uniquely Christian, historically or theologically. As unfortunate as it is, we have many lessons to learn from negative examples.) In addition, not only do these contentions challenge a notion that Scripture is clear in any simplistic sense, but so many more challenges are raised in contemporary literary and philosophical circles (to be discussed in the second half of this book) that it is hardly possible to speak of Scripture's clarity without seriously qualifying and even restraining what is meant thereby.

### **Not Simply Clear, Not Simply Obscure**

As a positive assertion the clarity of Scripture seeks to capture a distinctly Christian confession regarding the text's accessibility and use by Christian readers. But when severed from actual attention to the text itself, perspicuity tends to foster misleading ideas about Scripture, interpretation and Christian identity. Perspicuity is not properly a theory about texts or human language in general, it is not a code that treats Scripture as a cryptogram, and it is not an appeal to additional information supplied from outside an actual reading of Scripture. It is, as G. C. Berkouwer reminds us, a *confession* (made in faith—concerning its own means of understanding). Rather than simply an “objective,” predetermined quality of Scripture *prior* to any actual investigation, or simply a “subjective” *result* of the “process of disclosure” known as interpretation, perspicuity concerns accessibility without necessarily a theoretical construction of how this is possible. Thus, it “evidently does not in any way have the character of simplicity.”<sup>9</sup>

A consistent check on grandiose estimates of perspicuity has been the simultaneous emphasis that Scripture is not simply clear, and similarly, not simply obscure. Instead, Scripture is both clear and obscure, not merely clear or obscure—a tension not simply attributable to the imbalance of objective or subjective. Either in the celebration of obscurity to the detriment of clarity, or vice versa, the confession of the clarity of Scripture resists an easy resolution.

It is very tempting, and also pious in certain circles, to take a seeming shortcut to justify the assertion that Scripture is clear by asserting the self-evidentiary nature of Scripture's clarity. But this is rarely, if ever, a self-evident matter. What we are referring to is the hermeneutical policy of interpreting unclear or obscure texts by means of clear or obvious texts—a procedure with a profitable as well as perverted history (which we will only illustrate here). Augustine, bishop of Hippo, offered one of the most interesting and influential char-

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<sup>9</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 269-70.

acterizations of this procedure. He remarked:

Among those things which are said openly in Scripture are to be found all those teachings which involve faith, the mores of living, and that hope and charity. . . . Then, having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure, bringing principles which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those which are uncertain.<sup>10</sup>

Sound counsel, which unfortunately has been adhered to by every dominating tradition within the history of Christianity; used to oppose all variants of Christian practice: the persecution of Jews, Christian dissenters or so-called Anabaptists; the rejection of alternative views of communion and sacrament; one experience of God's grace as opposed to another; the presence or absence of spiritual gifts such as tongues and prophecy; the affirmation or rejection of the women preaching or ordination; even the sanctioning of slavery throughout the greater history of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> We are forced to ask, how is this possible?

The self-evident assertion that Scripture is clear dictates that any problems produced by *supposedly* obscure texts will be resolved upon further historical examination (texts really don't disagree, it is said, when understood in their original setting) or through harmonization (the Bible can be rearranged, it is said, so as to fit one simple history of what really happened). Interpretative practices derived from mathematical or scientific sources resolve otherwise obscure or difficult practices. For example, were there two angels at Jesus' tomb (as in Jn 20:12) or just one (as in Mt 28:5)? A well-liked and conservative harmonizing solution reads like this: "These are not contradictory reports. In fact, there is an infallible mathematical rule that easily explains this problem: wherever there are two, there is always one—it never fails! Matthew did not say there was *only* one angel."<sup>12</sup>

Historical harmonization is also employed to explain that contemporary readers find discrepancies in the Bible because we do not understand what really happened. In part this is because our world is so different from the

<sup>10</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup>For example, Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe argue that "some passages of Scripture are hard to understand. Sometimes the difficulty is due to their obscurity. At other times, the difficulty is because passages appear to be teaching something contrary to what some other part of Scripture is clearly teaching. For example, James appears to be saying salvation is by works (James 2:14-26), whereas Paul taught clearly that it was by grace (Rom 4:5; Titus 3:5-7; Eph 2:8-9)" (*When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1999], pp. 17-18).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-22.

world in which the Bible was produced, or the manner of representing what really happened is at variance with how it is presented in Scripture. The undergirding conviction is that chronological accuracy is what justifies saying the Bible is clear because clarity is about whether the Bible clearly depicts what really happened—as in the simple, single event that logically stands behind different representation in this manner of understanding.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the most conservative as well as typically liberal historical scholars (strange bedfellows, to be sure) share this orientation. While the former orientation defends confession on the basis of ancient justification of the present, the latter defends the ancient as a reform of confession. The obvious contrast stems from the use of historical justification, either from feigned historical objectivity (apologetic historical harmonization) or eschewing confessional prejudice (now traditional critical scholarship).<sup>14</sup> (All this is to say that the outline below of conservative apologetics for historical harmonization is similarly applicable to dominant forms of critical historical scholarship.) The practical effect of such harmonizations is, as one commentator observes, “damaging to the clarity of Scripture. They actually subvert scriptural authority by implicitly denying the plain meaning of the text.”<sup>15</sup>

Harold Lindsell’s argument in his famous *The Battle for the Bible* demonstrates how the rather straightforward assertion of Scripture’s clarity is linked with historical harmonization in defense of his position on the subject of Scripture’s inerrancy. “Those who advocate inerrancy,” Lindsell writes, “take the Bible in its plain and obvious sense.” That the argument is historical in nature is doubtless: “The spades of a thousand over the centuries have not discredited the truth of Scripture nor has the turned-over earth proven the Bible to be untrue.”<sup>16</sup> So obvious is this historical argument Lindsell offers that he asserts, “One of the greatest Old Testament prophecies foretold the Diaspora of the Jews because of their sins, with the promise of the regathering of Israel in the latter days. Who can doubt that the return of the Jew to Palestine, even though

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<sup>13</sup>Gleason Archer offers an example of historical harmonization based in chronological or representation of one simple, single event: “In the case of parallel passages, the only method that can be justified is harmonization. That is to say, all the testimonies of the various witnesses are to be taken as trustworthy reports of what was said and done in their presence, even though they may have viewed the transaction from a slightly different perspective. When we sort them out, line them up, and put them together, we gain a fuller understanding of the event that we would obtain from any one testimony taken individually” (*Bible Difficulties*, p. 16).

<sup>14</sup>James Callahan, “The Bible Says: Evangelical and Postliberal Biblicism,” *Theology Today* 53, no. 4 (1997): 449–63.

<sup>15</sup>Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 626.

<sup>16</sup>Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), p. 37.

in unbelief, is anything other than a fulfillment of biblical prophecy?"<sup>17</sup>

How many times did Peter actually deny Jesus in relation to the cock crowing, or how many times did Jesus "cleanse" the temple (the Synoptic Gospels have it at the culmination of Jesus' career, while the Gospel of John has it at the beginning of Jesus' career)? Lindsell's now infamous resolutions to these seeming discrepancies display a preoccupation with historical harmonization: "None of it is incompatible; the accounts only supplement each other . . . and make the seeming contradictions in the Synoptics understandable."<sup>18</sup> Numerical and measuring discrepancies are not errors, just misinterpretations of measuring procedures, ignorance of geometry or even accurate use of inaccurate statistical information; conflicting details in Jesus' statements are not contradictory, Jesus could have easily said both or many more similar things, or the Gospel writers could be quoting different parts of Jesus' conversation.<sup>19</sup> The idea that Scripture is in error here or there "appears only to those who read the account superficially and have not probed into the real possibilities. . . . Thus there is no error, no incongruence, no real problem of any kind, at least not in the words of Scripture."<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, one of the most significant causes for the troublesome circumstances of those who castigate Scripture's authority, according to Lindsell, is from biblical critics or practitioners of "hermeneutics" because under this guise "it is possible to destroy the idea of biblical infallibility neatly by providing interpretations of Scripture at variance with the plain reading of the texts." Unbelief, it turns out, is at the root of denials and reinterpretations of "what the Scriptures clearly teach."<sup>21</sup> There is more to the sound and viable defense of inerrancy than this idea of clarity, and there is more to clarity than this simplistic characterization.

In the effort to employ clarity in relationship to historical harmonization, Lindsell's argument is not unique. On the contrary, the sometimes-spoken and often-unspoken assumptions of many late modern apologetic works is precisely that "difficulties" or "hard sayings" of certain biblical texts can be resolved by means of accurate historical information about *what really happened*.<sup>22</sup> This indicates a uniquely historical commitment to a greater notion of

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 164-66.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 164, 169.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 39, 40.

<sup>22</sup>An illustration of this assumption in evangelical scholarship is the following: "Thanks to [archaeology's] skilled and scientific application it is possible today to understand the Bible in its setting of time and place as never before. To grasp with clarity the writer's first meaning and original purpose is manifestly the first step towards the elucidation of that which is permanent and universally significant in his theme" (Bernard Ramm, "The Use of Archaeology in Interpretation," in *Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1971], p. 55).