Introduction

"We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more and farther than they, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are raised up on their giant size. Our age enjoys the gifts of preceding ages, and we know more, not because we excel in talent, but because we use the products of others who have gone before."

John of Salisbury, quoting Bernard of Chartres

"Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Matthew 13:52

This book is the result of a long journey. It began in the late 1980s while I was researching the history of how the conclusion to Matthew's gospel has been interpreted. I was interested in studying the relationship between Jesus' "Great Commission" and the missionary endeavors of the church. I expected to find a high level of continuity among the interpretations offered by the various giants of the church who commented on this text. Instead, I was astounded by the diversity of interpretations offered for this single passage.

The range of interpretations offered for Matt 28:18–20 challenged my preconceptions of what we mean when we speak about a text's *meaning*. I cut my teeth in a theological tradition that taught that the goal of interpretation was to recover the author's original intentions. These are what grounded a text's meaning and should give it stability in whatever situation

it was interpreted. Almost every interpreter I studied claimed to be doing just this, and yet they arrived at very different conclusions regarding what they thought the biblical authors had intended.

Three solutions are usually offered for this dilemma. First, we could claim that all those who have gone before us are partially right, but add that with the current research and tools available today, we possess a more accurate understanding of what the text means than those who proceeded us. In other words, we can claim chronological superiority based on our position in history and view those who came before us as well intentioned but misinformed.

A second solution is to make a distinction between the *meaning* of the text and the *significance* that different readers attribute to it. While there is some philosophical merit to this argument, it misses the fact that for the past two thousand years it has been the meaning of the text, not its significance, that scholars and theologians have been wrangling over.

Third, theories such as Reader-Response Criticism have attempted to address this issue by giving more attention to the role that *readers* play in constructing the meaning of a text. However, all too often too much weight is given to the reader and, as a result, meaning is boiled down to individual preference or taste. The meaning of a text is reduced to an interpretive free-for-all. But the historical record of the interpretation of a text like Matt 28:16–20 demonstrates that there are consistent threads and leitmotifs that crisscross one another and give a degree of continuity and coherence to its tradition of interpretation. These threads of continuity seem to indicate that the text itself and other factors limit the possibilities for what is considered an appropriate reading.

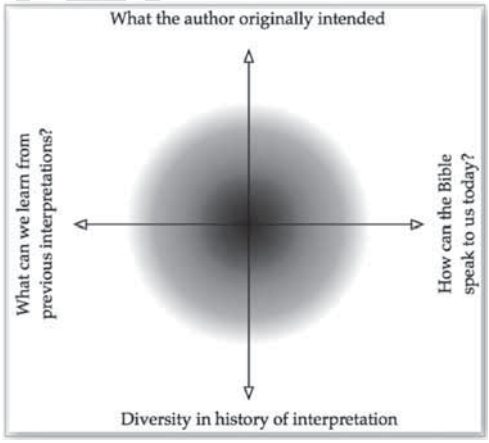

Figure 2. The shaded area in the center represents a balanced hermeneutical model that incorporates these four very different goals of interpretation.

Neither the author-oriented approach nor Reader-Response theories could account for the continuity or diversity in the historical record of how Matt 28:16–20 has been interpreted. As a result, my attention shifted from the practice of biblical exegesis to questions about how we read or interpret a text: from biblical studies to hermeneutics (a discipline that is not only intellectually challenging but immensely practical). In particular, what was needed was a hermeneutical model that could balance several seemingly contradictory ideas. It had to account for and explain the twists and turns that occur in a text's interpretative history as different readers have interpreted the biblical text throughout the history of the church and at the same time appreciate what the author was trying to communicate to their original audience (see Figure 2). Along another axis, this to not only enables us as contemporary readers to learn from the gifted commentators of the past, but also allows the biblical texts to speak to us in new and even provocative ways today.

RECEPTION THEORY

Anthony Thiselton originally exposed me to the concept of Reception Theory while I was working on my doctorate under him at the University of Nottingham. Reception Theory is a literary theory that was formulated in Germany during the 1960s. This approach is well known in Germany and continental Europe but its acceptance in the English-speaking world has been relatively slow, and it has been in only the last ten years that it has been recognized as a valuable tool for biblical studies. One of the original proponents of Reception Theory, Hans Robert Jauss, once joked that "to the foreign ear, questions of 'reception' may seem more appropriate to hotel management than to literature."

Reception Theory was conceived at the University of Constance, Germany, when a group of scholars sought to overcome what they thought were weaknesses in contemporary literary theory. German literary theories were dominated by either historical-critical or formalist approaches at that time. Contemporary theories of literary history were often organized around the poles of great authors and masterpieces. While this approach provided some skeletal structure to literary history, it was a very bare one. In particular, too much attention was devoted to the great authors and many of the

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lesser-known authors and their works were overlooked. At the same time, the relationships between various texts, the development of literary trends, and the ability to assess the impact of a particular text was not possible, or if so, only very minimally.

Jauss and his colleagues complained that methods for studying literature being taught at the universities concealed the role that readers play in the formation of any literary tradition. It was only when a book was read, interpreted, and applied that a literary tradition was formed. As a result, Jauss and his colleagues sought to do justice to the roles that the authors, texts, and readers play. There also needed to be some means to evaluate the influence and impact of a particular author's work on subsequent writers and readers. This final aspect is often neglected, but is one of the most significant features of a text's history.

A second question Jauss and his colleagues sought to address was how to bring a text from the distant past back to life for present-day readers. This question was a particular challenge for him. His research focused on medieval tales and poems written about the royal court. Traditional methodologies of literary history allowed one to interpret the meaning of these tales, but did so in a way that made these medieval stories dry and dusty; historical relics from a distant time and place. The challenge for Jauss was how to bring these stories back to life so that the modern reader could understand, appreciate, and enjoy them once again.

The same challenge faces readers of the Bible: How can we read and interpret the Bible so that it speaks in fresh and even provocative ways? This may seem like a moot point to many in the church today, especially given the abundance of contemporary translations and books written about the Bible. However, two things must be kept in mind. First, the Bible is not a modern book but an ancient one (or more accurately, a collection of ancient books). The most recent portion of the Bible was written almost two thousand years ago, by authors who spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek and were subjects of the Roman Empire. Their language, daily life, and understanding of the world were profoundly different from ours. To ignore the historical, cultural, and linguist distance between the biblical authors and ourselves is not only naïve but also can easily lead to misunderstandings of the text.

> It is for these reasons that the question of how we interpret the Bible so that it speaks in new and fresh ways is critical for the contemporary church.

We also need to keep in mind the old adage that "familiarity breeds contempt." Western European and North American cultures are saturated with words, images, ideas, and stories from the Bible. When a housing developer advertises new homes for sale as "your sanctuary" we see an

appropriation of a biblical concept to real estate marketing. This saturation is even more profound for those who have been raised within a believing community. A certain reading lethargy sets in after hearing the same biblical stories and passages taught over and over. As a result, when we sit down to read the Bible it often seems like yesterday's news to us. Our mind races ahead of our eyes for something to catch its interest. Soon we are no longer reading the Bible but pondering the weather or our plans for the day. When our attention finally snaps back to the page we ask, "Now just where was I?" "Did I make it to the end of this line, paragraph, or page?" So we back up a few sentences, or start reading at the top of the page all over again.

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THREE-WAY DIALOGUE

While some may enjoy diving into the deep and technical discussions surrounding the philosophical principles of interpretation, or linguistic nuances of Koine Greek, that is not the aim or focus of this book. Instead, the emphasis of this book will be on introducing the reader to the basic concepts of Reception Theory and the role these concepts can play in how we study the Bible. At times, this means that, as author and readers, we will have to wrestle with a few philosophical and hermeneutical issues in order to understand Reception Theory. But I will make every attempt to keep these discussions to a minimum. The essence of this book will be on practice rather than theory.

The goal of this text is to help the reader shift from a two-way dialogue with the Bible to a three-way dialogue. The normal interaction we think of between a reader and a book is like a two-way dialogue. It is based on an image we have of two people talking with each other. In this case the author is communicating with the reader with written rather than spoken words. In the act of reading we may even lose sight of the fact that the author is not present, just the text they wrote. The basic metaphorical model is one in which the text is a "container" or "channel" through which the author communicates to us. This two-way dialogue model is a universal aspect of almost every method of biblical interpretation today.

The third participant I would like to introduce into this dialogue is the tradition of biblical interpretation. The problem is not that we are members of a tradition that has commented on and applied the biblical texts in various ways. Rather, it is how to engage our tradition in a receptive and critical

manner—to bring tradition to the table, so to speak, as an active dialogue partner when we read the Bible.

Consider the imaginary idea of a chess game that has been going on for two millennia. The original players are long gone and their spot at the table has been filled by others hundreds of times so far. As you observe the game one player retires and you are asked to take their place. If we use the analogy of a two-way dialogue you would jump right in and begin playing the game. Having read *Great Chess Moves for Dummies* you may even have a few good moves up your sleeve. But would you know what moves to make *at this particular point in the game?* If you don't know the past, would you repeat the same mistakes of those before you or miss out on opportunities they exploited? Would your moves be wise or foolish in light of the current opponent?

In terms of the chess analogy a three-way dialogue would mean changing the way we approach the game. We would want to learn from others in the room, especially if they have been there a while and were known to have made some good moves in the past. We would want to know if there were any special rules (for example, the use of a timer to keep the game moving fast, or a rule that you must use your left hand to make moves on odd-numbered Tuesdays in any given month) for this particular game of chess. What have been some of the best moves made in the past? What type of player is your opponent? Based on all this information, what would be the wisest move to make right now?

Let me apply this analogy to biblical interpretation. The normal approach to reading the Bible is that of a two-way dialogue. Now I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that this is an invalid approach. However, since most of the book will be presenting an approach to biblical interpretation based on three-way dialogue, it may be possible for someone to read this as an argument against the traditional approaches. What I hope to demonstrate are the benefits that we can derive from engaging our tradition when we study the biblical text. Just as we would want to learn from the experiences and wisdom of other chess players, it would be wise to learn from those who have wrestled with the biblical message before us. What have been some of the best interpretations and applications of this particular story? What mistakes have others made when interpreting this passage? Have the rules changed for what counts as a valid interpretation over time? Have others read the text in the same manner as we do today?

As members of the church this three-way dialogue is very significant. After all, we claim that God's interactions with humanity are recorded in this book we call the Bible and that our personal faith and Christian community rest on it. We believe that through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, God uses this book to inspire, console, correct, and guide us. If we

claim that God speaks to us through the Bible we should be open to what others claim God has revealed to them. Especially if we consider that in the two thousand years since the church was inaugurated there have been countless individuals who had sharper minds, were better readers, and were more devout than we are. We should be grateful to sit at their feet!

THREEFOLD STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Time for a quick disclaimer on my part. This book examines and attempts to demonstrate how Reception Theory enables the biblical reader to engage the Bible and the history of biblical interpretation in a three-way dialogue. Such an exclusive focus could give the impression that I think this is the only viable method of studying the Bible. This is not the case. On the contrary, I believe that there are a wide variety of valuable methods. The different approaches (historical studies, background, word studies, grammar, narrative analysis, etc.) can be compared to various tools. A good do-it-yourselfer doesn't just have a hammer in his or her toolbox, but a collection of tools. (I use this line regularly to justify my spending to my wife whenever I return from the home improvement store).

Once, I attempted to replace a faulty water pump on my car. In order to do this I had to first remove the serpentine belt (obviously named for its relation to a certain biblical character), which connected the water pump to about ten other pulleys on the engine. The instructions called for the use of a "tension adjusting wrench" to relieve the tension that held this belt in place. A quick call to the local automotive supply store revealed that this one tool cost about $25. So I improvised, using a pipe wrench with a rusty old piece of pipe slipped over the end for extra leverage. After several frustrating hours, a bruised forehead, and bandaged knuckles I resigned myself to shelling out the $25 for the "tension adjusting wrench." In less than ten seconds the serpentine belt was off. The right tool made all the difference.

The same is true in biblical interpretation—the right approach can make all the difference. A word study on "Corinth" will not yield the same results as a historical-background study on what life was like in ancient Corinth. Reception Theory is an excellent tool for engaging the history of biblical interpretation along with the Bible, but it is only *one tool among many* that the reader should have at his or her disposal.

Unfortunately this analogy fails at a certain point. Applying the appropriate interpretive tool will not produce results in ten seconds, but may involve long hours, days, or even years of diligent study. However, the results are well worth the sacrifice.

The model of Reception Theory presented in this book can be organized under three historical contexts and three levels of reading.

First Context—The Author and Original Audience

First, the biblical text is a product of history. The New Testament is the result of the early church's understanding of God's revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The authors of the New Testament took a very particular perspective on the person and message of Jesus and sought to persuade the people to adopt that same view. At the same time, when these same authors read various passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (which was their Bible) they read them through the lens of Jesus' resurrection—often in ways very different from the Jewish community that many of them came from.

The experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus clearly illustrates this (Luke 24:13–35). Prior to the resurrection, Jesus' followers did not perceive the relationship between various scriptural passages and Jesus' life and teachings. So Jesus gave these gentlemen a crash course on how to read the Scriptures from a new perspective: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27, ESV). This allowed them to read these passages from an entirely new perspective. It was like putting on a new pair of glasses and seeing things in an completely new way. In a similar manner, in order to understand the New Testament the reader must understand how the authors of these texts perceived the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and how this became the lens through which they read, interpreted, and quoted what we now call the Old Testament.

So the first historical context we need to understand is the context in which a text was originally written and how the original audience would have understood the text. Why didn't the disciples recognize the references to Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures before they were explained to them? How would Paul's readers have understood his writings given their religious, cultural, and social backgrounds? Determining how a text would have been received in its original historical context is similar to the traditional hermeneutical method that seeks to determine what the author intended when he penned the text.

Second Context—History of Interpretation

The second historical context is the history of the reception of the biblical texts as recorded in the various commentaries, sermons, creeds, confessions, art, and music of the church. We have to cast our net wider than just

the written records of a text's interpretation. Art and music often had a more powerful impact on how a biblical text was understood than a commentary or sermon: Handel's *Messiah* is one example. One of the primary tenets of Reception Theory is that a text possesses a potential for meaning that unfolds over the course of time. No single interpreter or generation can fully exhaust the meaning of the Bible. As such, both the Bible and its history of interpretation are witnesses to the creative power of the transmission of the biblical message to new generations of believers in new historical and cultural situations.

The biblical text is like the trunk of a tree. It is the document that we appeal to and which constitutes the center of our theological reflection and thought. The branches correspond to the history of how these biblical texts have been understood. They emerge from the same tree but can be very different in quality and character from one another. Some branches are incredibly productive. They have a long history of providing valuable insight and guidance for the church. Other trajectories of interpretation are hidden in the foliage; they have been forgotten and may need to be retrieved from some forgotten recess of history. At the same time, there are other branches that have proven themselves through history to be theological dead ends or, worse yet, whose fruit has been found to be unhealthy for the church.

This analogy helps us to see the organic relationship between the Bible and its interpretations. Reception Theory does not take the perspective that a text is hermetically sealed off from how it is interpreted, but instead perceives a dynamic relationship between the text and the interpretations that grow off it. Understanding springs from the interaction between readers and the texts. These interpretations, in turn, contribute to the way in which later readers will understand the message of the Bible.

Unfortunately, the history of a text's effects and interpretations is often treated as ancillary material that gets tucked away in a commentary's appendix or only called upon as an occasional illustration. But a text's reception history exposes the reader to the great repository of understanding and significance that the church has found in the Bible. It allows us to learn from previous interpretations and may also reveal to us why we read a particular passage the way we do. History reveals to us what we owe to those who preceded us. To cite the famous metaphor, "we are like dwarves on the shoulders of giants."

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Third Context—Our Contemporary Context

This brings us to the third historical context. We need to understand to a certain extent how and why we read a particular story or epistle the way we do. In order to do this, we must be students of our own culture, historical context, and religious tradition. However, this is often the most difficult step to perform, because the network of assumptions, preconceptions, and beliefs that shape our thoughts are often invisible to us. For example, when we read the word "whale" in the story of Jonah, we don't think of it as an evil creature on par with the devil, as Martin Luther did. Rather, we instinctively envisage it according to our modern biological view of the world: as an intelligent, giant, graceful sea mammal.

THREE LEVELS OF READING

Parallel to the three historical contexts I want to position three levels of reading. The first level is reading for pleasure or devotional reading. At the devotional level of reading we don't ask technical questions about the text. Rather, we want to enter into the world of the text. We don't ask questions about the meaning of the Hebrew word for "shepherd" or "sheep" when reading the Twenty-third Psalm devotionally. Instead, we want to enter into the text, to allow the words of the text to affect us and engage our spiritual imagination. Seeing God in terms of a shepherd and us as his sheep creates new perspectives for understanding our relationship to him.

> We need to understand how and why we read the Bible the way we do.

The second level of reading focuses on literary features. At this level of reading we are interested in the macrostructure of the text. If we are reading a narrative we need to have a grasp of the characters, conflicts, and overall story line. In order to understand the conclusion to Matthew's gospel we need to understand what led up to that point in the story; how the story about the magi from the East in Matthew chapter 2 is related to the command to "go to all the nations" in chapter 28.

Imagine a situation in which you ask a friend about a particular book on their shelf. Would you accept their summary and recommendation of this book if they had only read a few paragraphs in the book? Yet we do this all the time in Bible studies, Sunday school lessons, and sermons. We fragment and atomize the text of a biblical book or letter, examine small portions of it (perhaps just a few verses), and then claim to understand the meaning of the whole. At the literary reading level we want to reverse this

trend and keep the whole of the book in mind, keep the big picture before us.

The third level of reading examines the nuts and bolts contained in the text. The intention at this level is to try and determine the answers to two questions. The first is: *what does the text say?* This may involve exploring further questions about the meaning of a word, the background to a particular idea, the literary structure or genre of the text, and so on. This is the level with which most readers will be familiar. It is at this level of reading that the traditional methods and approaches to biblical interpretation are at home. The second question asks, *what does the text say to me?*

These two questions unite the hermeneutical concepts of interpretation and application. Meaning and application are not separate concepts but directly related to each other. In many instances it is impossible to discuss one without reference to the other. For example, any discussion of the meaning of the Twenty-third Psalm without reference to its effect on the reader misses the thrust of the psalm—it was written and structured in such a manner as to produce an effect in the reader.

To a greater or lesser extent all texts have a similar relationship between "*what it says*" and "*what it says to me*." What distinguishes the third level of reading from the first two is that the interpreter is focused on particular questions or aspects of the biblical text, such as a word, a phrase, or the grammar of a sentence—the "parts" of the "whole" text. This contrasts with the first two levels of reading that focus on the big picture, or the "whole" into which all the "parts" fit.

There is a constant ebb and flow between the three levels of reading. Our understanding of the "whole" gives us a context in which to understand "parts." And as we study the "parts," we gain a better grasp of the inner workings and intricacies of the "whole."

These three historical contexts and three levels or reading form the backbone for this book. The first five chapters will focus on the three historical contexts and the history of interpretation. The sixth chapter will try to pull all the "parts" of this book together with practical advice and guidelines for engaging in a study on a text's history of reception. While the sixth chapter could be read on its own, it is built upon the preceding chapters and should be read in that light of them. Finally, the seventh and eighth chapters will explore how the material presented in this book can be applied to teaching or preaching situations.

A WORD ABOUT SOURCES

Before someone starts to complain about the types of resources and texts cited in this book—"his work does not use the original Hebrew or Greek manuscripts . . ."—I would like to offer a word of clarification. This book is written for someone who is involved in their Christian community (and semifamiliar with their tradition's history), is conversant with both the Old and New Testaments, and has a fair amount of intellectual curiosity (why else read this book in the first place?).

Therefore, the historical sources that I have selected should be either familiar to you or you should have access to them. This means that texts like lexicons and dictionaries that require a strong grasp of Greek or Hebrew will only make the occasional appearance in this book. Exegetical resources that are written for the informed layperson will take precedence over technical reference works that require a specialized theological education. Books that are widely available are preferred over those that, while they may be more accurate and reflect the most recent research, might only be found in a prestigious library.

And finally, resources that are available on the Internet are given a high priority—that way you can imitate the Boreans and "see whether these things are so" (Acts 17:11). While there are definite drawbacks to the Internet, one of its strengths is its democratizing power. A person sitting in their stone farmhouse on a Scottish isle has the same access to these resources as the apartment dweller in New Delhi. Since one of my hopes in writing this book is not only to explain how to engage in a three-way dialogue with the Bible, but to encourage you to go and do the same, it is only appropriate to focus on resources that will make that possible.

THE DWARF STANDING ON A GIANT'S SHOULDER

The metaphor of a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant is meant to reveal a great deal about how we view our relationship to history. This metaphor has a rich history of reception. As early as the twelfth century, John of Salisbury quoted his teacher Bernard of Chartres's teaching that truth is conveyed to us through tradition: *"We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more and farther than they, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are raised up on their giant size. Our age enjoys the gifts of preceding ages, and we know more, not because we excel in talent, but because we use the products of others who have gone before."*

Up until the Enlightenment this image was used to indicate that just as the dwarf owes his keen vision to the giant, so also we are indebted to our tradition. The dwarf's vantage point allowed it to see a bit farther than the giant could. This simple metaphor revealed not only how we know more than those in the past, but also our dependence on the work of those who came before us. There is a certain interpretational freedom in this metaphor. It gives credence to both tradition and contemporary knowledge and allows some latitude on where we place the emphasis, depending on how we perceive the relationship between the ancient and the modern.

During the Enlightenment this metaphor was interpreted in a different manner. Sir Isaac Newton and others claimed that while we have benefited from the past, we are independent from and above the giant. The emphasis now fell on the dwarf's superior vision and better understanding than those who came before. Those in the past did not possess the same level of truth as the Renaissance thinkers. The result was that the authority of tradition was reduced, if not outright rejected.

Gerald Holton (Professor Emeritus of the History of Science at Harvard) is a contemporary embodiment of this spirit: "In the sciences, we are now uniquely privileged to sit side by side with the giants on whose shoulders we stand." Since we know more than those who came before us, we are tempted to think that there is not much they can teach us.

The image of the dwarf on the giant's shoulders raises questions about the interpretation of classical texts such as the Bible. How indebted are we to those who preceded us? Do they have anything to teach us? The metaphorical image of the dwarf standing on the shoulders of the giant is an appropriate image in regard to these questions. We are standing on the shoulders of giants and need to learn how to read the text with them.