

# INCARNATIONAL INTERPRETATION

## HEARING THE WORD OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The New Testament constitutes a paradox in Christian thought. God is its author, but it was written by humans. Just as Jesus is fully human and fully divine, so also is the authorship of the New Testament. The theological language used to describe this mystery is *incarnation*, which denotes a transcendent reality embodied within a finite entity. Thus, with respect to the New Testament, the divine message is incarnated within human language. This incarnational character determines the most appropriate approach to the text. On the basis of its divine nature, the church rightly accepts the New Testament as authoritative. Concurrently, its human nature means that it comes to us in the trappings of a culturally conditioned document, the components of which proceed from and are addressed to a particular historical-cultural moment. This essay explores the implications of the dual authorship of the New Testament, beginning with the divine and followed by the human. The interface between the two aspects emerges under the rubric, incarnational interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

### The Divine Authorship of the New Testament

In many respects the divine authorship of the New Testament is accepted as an axiomatic article of faith in the church. One objection to starting with faith is that it might open the floodgates to religious relativism. If the New Testament is not proved to have God as its author,

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<sup>1</sup>The conviction that the authorship of the New Testament has a dual human-divine nature distinguishes Christian thought from that of many other religions. For instance, Muslims affirm only divine authorship of their sacred book, the *Qurʾān* (Cf. Joseph M. Mutei, “The Bible: Classical and Contemporary Muslim Attitudes and Exegesis,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 31 [2007]: 207-220). The present essay, therefore, may serve as a resource in inter-religious dialogue for promoting deeper understanding between Christians and others. Moreover, this essay may empower Christian missionaries who sometimes struggle to explain to potential and recent converts why Christians seemingly obey or disobey scriptural mandates in arbitrary fashion.

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how can we know it is true? The problem is profound, yet I would argue for divine authorship on the basis of both internal and external evidence. Any one of the arguments might not be convincing in and of itself. Still, when taken together, they form a solid foundation.

Frequently cited internal evidence includes 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (NASB), and 2 Peter 1:21, “For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (NASB). While these two verses do not refer specifically to the New Testament, the church has applied them by analogy to the whole Bible. External evidence includes the general historical reliability of the texts and the fact that the Bible has sustained the spiritual life of the church for some twenty centuries.

Similarly, the religious experience of multitudes of Christians, including my own, seems to be genuine. The core of ethics in the New Testament, moreover, corresponds with the highest ideals of humankind. For these reasons, faith in divine authorship is a sound starting point for understanding the New Testament.

The church, then, rightly states that the New Testament is God’s Word. It is not merely the Word about God. Nor is it the record of the lofty thoughts of humans as they contemplated the truths of life. Rather, the New Testament is God’s self-revelation. It contains the truth about God: his character, his desires, and his purposes. In the New Testament, God has revealed that he loves humankind and that he has acted within history to redeem people unto himself. Above all, God has revealed Jesus Christ as his unique representation through whose death and resurrection he has purchased our redemption.

The New Testament also communicates ultimate, objective truths about good and evil and about the nature and destiny of humankind. By it we know how to please God and how to relate to one another. In short, the New Testament is authoritative. It is a binding compendium of truth and righteous conduct. It is the infallible rule for faith and life, thereby furnishing the church with everything needed for its wholeness.

When we say that the New Testament is of divine authorship, we do not mean to say that it is divine, a claim which would be tantamount to idolatry. The New Testament does not embody all the fullness of

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God, nor does it convey all that will be known about him in the life to come. It does, however, seem to communicate exactly what God wants us to know at this time. It is the sufficient guide for his people.

### **The Human Authorship of the New Testament**

God authored the New Testament, but it also had human authors. The divine Word comes to us through the vehicle of human communication. Therefore, the New Testament can be profitably studied according to the strictures of conventional human writing. The better we understand this component of the text, the more clearly we can hear the message that God intends for his people. Thus, there are at least four aspects of the human dimension that can be examined for each particular New Testament writing: (1) the selection and transmission of the text as canon, (2) the cultural context of the human author and the first recipients, (3) the literary context and the genre (type of writing, e.g., letter, history, biography), and (4) the presence and function of figurative language.

*Selection and Transmission of the Text.* The selection and transmission of the New Testament text also displays both human and divine dimensions. The process by which writings were included in the New Testament (canonization) was complex and lengthy. At the risk of oversimplification, church councils selected texts on the basis of their apostolic origins and/or the edifying qualities inherent in the text. A closer investigation reveals that some texts were first accepted but later excluded, while others were initially rejected but subsequently included. There were disagreements over the merits of certain documents, and different groups proposed competing canonical lists. This complexity raises at least three crucial questions: (1) Are all New Testament documents equally authoritative, or should we have a “canon within the canon”? (2) Are there other documents which should be part of the New Testament? Are other canonical lists to be preferred? (3) Why is the canon closed? Does God not speak authoritatively today? These issues are profound and will require continuing reflections. At this time, my working hypothesis is that God used human processes to assure that exactly the right documents were included in the New Testament.

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The texts themselves have also undergone complex processes as they were transmitted through the centuries. In the main, New Testament texts were copied and dispersed in the same way as other documents. The extant New Testament manuscripts exhibit the same kinds of copyist errors as copies of merely human writings. However, it is not stretching credulity to assert that errors in the text are remarkably few and relatively minor. We can have a high degree of confidence that the text we have today is exceedingly close to the original autographs. The Church asserts that this degree of reliability is the direct result of the Holy Spirit safeguarding the transmission of the text. Even so, a certain amount of work remains in sorting out textual variants and determining the original text.

*Cultural Context.* The books of the New Testament were written within the Greco-Roman world. More particularly, much of the New Testament reflects a Jewish background as influenced by the politics of imperial Rome and the cultural imperialism of Greco-Roman society. The tensions arising out of this diversity vexes those who seek today to understand the divine message. For example, precedent for the “Word” (Logos) language of John 1 might reside in Jewish Wisdom literature or in the writings of Greco-Roman philosophers. It is also possible that the author incorporated both perspectives. Whatever the solution, an understanding of the cultural background enriches our appreciation of the message. Other cultural issues which likewise inform our reading of the New Testament include attitudes toward marriage and family; the value placed on wealth and the means of its acquisition; expectations of magic, spirits, and healing; expectations for moral living; and conventions of writing and authorship. This list could be expanded, but the point is simply that the more deeply one imbibes the cultural milieu of the first century, the greater will be his or her understanding of the New Testament.

Another salient feature of the historical-cultural context of the New Testament is that certain perspectives diverge from the attitudes and activities of today. Indeed, some practices accepted in the New Testament, such as slavery, seem completely immoral in contemporary society. Conversely, by today’s standards the prohibition of other practices in the New Testament seems oppressive. Are some parts of the New Testament culture-specific and not universally applicable? If so,

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how does one distinguish between them? As we shall see below, certain principles can help to differentiate the contingent from the universal.

*Literary Context and Genre.* The New Testament employs ordinary human language. Sentences obey the accepted rules of grammar, thoughts emerge in familiar ways, and arguments proceed according to the conventions of first century literature. Similarly, the types of literature in the New Testament conform to the genres used in the ancient world. The gospels, for example, display many of the characteristics of other ancient biographies, such as the use of direct speech and the selection of material for narrative impact. Likewise, the epistles utilize stylized introductory formulae, standard epistolary topoi (topics typically discussed in letters), and other techniques of letter writing in antiquity. For these reasons, the methods applied to writings with only human authors—such as analysis of grammar, comparison of word usage, identification of rhetorical techniques, and examination of conformity or non-conformity to genre expectations—also illuminate the meaning of the New Testament.

*Figurative Language.* Like other writers, the human authors of the New Testament used figures of speech such as metaphor (e.g., fishers of men, Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17), simile (e.g., “The Kingdom of heaven is like . . .,” Matthew 13:31 and others), symbol (e.g., seven lampstands, Revelation 1:12, 20), and even irony (e.g., Caiaphas’s prophecy, John 11:49-52). In order to understand the intended meaning, the modern reader must recognize the figure and interpret it accordingly. If a particular text was intended figuratively, to read it as non-figurative might lead to gross misinterpretation. However, it is not always clear whether a phrase was originally intended as figurative. As a result, debates erupt over the proper interpretation of passages. For example, one’s view of the end-times rests in part on whether the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20 is intended as symbolic. As more light is shed on the use of figurative language in the ancient world, such debates might be resolved.

### **Incarnational Interpretation of the New Testament**

It follows from the preceding discussion that a thorough familiarity with the New Testament demands interpretation of the text.

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The incarnational nature of the Word of God necessarily molds this interpretation, requiring awareness of both divine and human dimensions. Understanding the human dimension entails navigating the cultural distance between ourselves and the original (human) authors—a distance compounded by the passage of time. Scholars have devised a diverse palette of methods to assist in overcoming this distance and to enhance the accuracy of the interpretation. These methods include text criticism (What is the original wording of the text?), source criticism (What sources—eye witness testimony, Old Testament quotations, hymns, traditional material, etc.—did the final writer use to construct the text?), form criticism (How was the text originally used in the ministry of Jesus and/or in the life of the early Church?), redaction criticism (What was the final writer trying to communicate by the way sources were used?), and rhetorical criticism (What techniques did the writer use to persuade his or her readers?).

These and other critical methods are just specific questions asked of the text in a rigorous manner. As such, the methods are neutral and need not be shunned as inimical to historic Christianity. However, practitioners of critical methods do bring presuppositions to their task. Naturally, these assumptions color one's interpretive conclusions. Many New Testament scholars approach the text assuming that miracles and other supernatural manifestations do not occur. Many of the same scholars presuppose that the Bible is the word about God, not the Word of God. Yet a scholarly approach to the New Testament does not require such assumptions. Rather, a faith commitment is a legitimate presuppositional stance for the New Testament scholar.

*The Role of Faith in Incarnational Interpretation.* Incarnational interpretation begins with a faith commitment. Although skeptics often provide valuable insights into the meaning of the New Testament, beginning from a standpoint of faith makes a difference in one's interpretation. The faithful interpreter accepts the historical accuracy of the text unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary. For example, minor inconsistencies and even apparent contradictions might be perceived as the variations of eyewitness testimony, not as evidence of fabrication. Similarly, the believing interpreter assumes that the authors (both human and divine) never intended to deceive. The human authors, moreover, were capable writers who wrote with conviction and

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intentionality, not with carelessness or ineptitude. Clearly, a faith commitment places certain constraints on the options for interpretation.

Incarnational interpretation rightly begins with faith; it also ends with it. Since the believing exegete receives the text as God's Word, he or she does not stop working until God's message for today has been explored. When all is said and done, taking a faith stance toward the New Testament means that one submits to its authority. Therefore, the faithful interpreter lives in light of its truth-claims, modifying personal beliefs and behavior to more nearly conform to those claims.

At this point, however, a difficulty arises. As we have seen above, the New Testament worldview differs from the modern one. Must today's faithful interpreter adhere even to those perspectives and practices considered outmoded or immoral? Some Christians argue that every detail of the New Testament must still be followed. Such a stance may be consistent in principle, but in practice it is difficult to maintain. For example, very few Christians adhere strictly to the command in 1 Corinthians 11 for women to pray with covered heads. Other Christians believe that church tradition must distinguish between what is universal and what is culturally relative. On this view, however, the tradition is normative, and the New Testament is no longer useful for confronting traditional beliefs and behaviors. Without denying the importance of tradition, a better approach is to discover principles by which one can consistently determine what is universally binding.

*The Role of Reason in Incarnational Interpretation.* In assessing what is of universal validity in the New Testament, it is easy to lose sight of the text's incarnational nature. One is tempted to say that certain parts contain purely human words (and are therefore cultural specific) while other parts contain the divine (and are therefore universally valid). Instead, all the human words together convey the divine message. Still, that message is always spoken within a particular historical context. Because the New Testament is God's Word in written form, we today are privileged, as it were, to eavesdrop on God's word spoken to diverse times and places many centuries ago. In other words, the biblical message is always culturally determined and directed. This does not mean, however, that it no longer has relevance. Rather, the task of the believing interpreter is to discover the divine message for today within

the message spoken for that day. It can be recognized in one or more of the following ways: (1) The message regarding the nature of God and his redemptive activity, including the Gospel of Jesus, is universally valid and objectively true. Of course, I refer here to the meaning as intended by the author, recognizing the referents of any phenomenological language, figures of speech, symbolism, and so forth. (2) Ethical prohibitions and prescriptions which are consistently maintained in a plurality of historical and cultural moments are binding today. (3) The motivations behind behavior praised or condemned—either explicitly or implicitly—are to be emulated or avoided, respectively.

But we have been speaking in idealized terms. In fact, the New Testament utilizes more than direct statements about God or direct commandments. It is more complex both in terms of its subject matter and its means of communication. Practically speaking, then, how does one discover the universal norms within the cultural-specific text? Dr. David M. Scholer, late New Testament scholar at Fuller Theological Seminary, offers some helpful guidelines in this regard. The following table is adapted from his article, “Issues in Biblical Interpretation,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 19-20.

TABLE 1: Historical-Cultural Contingency v. Universality

<b>Contingent</b>	<—————>	<b>Universal</b>
Peripher	<—————>	Central to Redemptive Message
De-Emphasized/Infrequent	<—————>	Emphasized/ Frequent
Descriptive Narratives	<—————>	Normative Teachings
Diverse Perspectives	<—————>	Uniform, Consistent Witness
Applications	<—————>	Principles
Intra-canonical reversals	<—————>	No reversals
Reflects Common Cultural	<—————>	Prefers One of Several Cultural
Options		Options
Current Practices Differ	<—————>	Current Practices Similar to
from Bib. Culture		Bib. Culture

Each of these eight criteria forms a continuum: a particular passage may lie closer to one side or the other, or it may belong somewhere in the middle. Therefore, each criterion requires discernment in addition to an investigation into the Biblical texts and/or historical-cultural contexts. A simple example illustrates how these criteria function. The command to greet one another with a holy kiss may be analyzed as follows (see Table 2): (1) According to Dr. Scholer, this command is peripheral, not central. (2) In my judgment, the command is de-emphasized— even though it is repeated five times—because it occurs at the end of the letters and is not developed with any explanatory comments. (3) Although—the statement is in the form of a command, its context suggests it is neither a descriptive narrative nor normative teaching, but rather an expression of fraternal fondness. (4) The five occurrences of the command form a uniform witness, but all are in a similar context. (5) The command seems to be an application of the general principle of love and unity among Christians, not a principle itself. (6) There seem to be no intra-canonical reversals. (7) Greeting with a kiss reflected the common cultural practice. (8) Our North American culture does not generally practice greeting with a kiss.

TABLE 2: Greet With a Holy Kiss

<b>Contingent</b>		<b>Universal</b>
Peripheral	<— <b>X</b> —————>	Central to Redemptive Message
De-Emphasized/Infrequent	<— <b>X</b> —————>	Emphasized/ Frequent
Descriptive Narratives	<————— <b>X</b> ——>	Normative Teachings
Diverse Perspectives	<————— <b>X</b> ——>	Uniform, Consistent Witness
Applications	<— <b>X</b> —————>	Principles
Intra-canonical Reversals	<————— <b>X</b> ——>	No Reversals
Reflects Common Cultural Practice	<— <b>X</b> —————>	Prefers One of Several Cultural Options
Current Practices Differ from Bib. Culture	<— <b>X</b> —————>	Current Practices Similar to Bib. Culture

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The majority of the criteria point to the command as a historically contingent one, not one with universal validity. Still, the command as stated was God's message to the early church. When we overhear that message, we still recognize the ideal of fraternal warmth among the body of Christ and are encouraged to respond to our contemporaries with a similar genuineness.

The above discussion demonstrates that reason plays a vital role in determining what is universally valid. It helps establish the criteria, assemble the relevant data, determine the meaning of that data, and draw conclusions. This is not to deny, of course, the importance of other factors, including faith, as we have already seen. Nevertheless, reason is essential in this and other areas of New Testament interpretation.

That being said, however, it must be noted that human reason is fallible. Judgments are only as good as the quality of information received. Even given all the information, wrong judgments are still made. Yet in many cases we do not have all the desired information, and sometimes the data is ambiguous. This requires humility on the part of the interpreter as he or she approaches the text. The exegete must realize that the "assured results" of critical scholarship are based on fallible judgments. He or she must employ the methods but acknowledge the possibility of error. This is not to say, of course, that we can have no confidence in any interpretation. Many interpretations are supported by a wealth of data, while others can be confidently eliminated. Where uncertainty remains, the interpreter must conclude that the available evidence seems to point in this or that direction and must acknowledge that other possibilities still exist. Then he or she ought to explore all the possibilities for their theological implications. Often two or more interpretations can be combined. For example, Jesus' teachings regarding the Kingdom of Heaven probably have both religious and social dimensions. Reason, then, should guide the interpreter to look for the possibility of more nuanced interpretations based on the combination of earlier proposals.

Reason is also helpful in discovering and evaluating presuppositions. We have already noted that a faith commitment is a legitimate presuppositional stance. In addition to faith, the interpreter often brings other presuppositions, both acknowledged and

subconscious. He or she maintains certain assumptions that form a rudimentary interpretive framework. As the meaning becomes increasingly clear, these presuppositions are either affirmed or disproved by the results of the study. The corrected perspective leads to more refined interpretations, which in turn can correct the interpretive paradigm further. The process is not endless, but it moves from the possibility of radical changes initially to subtle refinements later. As noted above, it is my conviction that the presuppositional stance most consistent with a genuine interpretation of the New Testament is that of a faith commitment.

Therefore, reason and faith together form the integrative core of incarnational interpretation. Recognizing both divine and human dimensions of the New Testament, incarnational interpretation is the most appropriate way to approach the text. It begins from a standpoint of faith, and its practitioners come to the text expecting to hear from God and to obey what he says. They are prepared to have their presuppositions challenged, their convictions refined, their motives purified, and their deeds rectified. Incarnational interpretation employs every available means to assist the humble exegete to hear the Word of God in its power, richness, and depth. The New Testament is profound. Together with the Old Testament, its joint divine-human authorship makes it unique among World Literature. More than that, it offers a message of hope and life to all who believe. As Jesus himself says in John 6:63, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (NASB).