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The Sense of the Scripture: Re-Examined in Light of Philosophical Hermeneutics and Recent Literary Approaches*

Abstract

In the context of romanticism in which scientific exegesis emerged in the nineteenth century, the psychological interpretation proposed by Schleiermacher and the positivistic postulates that characterized the theory of understanding set forth by Dilthey have influenced the concept of the literal sense of the Bible, conceived as “the sense intended by the author.” But hermeneutics has undergone a decisive shift under the influence of the phenomenology of knowledge. The intrinsic and cyclic relationship between the object known and the knowing subject, explored by Heidegger, has been taken up and developed by Bultmann (preunderstanding), Gadamer (appurtenance/fusion of horizons), and Ricoeur (distanciation, cycle of explication-comprehension). The recent literary methods propose certain procedures of the analysis of texts in order to advance the understanding of the sense of the text. The quest centers on the intention of the work rather than the intention of the author and on the role of the subject-reader, which leads to the recognition of multiple readings and the tradition of the effects of the sense. The reflection on the biblical sense requires us, however, to bear in mind some specific characteristics of biblical texts, notably the historical reality at their source and the recovery of the notion of the spiritual sense.


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In the still recent past, one could encounter exegetes who had spent their lives interpreting the biblical texts, "engaging the sense," as one might put it, without ever posing the fundamental questions: What is a text? What is an interpreter? What do we have in mind when we talk about the sense of the text? There was a general consensus around implicit answers to these questions. Today, the multiplication of methods and approaches to reading the Bible, as well as new developments in the questions of a theoretical framework that underlies them, create an obligation to explain and clarify, to give attention to the reevaluation of the presuppositions of exegesis. In response to the invitation I received to present a "major paper," I have chosen—not without naivete—to assign to myself the central and yet difficult question of the sense of the Scripture.¹ I present some reflections that I discuss around three questions, which dominate the three parts of my exposition.

1. What hermeneutical philosophy underlies the current concept of the literal sense of Scripture that has dominated scientific exegesis since its beginnings?

2. What displacements in the notion of the sense of biblical texts have been effected by contemporary philosophical hermeneutics and recent literary theories of exegesis that have affinities with this hermeneutic?

3. Is the Bible completely subject to philosophical and literary given or do its specific characteristics require a particular approach to its interpretation and understanding of its sense?

If these questions are simple, their answer is anything but simple. My proposals will be modest. They will emphasize certain displacements, certain arguments, certain questions. It does not seem to be yet the time for synthesis. My desire is that they will contribute to the necessary debate with a view toward filling up the present lack of an adequate theory of the sense or senses of Scripture, a theory that is adequate in that it takes account of the positive benefits of philosophical hermeneutics and the new literary methods.

In this vast field there is the need to circumscribe the scope of the inquiry and to choose an angle of approach. I will engage some of the most significant current thinking and some of the most prominent authors. The crux of my reflection is the relationship between author-text-reader in interpretation, i.e., in the determination or elaboration of the sense of scriptural passages.
The Intention of the Author

In The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, which appeared in 1990, Raymond Brown affirms that “most exegesists, if we may judge from the commentaries on Scripture, would be working with a definition of the literal sense closely resembling the following: The sense which the human author directly intended and which the written words conveyed (author’s italics). Two testimonies will suffice to confirm that this vision of the literal sense seems to have been indisputable in the last fifty years. In a special number of the journal JBL in 1958, dedicated to the exegetical task, all the authors considered the task of exegesis to be the reconstruction, as faithful as possible, of the sense that the human author wished to communicate to the audience he envisaged. L’Introduction à la Bible, by Robert and Feuillet, which appeared in 1959 and which became a classic in the French-speaking world, expressed it thus: “It remains to enter into the psychology of the author himself, to discern what he intended to signify when he drafted his text under this form and in these circumstances. It is here finally where the sense of the biblical books reside.” But historical-critical exegesis, which has invested its energies in the pursuit of this conception of the literal sense in the process of demonstrating that the biblical books are generally the product of multiple contributions in form and redactions by many authors, has brought out the ambiguity that affects this definition of sense: Exactly what author is involved? To what kind of authorial intention is it possible to attribute the literal sense of a text, that sense to which it is possible to assign a normative function? Whatever the response might be, scholars have maintained that the literal sense of the Bible is defined in terms of the intention of its authors.

The definition given of the sense of Scripture springs from the way one understands the one who comprehends a text, the interpreter. What approaches to the biblical text, what dominant hermeneutical currents held sway at the moment when scientific exegesis emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century? The driving suspicion in the humanistic movement and in the Reformation of the sixteenth century in relation to the allegorical exegesis of the Fathers of the early church, considered overly influenced by the subjectivity of the readers, was propelled by the Rationality of the age of the Enlightenment and led to a search for a sure and certain sense of the biblical text, a sense that was objective, unique, and scientifically verifiable. The historical sense that the author had placed in his text appeared to offer the necessary characteristics. But the thought of two hermeneutical theorists has particularly contributed to orient the hermeneutical quest in the direction of the intention of the author: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. These two have brought forward a model of cognition in the human sciences that bore the stamp of the romantic vision that permeated their age: to understand a text is to enter into the subjectivity of its author; it is to know
the thoughts, the sentiments, in short the lived experience of the person
who expresses himself in a text. But some specific explication is necessary.

Some recent studies on the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher have established
that his hermeneutics are complex and have been improperly simplified. Without
doubt, one is able to recall this phrase frequently cited by those who
have appealed to the “father of modern hermeneutics”: the purpose—which
is clearly never attained—is to come to “understand the discourse every bit as
well as the author has framed it, and then even better than he has framed it.”
But the hermeneutical course that he proposes consists of two complementary
and interrelated procedures, operating in a circle: a grammatical interpretation,
i.e., a study of the text and of the language that composes it; and a
psychological interpretation that consists in the laying hold of an author and
of his thought as they have been communicated by the linguistic medium.
The psychological interpretation, he says, is answerable to intuitive perception.
It is this that persons typically identify as being at the center of the romantic
period that followed Schleiermacher’s work. Perhaps forgetting the equilibrium
and the connection that Schleiermacher wanted to make between the
psychological understanding of the author and the critical analysis of the text,
the accent has necessarily been placed on the author and his intention.

If Schleiermacher cultivated his thought at the dawn of the romantic
period, it was at the twilight of the Romantic period and marked by the
Romantic period that his disciple Dilthey wrote his magisterial hermeneutical
works. He pushed much farther than his predecessor a hermeneutic of the
text centered on the comprehending of the author: the interpretation must
in some sense bring to life once again (nachleben) the experience of the
author, placing ourselves, as it were, in his skin by the mode of empathy
(hineinversetzen). The final aim behind the interpretation is not that which a
text says but that which is expressed by it. It follows, Paul Ricoeur will say,
that “by a single blow, the object of hermeneutics is directly removed from
the text, from its sense and its reference, toward the lived experience that is
expressed by it.” Dilthey had the great merit of responding to the domination
of the empirical model of the natural sciences which, in the middle of the
nineteenth century, imposed its scientifically objective criteria to every other
form of knowledge. The distinction he elaborated between two modes of
knowledge, the explanation (erklären) in the natural sciences and the understanding
(verstehen) in the human sciences, has marked all subsequent hermeneutical
reflection, at least that of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. But Dilthey
remained influenced by the postulates of the natural sciences of a positivistic
type; he sought to develop a theory of understanding that would lead to an
“objectively valid knowledge.” Gadamer is one of those who reproached
him for seeking for the human sciences a model that was parallel to the
scientifically objective “method.” When Dilthey was elaborating his
hermeneutic, the subjectivity of the reader in his world was not yet held to be a consideration in the act of knowing, and consequently in the interpretation and determination of the sense of a text.

Let us return to our question of the sense of Scripture. It seems to me that both the pretension to an objective knowledge, without the influence of the knowing subject, and the psychologizing theory of the understanding of texts have largely depended on the concept of the literal sense of the Bible that was imposed, so to speak, in conjunction with the development of scientific exegesis in the nineteenth century. The literal sense is the original sense of the text, that which is directly intended by its author. The corresponding method to this perspective of sense, the historical-critical method that became the scientific method accepted in the human sciences at that time, naturally became the method employed for the interpretation of the Bible. The specific characteristics of the biblical text were permitted solely to support this conception of the sense of the text and the employment of the historical method. The Bible, in fact, is a book whose sense is intimately tied to certain historical events that are reported in it. It is thus an inspired book. The theology of inspiration, at the same time the cause and effect of the perception of the literal sense that was in circulation, placed the accent on the psychology of inspired writer, his thoughts and his intentions, rather than on the inspired text as the Fathers of the early Church generally developed the notion of inspiration.10 Let us acknowledge that this hermeneutic of Scripture that was elaborated in the last century has had the great merit of embracing fully the role of the human authors in the production of the Bible, the Word of God.11

In the course of the twentieth century, the tools of historical exegesis were refined, and the accepted communication theory of the literal sense benefited from some new developments. From the side of method, we should note, in particular, the application of sociological analysis to the corpus of the Bible has lead to a better understanding of the world of the authors and of its original recipients: their historical, cultural, social, and religious world. As for that which has emerged from the theory of meaning as it relates to the intention of the author, two new contributions should be mentioned. First, the psychologizing that affected the question for the intention of the author is more and more abandoned; one recognizes that that which an author intended to say is truly accessible only through his text; it is a matter, therefore, not of communicating the mental processes of the author but of retrieving his intention such as it is expressed in the text. This movement bound by the text opens more largely the way for contributions from the new literary methods, which are progressively incorporated into the historical-critical method in biblical studies.

A second development should be taken into account. The historical
interpretation has led to a recognition of the distance between the world of the text and of its authors on the one hand and our world today on the other. After having established by exegesis the literal sense of the text, one encounters the necessity of proceeding to a second hermeneutical process: that of an actualization or application of the literal sense to our situation so as to render it significant for us. Hence, various propositions related to the sense have been advanced in the attempt to span the historical and cultural distance that separates us from the biblical texts and their authors. Eric Donald Hirsch, the principle proponent of the “intentionalist” theory in the 1960s, has proposed a distinction between “meaning” and “significance.”

“Meaning” is that which the author intended to transmit, that which is represented by the linguistic signs of the text and is fixed and determined. “Significance,” on the other hand, pertains to the relationship that an interpreter establishes between the “meaning” placed in the text by the author and all other reality. Although warmly received by a number of exegetes concerned with the objective character of the biblical text, the model of Hirsch has been rejected by the dominant current of philosophical and recent literary thinking. According to the exegetes, the distinction proposed by authors such as Krister Stendahl and Raymond Brown between “what the text meant” and “what the text means” pertains substantially to the same arena of application as Hirsch’s distinction between “meaning” and “significance.”

R. Brown confines explicitly the literal sense to “what the text meant.” By proposing distinctions that in no way detract from the connection between the literal sense of the text and the intention of the author, these interpreters desire to safeguard a sense of the text that would be unique, objective, verifiable, while entirely recognizing the necessity of an actualization understood as an application of the sense already constituted that is the same for everyone.

For this hermeneutic of sense, the historical paradigm remains dominant and the literary paradigm is subordinate to it. The purpose of exegesis is to know in the best possible way that which the historical author wished to transmit to his reading community and, consequently, what this community was able to comprehend. The model of application for the biblical text is that of the communication of a message (=sense) that a transmitter (=author) wants to convey to his receivers (=readers). Interpretation consists in decoding that which has been encoded without in any way modifying or supplementing. The literal sense of the biblical text is its original sense, its pristine historical sense.

II. The Dialectical Relationship Between Text and Reader

The usual theory of the literal sense of Scripture has today been questioned as much by the philosophy of hermeneutics as by the new literary methods.
For the latter, the sense is a matter of thinking in terms of a text-reader connection rather than a text-author connection. Let us examine this a little more closely.

1 Contemporary Philosophical Hermeneutics

A decisive turning point occurred with the development of the phenomenology of knowledge, which put in question positivistic and romantic epistemology. On this new foundation, in fact, is built the hermeneutics of philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Ladrière, without neglecting the theological hermeneuticians who were inspired by these philosophers: Jeanrond, Schneiders, Tracy, for example. The phenomenology of Husserl has dissolved the subject-object cleavage in knowledge while affirming that reality is known only as it traverses the consciousness of the knowing subject and that the latter, in turn, comprehends in his or her “I” only by way of the knowing of an object.18 Without doubt, Husserl made it his project to place in parentheses (époche) the historical and social factors that determine human consciousness in order to arrive at a sort of pure consciousness. Some philosophers who have followed, most notably Heidegger and Ricoeur, have demonstrated that such is not possible, that all consciousness is marked by the impression by a subject situated in his/her historical world.19

The intrinsic and circular relationship between the object known and the knowing subject—the hermeneutical circle—has been explored by Heidegger in the ontological phenomenology that he elaborated in Sein und Zeit. To understand a work is to understand oneself, to open oneself to new possibilities of existence. Moreover, the understanding of a work is based always on previous experience (Vorhaben), on previous insight (Vorsicht), and on previous apprehension (Vorgriff).20 It is well known that Bultmann took over this theme in applying it to biblical exegesis: there is no exegesis without presuppositions that direct the understanding.21 This necessary preunderstanding does not prejudice results. It is a matter “of a vital relationship of the interpreter with the matter of which the text speaks,”22 i.e., to employ a term used of Gadamer’s, an “appurtenance” (Zugehörigkeit): an interpreter can enter into the world of a text and appropriate it only in the measure that, in his world, he possesses a fundamental affinity with that of which the text speaks. If the subjectivity of the interpreter comes into play in the determination of sense, it is not a matter of subjectivism to the extent that, in dialogue with the text, the interpreter allows his or her pre-understanding to be deepened and enriched, to see it modified and corrected by his or her communion with the world of the text. For Gadamer, who adopts these perspectives on the dialectical movement between a text and a historically situated reader, the true comprehension or apprehension of a text
operates in a fusion of the different horizons of the text and its reader (Horizontverschmelzung). The correct interpretation enlarges and transforms the horizon, the world of the reader, as this interpretation is situated within the interior recesses of the reader. Let us specify that the horizon of a reader that he or she brings to the reconstruction of the text is constituted, for Gadamer, by the tradition that bears it along, i.e., by the combination of the historical and cultural givens that form its vital context. The text is thus presented to the reader borne along by a tradition (Überlieferung), a history of its effects of sense (Wirkungsgeschichte).

The hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur is situated in this way of thinking opened up by Heidegger and Gadamer. Nevertheless, it is characterized by certain characteristics of its own. In terms of that which touches upon the interpretation of texts, their sense, I would emphasize two developments that are specific to him, and it is because of them that I term this little jaunt philosophical. The term “distantiation” that Ricoeur employs picks up the emphases here underlined. A distance is established between a text and its author and between this text and its readers. The correct interpretation does not consist in suppressing this double distance established between the author and the reader of the text, as Schleiermacher and Dilthey wished to do, but rather in acknowledging it.

There is an open distance between a text and its author. For, in a text, the intention of the author is objectified in the forms of language, and these forms of language transcend his conscious aims. Once produced, the text assumes a certain autonomy in relation to its author; it no longer pertains exclusively to his or her own horizon and it commences on a course of sense that is bound up with its successive readers. The sphere of sense is displaced from upstream to downstream, i.e., from the world behind the text, the world pertaining to the origin of the text, to the world in front of the text, a world composed of its successive readers. To express the sense is not to recover the unknowable intention of the author but to appropriate for oneself the intention of the text in its world of the reader. It is precisely because the writing establishes a distance with the initial context of composition that the text assumes a surplus of sense and that, thus, the world of the text and the historical experience at its source can be comprehended in a new context. In the terms of Ricoeur, in decontextualization the text allows the recontextualization, i.e., the appropriation of the world of the text.

The second distance, that between the text and its readers, led Ricoeur to develop the binomial explication—comprehension. He has demonstrated the necessity of the circuitous path from the explication towards the comprehension of a text. There is a circular movement, a constant coming and going, between the explication and the comprehension. The scientific explication makes possible the knowing of that of which the text speaks and
protects the latter from all undue projection back into its sense. "To interpret more fully is to comprehend better," as Ricoeur has frequently repeated.27 Ricoeur has long depended upon literary procedures to overcome this distance between the text and the reader and to enter into the world of the text. He has devoted a number of studies to questions of linguistics, of semiotics, and of narratology. Dilthey had taken a great step in hermeneutics when he distinguished comprehension and interpretation, but he proposed a theory of comprehension as something immediately grasped. Gadamer took up the distinction of Dilthey and maintained it in terms of disjunction. Paul Ricoeur has been able to develop a hermeneutical theory that integrates interpretation and comprehension, the objective dimension and the subjective, the rigor of method and the subtlety of personal implication, in the course of the determination of sense.28 The recognition of the necessary scientific interpretation of the text leads us to speak of the new literary methods and of the conception of sense that underlies them.

2. The Recent Literary Approaches

In the 1930s certain literary critics began to emphasize that the traditional approach centered on the author was unsatisfying. In the 1940s the American movement known as "New Criticism" insisted on the autonomy of the text in relation to its author and designated the text as the locus of the sense.29 An expression came into vogue, not without creating debate: "intentional fallacy."30 In our time, the term "formalism" remains associated with the methods that consider the forms and structures of the text as the source of the sense.31

In the 1960s philosophical hermeneutics, more specifically the thought of Gadamer, exercised an influence on literary theories of interpretation that were at that time progressively elaborated.32 In contrast to the new literary criticism of the 1930s through the 1960s, which did not inform biblical exegesis, the recent literary methods have made their way into the interpretation of the Bible. While remaining centered on the text and its world, these methods applied to the Bible have progressively integrated into the course of their procedure the horizon of the subject reader. In the 1980s the increasing employment of the word "reading" to speak of interpretation ("semiotic reading," "narrative reading"...)33 testifies to the displacement of emphasis in the quest of sense: the latter appears situated in the act of reading, i.e., in the relationship between a text and a reader. In that, the literary methods join with the preoccupations of philosophical hermeneutics for which interpretation is operative in a dialectical relationship of text—reader. I allude briefly—in view of the question of sense—to some elements of three literary methods recently employed in biblical studies: semiotic analysis, narrative criticism, and the "reader-response" approach.34
In semiotic analysis, one is now far removed from the time when interpretation, entirely centered on the text outside of which one did not envision any place of safety, led to the death of the subjects, author and reader. The perspective, in fact, is entirely otherwise when one examines a little of the semiotics of Umberto Eco in Italy and that of Algirdas Greimas in France as developed by the CADIR of Lyon which has applied it to the biblical texts.\textsuperscript{35} I limit myself to those proposals drawn from the authors of CADIR, in relation to the question that occupies us. The semioticians affirm repeatedly that their method does not lead one to speak of the sense but to engage the structures of the text that have produced the sense: discursive, narrative, logico-semantic structures. Nevertheless, the semiotic practice at the CADIR has opened the question, considered fundamental, of the enunciation and of the subject that it implies. The interrogation bears on the work of the reader and on that which happens in the act of reading.

According to the semiotician Louis Panier, “the sense of a text is not ‘given,’” is the object of a construction, regulated by models tested on the text: there is no evidence of the sense, but construction of hypotheses” by a reader who “must measure the resistance of the discourse to the proposed models.” After “the formal description of the structures of the signification,” one can proceed to “a task of interpretation.” The latter “is elaborated in the construction of models of the signification and in the acceptance when a reader, agreeing to these articulations of the sense, is actualized as ‘subject.’”\textsuperscript{36}

“To read is to pass from sign to sense. To express the perceived sense is already to interpret,” writes Jean Delorme in the recent article “Semiotics” in DBS.\textsuperscript{37} He specifies that “the text hollows out an appeal to the interpretation that is not able to be filled in, to put it otherwise, to a speaking subject visited by a speech that this one does not know how to master [. . .] so that one is not able to conclude by saying: here, clearly, is the sense of the text, here is the way it must be understood.”\textsuperscript{38} Does not semiotics here join the hermeneutical project by formulating certain procedures for successfully actualizing the sense?\textsuperscript{39}

Narrative criticism—the counterpart of semiotics in English-speaking settings—likewise proposes certain strategies, certain procedures, so that a reader might enter correctly into the world of the text.\textsuperscript{40} I mention simply the two notions of the implied reader and the implied author.\textsuperscript{41} The first pertains to the manner in which the text appeals to and conditions the response the reader. It is a matter of a literary solicitation. By a series of signs, the text indicates to its potential readers how to operate so as to enter into its perspective. The portrait of the implied reader can be established by assembling the survey of the competencies that the narrative requires for reading it well: predispositions, attitudes, linguistic, historical, and religious knowledge, etc. The interpretation thus becomes controlled by the text. We meet here again the literary plan, the attention to the correct presuppositions, which is the
concern of hermeneutics.  

The textual strategies are the expression of the implied author, a parallel notion to those of the implied reader in narrative criticism. The implied author is the textual manifestation of the real historical author. He is internal to the narrative and must therefore be inferred from it. The vision of the world, the values and beliefs that one can discern in a text are so many indications of the implied author. In order to interpret well, the real reader must therefore be joined to the implied reader, i.e., to enter into the intention of the work, to discover the strategies of reading that are the manifestation of the implied author.  

Reader-response criticism is viewed by many as a type of narrative criticism. It is, moreover, one of its principle representatives, Wolfgang Iser, who has provided the most significant elaboration of the notion of the implied reader. This school of thought considers the text as an act of communication. It is interested in the real reader, it elaborates the dynamics of the process of reading, which actualizes in a creative way one or the other of the dimensions of sense which exist potentially within the text. But various currents compose reader-response criticism. For the moderate current, of which Iser is an example, the text furnishes to the reader signs and gaps—in short, a code—that provokes and channels his/her creative participation. The radical current, represented in particular by Stanley Fish, is interested in the effects of sense produced by the reader, and establishes their validity, not on the givens of the text but on the specific community of the reader. If the moderate wing depends on a philosophy, it is not so with the radical wing for which the sense of texts is absorbed into its pragmatic effects; sense does not exist in the joining of the horizons of the text and the reader, as in the thought of Gadamer, but it is founded in the horizon of the community of readers.  

3. The sense of the biblical text  

The givens of philosophical hermeneutics and of recent literary theories lead us to some considerations on the sense of the biblical text. Let us approach the question from the three components of author, text, reader.  

In the quest for the senses of literary texts—and, therefore, those of the Scripture, that which is in view is not the intention of the historical author, but the intention of the work produced by a historical author; one can just as well put it this way: it is the intention of the implied author, who is identified with the intention of the work. The latter goes beyond the intention willed by the historical author for his reading community. The literal or textual sense is therefore much larger than the historical or original sense, i.e., the sense perceived by the group of readers for whom the text was produced. Without doubt, for successive generations of readers, the sense of the text could not be in contradiction, but rather must be in vital continuity with the original
historical sense. But how today could this original historical sense be anything other than a hypothesis derived from the text?

The text must guide and control the interpretation. It possesses its constraints, its possibilities, and its prohibitions in the effectuation of the sense. This can be correctly achieved only with the aid of rigorous literary methods. Is it necessary to distinguish two steps as Ricoeur suggested in 1968 in his "Preface" to Jesus by Bultmann, based in this case on Frege and Husserl: the objective step of *sense*, called the "ideal" sense—the "sense of the text," the "immanent sense of the text," as he otherwise specifies it—and the step of the *signification*, "which is the moment of recapturing of the sense by the reader, of his/her effectuation in existence." But it is necessary to recall that the subjectivity of the reader is active toward the work in the course of the course of explication itself, for the interpreter utilizes those methods which are within his/her horizon and proceeds from his/her own presuppositions. Moreover, the sense of the work always remains potential; its real existence is actualized only in particular significations. The sense of a text emerges when a reader causes the significations to spring forth, i.e., creates in some sense a new text. The text determines, therefore, a trajectory—a path of sense—on which different routes become inscribed.

Two questions are posed. First, can one speak of an objective sense when, in one's elaboration, one interposes a reader as subject? A good interpretation can be neither purely objective nor purely subjective. The sense is produced by a reader in the very act of receiving it. The hermeneutical circle—the circle of sense—is however not a vicious circle. The horizon of the reader permits propositions of sense opened up by the text to take shape and the horizon of the text critiques and enriches the horizon of the reader, which must be submitted to the objectivity of the text in its constraints and its prohibitions. For if the presuppositions nourish interpretation, the prejudices, by contrast, cause it to atrophy.

Another question, subject to debate: Is it necessary to speak of multiple senses? The biblical texts do not have a fixed sense. They possess the possibility of engendering diverse significations without end in the minds of the readers in their situations. They may be understood, not as a reservoir of sense, but as a source from which the sense springs forth in constantly different ways. Their sense remains in some ways inexhaustible. I prefer, nonetheless, to speak of multiple reading rather than of multiple senses. The number of good readings of a text is not infinite. All of them must be inscribed in the direction of sense indicated by the text.

The various good readings of the biblical text in the course of the centuries have the effect of enriching the text, adding to its sense certain new determinations. The "history of the effects of the text" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in the life of the Church is in some ways constitutive of the sense of the
Scriptures and contributes to the horizon of the interpreter.\textsuperscript{55} One can only rejoice to see appear, in our own time, new collections of commentaries, such as the Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, that give great attention to the history of the effects of the sense of the texts.\textsuperscript{56} The interpretive tradition must, however, be submitted to a hermeneutic. The Bible remains normative for discerning the proper unfolding of its authentic sense.

A final reflection. This more recent approach to the sense of texts joins together practically the reading of the Holy Scripture to our Jewish and Christian origins. It is implicit in the historical process of the formation of the biblical text. At the birth of the New Testament, the traditions from the past—oral and written—the promise, the election, the covenant—were without exception actualized in a new way functionally out of a historical situation of the people. These re-readings opened up new aspects of sense and engendered new Scriptures. The New Testament was not produced otherwise. In its essential texture, it is a reading of the event of Jesus Christ in light of the Scriptures of the First Testament and a re-reading of the latter in light of that event recognized as eschatological. The phenomenon of the history of effects of the sense of the Scripture originates therefore from the biblical text itself, which incorporates it and canonizes it.\textsuperscript{57} The first interpreters of the canonical text, whether Jews or Christians, continued to consider that the sense of the text which comes out of the past is never closed. In the Jewish tradition this contextual interpretation has given birth, notably, to the Targums and the Midrashim. The exegesis of the fathers of the church sought, with certain allegorical procedures that are strange to our rationalism, to release the meaning of the texts for the believers in their time and in their situation. These contextual and actualizing readings proceeded from the conviction that the texts were expressions of the living speech of God and, consequently, were bearers of present sense for their generations.\textsuperscript{58}

### III. Specific Traits of the Biblical Sense

Do the particular characteristics of the biblical text require that we nuance or expand our proposals on the sense of the Scripture, prompted as they are by the general hermeneutics of texts? I turn briefly to the question of the historical dimension of the biblical sense and that of the spiritual sense.

#### 1. The historical dimension

The problem is not that of the cultural and therefore the historical character of the words and of the literary genres of the Bible. It is understood that, in order to explain the text, the primary literary procedure involves the philological requirement: to recognize the signification of the words in the cultural context out of which the text emerged.\textsuperscript{59} Likewise, in order to have access to the world of the text, certainly if it is a matter of an ancient text strange to our
own cultural universe, one cannot spare any effort to recognize its literary genre, a procedure emphasized in the historical-critical method (Führungsvorstellung). For the interpretation of the biblical texts, the understanding of the literature of the ancient near east is essential. In this semantic process, a delicate question is nevertheless posed: to what extent does the signification of the words and of the literary codes of a text depend upon their original linguistic context (the world of the author and of his first readers) and/or their literary context in which they were inserted (the world of the text)? But this entire enterprise lifts up the literary paradigm, not the historical paradigm.

The historical problem that I am posing is specific to the biblical texts. The historical reference is inscribed at the heart of these texts: it stems from the “world of the texts” of the Bible; it is the source of their sense. The whole biblical sense, in fact, rests on certain historical events that are presented as events of salvation for successive generations, i.e., that turn back to the effective presence of God in our own history. It is necessary therefore to bear in mind the historical paradigm in the interpretation of the texts. That means to consider on the one hand the historical referent (the active God, Jesus Christ, events of salvation), on the other hand the authors in their community, understood according to their witness to the history, to the events. For, in the Bible, that is the issue: the testimonies to the events. The biblical writers never wished to write history as such but to testify to that which they had experienced in history. Their witness relies on the existence of foundational historical events—or trans-historical, as the resurrection of Jesus—and on the human and spiritual interpretation of these events.

The historical quest aims, without doubt, to know the verity of the events of salvation, insofar as that is possible. But first and above all it seeks to understand the testimonies of the events. For we have only a mediated access to the historical events through the faith-testimony that has been given to us. Moreover, what makes sense to us and are transmitted to us are the interpreted events: for example, in each Gospel, it is the Jesus-event interpreted in the light of the resurrection and in terms of the function of a community that is historically and culturally situated.

These testimonies are historical. They are able to be verified and to be comprehended. It is necessary to verify the quality of the testimonies and the accuracy of their witness. But certainly it is necessary to comprehend what is the interpretation given of such an event for a specific historical community. One owes it to oneself to attempt to retrieve as much as possible the world behind the text and the origin of the text — as much as possible, since it is through the literary that one attains the historical, which places the historical study of the Bible in a particular category. The apprehension of the sense of the event for the author and his community can be, at most, the more probable hypothesis drawn from the text. But to aim at this probable hypothesis is
important because the world of the text refers back to a double experience: that of the authors of the text in their community and of us in our community. Our experience can be authentic only if it is situated in continuity with that of the first witnesses at the origin of the text. It seems to me that some studies continue to plumb the language of testimony and develop a theology of historical biblical testimony, which is of a singular nature.

The quest of the sense of a biblical text must therefore be to lay hold completely of the biblical authors and their ecclesial world. It is not possible to confine oneself to the consideration of the relation of text-reader. There is a circularity between three parameters: author, text and reader. In such a case, how does one connect the study of the world of the text and the study of the world at the origin of the text, i.e., the quest of the historical witness of a community? How does one relate the particular sense given to the event by a community-source and the unvarnished sense that is offered by the text arising from original historical considerations?

The problem may be formulated in yet larger terms: how do we harmonize our historical studies and our literary studies of the biblical text? How may they be mutually probed effectively so as to lead to a better expression of the sense? It is necessary to pursue the study of a biblical hermeneutic that conjoins historical explication and literary explication, i.e., the use of historical methods, for example sociological ones, and the use of literary methods, which remain primary.

2. The Spiritual Sense

I am offering a few words about the spiritual sense, which is, in my judgment, the literal sense of the Scripture understand in profundity. Emerging from the Church Fathers and from the Middle Ages, the nomenclature “spiritual sense” has served to designate the reading of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event. This presentation appears today to be unsatisfactory, and many are proposing to do away with the notion of spiritual sense. I think it is necessary to retain it but by defining it differently.

The expression “spiritual sense” may denote three realities:

1. The Bible inssofar as it speaks of God. God is the fundamentally ultimate referent, and everything in the Bible revolves around God. The world of the text is essentially related to God and God's project of life for humanity. One can therefore say that the literal sense of the Bible, in its essential givens, First Testament and New Testament, is a spiritual sense. But it would be better to speak in this case of religious sense, which corresponds to the object of the Bible as a religious text.

2. The Bible as the Word of God. This is the reading adopted by the believer, Jew or Christian. For such a reader, the Scripture is the
sketch or the memoir of the presence of God in the history of Israel and, for the Christian, in Jesus Christ, and this speech, constantly actualized, defines the identity of the reader. In order to hear the Scripture as the Word of God, the prerequisite for comprehension is faith and openness to the same Spirit that inspired it. Faith and the Spirit create an existential connection with the world of the text understood as the Word of God; they make it possible to know the referent of the text as real, present. To speak of the "spiritual sense" is at the same time to appropriate it. This is, according to my perspective, the spiritual sense properly speaking. Within the proposition that there is a meaning of the text, there is a declaration about the truthfulness of the text, i.e., about its claim to communicate accurately the extra-textual reality and its significance.\textsuperscript{66}

3. The Christological Sense of the Old Testament. This is a specification of the spiritual sense. It involves a reading in the Christian faith of the First Testament that permits one to recognize the meaning of it, i.e., its Christological significance.\textsuperscript{67} The sense constructed in this canonical reading of the text, which is inscribed beyond the immediate beyond the immediate literal sense, may be called simply the Christological sense or the ultimate sense of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{68}

A long tradition, of which Thomas Aquinas is witness, affirms with reason that the literal sense is the basis of the spiritual sense, which can only be constructed by and through the letter of the text. There is no authentic spiritual sense without the inner content of the formulation of an authentic literal sense. The Christological reading of the First Testament, however, poses particular problems and obligates one, among other things, to reflect on the scope and procedures of a canonical reading of the Bible.\textsuperscript{69}

By Way of Conclusion

I do not conclude. My purpose is to open, not to close, the question. I end with a final reflection.

To interpret the biblical text, to express its meaning, is a complex enterprise, because the intended objective is rich and will always in some ways escape us. All the tools, all the literary and historical methods, must make their contribution. All exegetes in their own domains play an important role. But it is necessary for each one of them, modestly, to recognize the necessity of, and to understand what is involved in, situating his or her own contribution in the entire quest. To interpret the Bible is a collective task. It is the work of exegetes but also of people of faith in solidarity. It is a human work but also a work of the Spirit who enables us to hear the Word as a word of life and of liberty and to allow it to inhabit us and transform us by its incisive power.
End Notes

1 I was interested very early in the questions of method and biblical hermeneutics, and I made in some ways "the point" almost twenty years ago when I produced an essay that addressed the question of sense: L'Actualization du Nouveau Testament: De la réflexion à la pratique (LD 107; Paris: Cerf, 1981).


4 J. A. Fitzmyer, who accepts and comments on the definition given by R. Brown, specifies this "human author": "the last one responsible for the final form of the phrases or words in a given statement or story"; "The Senses of Scripture today: ITQ 62 (1996-97) 102. R. Brown appears to propose that we consider the author to be both the "substantial writer of the parts" and the "redactor/editor of the whole": "Hermeneutics," 1148-9.


6 F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), 112. Schleiermacher employs the word "divination" in order to signify that one is never able to comprehend fully the singularity of a text and its author. This term is prone to some misunderstanding.


10 The Bible was viewed as an inspired book because it was the product of an inspired author. The prophetic model was applied to the inspiration of the Scripture.

11 Some Catholic authors have depended upon Thomas Aquinas for the connection of meaning to the intention of the author. But for him it is a matter of the author being God, and the presentation he makes of the literal sense is not without ambiguity if one reads accurately the passage which is repeatedly referenced: "Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, who by one act comprehends all things by his intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (Confessions, xi.ii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses.": *Summa Theologica* 1, qu. 1, art. 10 (New York: Benziger, 1947).

Hirsch admits, however, that the authors intended to signify more than that of which they were conscious. See *Validity*, 48, 51, 61; *Aims*, 74-92.

More recently, a work on hermeneutics has presented the theory of Hirsch on meaning as being the most appropriate for biblical interpretation: E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1990) 54-69.


What it meant, either when it was written (literal sense)” (Brown, *Critical Meaning*, 35); “What ‘Matthew and Luke meant’ is the literal sense of their Gospels” (ibid., 36).

The major property of the phenomenology of knowledge is intentionality: the knowledge of the self is at the first knowledge of something.

See P. Ricoeur, “Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl,” *Du texte à l'action*,55-73. Is not the Husserlien desire to place between parentheses or to suspend (époché) the concrete historical experience of the conscious subject and to extricate the essences out of their historical context (reduction eidétique) a vestige of idealistic philosophy?


Ibid., 172.


Ibid., 321-2, 368 and throughout. The translator has rendered *Wirkungsgeschichte* sometimes as “histoire de l'action,” sometimes as “histoire de l'influence.”

Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 54, 116-17

The circular process of explication and comprehension is constantly repeated: pre-comprehension, explication, new comprehension, etc. The circle is actually a spiral, for one cannot ever pass again the same point; normally, one enlarges and deepens. Literary analyses will validate and modify interpretive hypotheses that one constantly makes as one progresses through the reading process.

While following Bultmann completely on the enunciation of the hermeneutical circle, Ricoeur has criticized him for short-circuiting the process of critical interpretation and proceeding too quickly to an existential interpretation of the text.

The "Yale School" (H. Frei, W. Lowe, etc.) has criticized Ricoeur for connecting the biblical texts to the subjectivity of the readers and not giving proper attention to the sense that these texts have for themselves and in themselves.
Their position towards Ricoeur is largely determined by an intratextual conception of meaning (and by Barthian presuppositions?).

29 R. Wellek and A. Warren, Theory of Literature (London: Penguin Books, 1949) is probably the most influential work that reflects this current.


31 The practitioners of these methods are as anxious to assure objectivity in the interpretive act as the historical-critical exegetes who connect meaning to the intention of the author.


33 Without considering “psychological,” “feminist,” “liberationist” readings, which are presented not as literary methods but as ways of approaching the text from a particular contemporary perspective.

34 More evocation, because anything like a suitable description would require an exposition of each method that situates in their contexts those elements that are here discussed.

35 CADIR = Centre pour l’Analyse du Discours Religieux.


39 The semiotics of reception of U. Eco recovers the hermeneutical principle requiring that a work be enriched from the interpretations that have been given to it, on the condition, however, that these interpretations are connected to the profound intention of the text. See U. Eco, “Intentio lectoris. Appunti sulla semiotica della recezione,” I limiti della interpretazione (Milano: Bompiani, 1990) 25.

40 J. Delorme ends his article in DBS on semiotics by expanding on narrative criticism. He employs, in particular, the notions of “implied author,” of “implied (or ideal) reader,” of “narrator (omniscient or not),” of “point of view,” and of “focalization”: “Sémiotique,” 308-10.


42 Adele Berlin, a pioneer in biblical narrative criticism, writes: “Just as no reading is free from input from the reader, so no reading is free of input from the text”: “The Role of the Text in the Reading Process,” Semesia 63 (1993) 144.
The semiotician Umberto Eco writes, in the same way: “As for the model author, that is the one who by way of textual strategy strains to produce a certain type of model reader. Here therefore at this point the research on the intention auctoris and that of the intention operas coincide.”: Notes sur la sémiotique de la reception,” *Actes sémiotiques, Documents IX*, 81 (Paris: Hadès-Benjamins, 1987) 22. By the same author: “Reply,” *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (ed. S. Collini; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992) 139-51.


One of the leading representatives of reader-response criticism writes: “No Longer can meaning be understood to be a stable, determined content that lies buried within the text, awaiting excavation. Rather, meaning becomes a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate.”: R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 3.

S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

A phenomenology of perception, which is rooted in the thought of Ingarden and Husserl, underlies the theory of Iser. One might regret, however, that Iser sets forth barely any methodological tools for the reading of texts.

Among the literary methods, one may also consider ancient rhetoric which is enjoying a renewal in biblical studies as well as the “new rhetoric.” Rhetorical analysis aims to discern the strategies of communication and of persuasion of the text.


We should note that many today are calling into question this supposedly total objectivity of knowledge even in the spheres of science and nature. Shortly after the publication of the magisterial study of Gadamer, one work has come play a significant role in the raising again of this question: T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

If this is the case with every literary and philosophical writing that deals with the human person, it is even more true of a religious text like the Bible, written in symbolic language, which evokes constantly more profound dimensions of the meaning of its primary sense.

After having finished the present exposition I obtained access to the studies on some biblical passages in the First Testament that Paul Ricoeur and André LoCocque are going to publish jointly. In the short preface where they explain their approach to the texts, the authors write that the “multivalency [plurivocité] of texts” and their “multiple reading [lecture plurielle]” are connected phenomena: *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 13.

One may without doubt read as a hyperbole the affirmation of Pier Cesare Bori in his fine book concisely entitled *L'interprétation infinie* (tr. fr. Paris: Cerf, 1991) 60: “Thus every biblical text contains potentially infinite meanings; it is infinitely polysemous.” We appreciate that this author has well drawn upon the suggestive formula of Gregory the Great: “The Scripture develops with those who read it.”
The open character of the text makes possible the reading of the Bible in the multiple languages and cultures of the world, i.e., to employ a term that has recently gained currency, its enculturation.

The Bible was produced by and for a believing community; it is, therefore, within the life and faith of the ecclesial community that one is able adequately to interpret it, i.e., to correspond to the "implied reader" of the text.

It is increasingly recognized that the principle of Sola Scriptura "turns out to be untenable even on the hermeneutical plane": Ricoeur and LaCocque, Peniser la Bible, 10. Just as the breadth of a conception of the literal sense upon which there is no agreement leads Protestant exegetes to recognize a greater role for tradition in interpretation, so on the other hand the acknowledgement of a unique literal sense, determined once for all, has without doubt contributed to the inclination of Catholics prior to the Second Vatican Council setting forth tradition as a source of meaning distinct from the Scripture (and among others, to propose the theory of "sensus plenior").

The historical-critical method, in distinguishing the stages of redaction—the history of the meaning—of the biblical texts, prompted a reconsideration of the open and dynamic character of the meaning of the Scripture.

The midrashic rules of Jewish interpretation and the allegorical procedures of the Church Fathers and of the Middle Ages do not correspond to our scientific criteria. But are not our recognized literary methods stamped with the cultural presuppositions of our occidental western-European and North American world of the twentieth-century? In their purpose and their perspective and aim Jewish and patristic readers may serve us as model and inspiration.


For example, how to interpret correctly the Gospels without knowing the nature and function of a parable in the Palestinian milieu?

To testify to an event is not only to attest the existence of a fact, it is also to interpret that fact: it is to recognize for oneself a significance in the course of human history. As in the Bible, the attestation of events is inseparable from a faith-interpretation, research into the veracity of certain facts with the aid of the historical methods must recognize its insufficiency.

The authors of the biblical texts put forth their own testimonies to the events conveyed in the oral and written tradition which bears them. But a distance separates the testimony of the first witnesses and that repeated by those who attest it through writing.

There will be a further pressing forward of studies already aptly undertaken in philosophy and theology, for example in E. Castelli, ed., Le témoignage (Paris: Aubier, 1972).

Obviously, some of the multiple propositions of the text do not bear directly upon God and our relationship to God. There are some affirmations of a geographical or chronological order, etc. The immediate sense of these propositions is not a spiritual or religious sense.

All, believers and unbelievers, may engage in this religious reading of the Bible. The prerequisite for entering into the world of the Bible and eventually to appropriate it is an attitude of openness to the transcendent.
How far in the process of interpretation does the cognitive function operate out of faith? Is this question unanswerable?

The Fathers read the Bible from the perspective of God as author. The meaning of texts intended by God, the author of all the Scripture, in which God makes known progressively his plan, surpasses, therefore, in their eyes, the thought of the human authors of each book, which demands to be read in its relation to the others.

The term “ultimate sense” is proposed by Paul Beauchamp.

Let us merely note that, received as canon, the Scripture in its totality forms one text; it is only as we take up the whole canon that we plainly confront the biblical world in its totality (and that one may adequately speak of biblical meaning?).